

# **IRAN'S NUCLEAR POLICY AND NATIONAL IDENTITY NARRATIVES**

by

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## *Abstract*

This dissertation examines the nexus between Iran's national identity and its nuclear policy through a social constructivist lens. This study posits that Iran's pursuit of nuclear capabilities is not merely a strategic or security-driven endeavour but is deeply rooted in the country's national identity. It argues that Iran's pursuit of nuclear capabilities, emblematic of national pride and sovereignty, is intricately linked to narratives of modernity, justice, sovereignty, independence, and resistance to external pressures. It examines how narratives such as “modernity,” “justice and national rights,” “sovereignty,” “independence,” and “anti-oppression,” along with external factors such as sanctions and negotiations with the P5+1, have influenced Iran's nuclear policy across the presidencies of Khatami, Ahmadinejad, and Rouhani.

The nuclear programme is seen as a symbol of technological advancement and modernity, reflecting Iran's desire to close the technological gap with the West and assert itself as a modern nation. This narrative is crucial for portraying Iran as a technologically advanced and independent power that deserves international recognition. The pursuit of nuclear technology is framed within the context of justice and national rights, emphasising Iran's right to develop nuclear technology for peaceful purposes. This narrative is used to justify the nuclear programme as a legitimate pursuit of national rights and justice, countering the perceived narratives of Western oppression and double standards. Sovereignty is a central narrative, with the nuclear programme representing Iran's assertion of its sovereign rights against external interference. The development of an indigenous nuclear fuel cycle is portrayed as a symbol of sovereignty and independence, which are linked to Iran's historical consciousness and desire to maintain autonomy in its domestic and foreign policies. The nuclear programme is seen as a means to achieve and maintain independence from foreign powers, reinforcing the country's self-reliance and autonomy. The nuclear programme is framed as a form of resistance against oppression and external domination, aligning with the broader narrative of anti-imperialism and defiance against perceived injustices.

International sanctions have played a critical role in shaping Iran's nuclear policy. Sanctions are perceived as unjust and oppressive measures aimed at undermining Iran's sovereignty and rights. This perception reinforced the narratives of resistance and justice, further entrenching the resolve to pursue nuclear capabilities as a form of defiance and self-reliance. The negotiations with the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the UN Security Council plus Germany) have been a significant external factor influencing Iran's nuclear policy. These negotiations are seen as a platform to assert Iran's rights and legitimacy, and negotiate from a position of strength, reflecting the themes of sovereignty and justice. The outcomes of these negotiations have varied across different presidencies, reflecting the changing dynamics of Iran's internal and external political landscapes.

During President Khatami's tenure, the nuclear policy was characterised by a more conciliatory approach, emphasising dialogue and engagement with the international community. This period saw efforts to balance the narratives of modernity and justice with the need for international cooperation and legitimacy. Under President Ahmadinejad, the nuclear policy took a more confrontational stance, with a strong emphasis on resistance and defiance against external pressures. Ahmadinejad's rhetoric and policies highlighted the themes of sovereignty, independence, and anti-oppression, reinforcing the narrative of Iran's right to pursue nuclear technology despite international opposition. President Rouhani's approach to the nuclear issue was marked by a return to diplomacy and negotiation, seeking to alleviate the economic

pressures of sanctions while maintaining Iran's nuclear rights. Rouhani's policies reflected a pragmatic balance between the narratives of modernity, justice, and sovereignty, aiming to achieve a diplomatic resolution that would recognise Iran's nuclear rights while addressing international concerns.

This dissertation argues that Iran's nuclear policy aspirations cannot be fully understood through traditional realist approaches. Instead, a social constructivist perspective revealed the profound influence of national identity narratives on Iran's nuclear policy. By examining the interplay of these narratives with external factors, such as sanctions and international negotiations, this study provides a comprehensive understanding of the motivations and implications of Iran's nuclear policy across different presidential administrations. This research employs a qualitative methodology and historical analysis, focusing on case studies of the aforementioned presidencies. This advances our understanding of Iran's policy motivations and offers fundamental insights for policymakers and academics, suggesting that effective diplomacy with Iran should account for these deeply rooted national identity narratives.

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### **Acronyms List (Alphabetically)**

Additional Protocol (AP)

EU3 (Refers to the three European Union countries involved in the Iran nuclear deal: France, Germany, and the United Kingdom)

European Union (EU)

Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)

High Representative of the Union for Foreign Affairs and Security Policy (HR/VP)

International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA)

International Monetary Fund (IMF)

Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)

Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)

Joint Plan of Action (JPOA)

Low-enriched uranium (LEU)

Non-Aligned Movement (NAM)

Nuclear research and development (R&D)

P5+1 (Refers to the UN Security Council's five permanent members plus Germany)

Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO)

Supreme National Security Council (SNSC)

Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT)

United Kingdom (UK)

United Nations (UN)

United Nations Security Council (UNSC)

United States (US)

World Trade Organization (WTO)



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## *Dedication*

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To all my grandparents, and especially my late grandmother, Shirin, who recently passed away. I hold her, and all of them, dearly in my thoughts.

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## ***Declaration***

I declare that this thesis I have presented for the examination of my Ph.D. degree from the University of Birmingham is a presentation of original work, and I am the sole author. This work has not been previously presented for an award at this university or any other university. All sources are acknowledged as references. The copyright for this thesis rests with the author. No quotation from it should be published without the author's prior written consent, and the information derived from it should be acknowledged. This thesis may not be reproduced without the prior written consent of the author. I warrant that this authorisation does not infringe on the rights of any third party, to the best of my belief.

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June 2024



## ***Chapter 1. Introduction***

### **1.1 Iran's Nuclear Programme (1950s–2000s)**

Iran's nuclear programme has its roots in the mid-20th century, during the reign of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. The Shah envisioned nuclear technology as a tool for modernisation, energy diversification, and establishing Iran as a regional power (Chubin, 2006). He believed that nuclear power was a symbol of technological modernisation and a way to secure Iran's future energy needs. This vision translated into investments in nuclear power during the 1970s. Funded by Iran's oil revenue, plans were drawn up to construct a network of nuclear reactors across the country (Hadian, 2008). The initiation of the nuclear programme in Iran was facilitated by the 1957 nuclear cooperation agreement with the United States, which was part of the Atoms for Peace programme aimed at promoting the peaceful use of nuclear energy. Iran received its first nuclear reactor from the US, which laid the foundation for its civil nuclear infrastructure (Fuhrmann, 2012).

By the 1970s, Iran's commitment to nuclear non-proliferation was institutionalised through the ratification of the NPT in 1970. This commitment was reinforced in 1974, when Iran entered into an additional agreement with the IAEA. This agreement mandated comprehensive reporting of Iran's nuclear materials and facilities, marking a significant step in Iran's nuclear safeguard obligations (Iran Safeguards Agreement, 1974; IAEA, 1974). Envisioning nuclear technology as a cornerstone of modernisation and industrialisation, Shah initiated the programme within a narrative of national progress and modernity (Milani, 2010). The 1979 Islamic Revolution ushered in a period of uncertainty for Iran's political trajectory, foreign policy, and its nuclear programme (Hadian, 2008). Nuclear R&D activities were temporarily suspended following the revolution. This was further compounded by the departure of foreign experts and the withdrawal of Western investment, casting doubt on the programme's future and adding new challenges (Samore, 2013). Thus, the advent of the 1979 Islamic Revolution marked a critical turning point, leading to a comprehensive re-evaluation and initial cessation of the nuclear programme, which was deemed un-Islamic and unnecessary.

However, the subsequent Iran-Iraq War from 1980 to 1988 underscored the importance of national security and self-reliance in Iran, thereby reinforcing the need for the nuclear programme's reevaluation. According to Sick (1987), this conflict catalysed the reinvigoration of narratives focused on sovereignty and independence, thereby influencing the strategic reassessment of the nuclear programme. This period fostered a perception of existential threat that gradually fostered a revival of the programme, driven by a confluence of objectives: ensuring energy security, fostering technological advancement, promoting self-sufficiency, and bolstering national pride (Hamblin, 2014). Coupled with the United States' withdrawal of support from the programme, Iran sought alternative partnerships for nuclear development, most notably with China and Russia, for the construction of the Bushehr nuclear power plant (Heinonen, 2014; Samore, 2013).

The discovery of undeclared nuclear facilities at Natanz and Arak by the IAEA in 2002 marked a turning point, raising suspicions about the possible military dimensions of Iran's nuclear programme (IAEA, 2003). The IAEA's findings on unreported nuclear material, undeclared enrichment activities, and the existence of facilities not previously disclosed to the IAEA were pivotal in the IAEA's view that Iran was in non-compliance with its NPT obligations (International Atomic Energy Agency, 2003). This development coincided with the presidency of Khatami (1997–2005), which marked a period of rapprochement with the international community based on Khatami's "Dialogue Among Civilisations". These disclosures led to suspicions about the programme's intentions, laying the groundwork for future confrontations. In June 2003, the IAEA Board of Governors passed a resolution demanding the complete cessation of Iran's uranium enrichment and reprocessing activities. This resolution required Iran to comply with stringent inspections by the end of October of that year, aiming to ensure the exclusively peaceful nature of its nuclear programme (Arms Control Association, 2003; IAEA, 2003). Additionally, the resolution called for Iran to undertake substantive measures to restore international confidence (IAEA Board of Governors, 2003).

The 2005 election of Ahmadinejad signalled a shift in Iran's nuclear policy from diplomacy to defiance. His presidency was characterised by a hard-line stance on the nuclear issue, marked by rhetorical escalations and a refusal to compromise on Iran's right to enrich uranium. Under his leadership, Iran advanced its research and uranium enrichment activities, resulting in a series of sanctions by the UNSC to curb the Iranian nuclear programme. These sanctions targeted critical sectors, including Iran's economy, nuclear and missile programmes, banking, and oil exports (Katzman, 2020). Despite international pressure, Iran continued to expand its nuclear facilities, including the construction of a second enrichment plant near Qom in 2009, which raised international concerns about Iran's intentions and its commitment to the NPT (International Atomic Energy Agency, 2009). During Ahmadinejad's tenure, nuclear negotiations failed to yield a tangible solution, as both Iran and the P5+1 remained steadfast in their positions.

The election of Rouhani in 2013 marked a transition towards moderation and the revitalisation of diplomatic engagements to resolve the nuclear dispute and eliminate the impact of economic sanctions on several key macroeconomic indicators in Iran, including oil exports, exchange rates, and inflation. His administration sought to negotiate a resolution to the nuclear impasse. These efforts culminated in the JCPOA in 2015, which aimed to limit Iran's nuclear programme in exchange for the lifting of international sanctions (Katzman, 2020). The JCPOA represented a recalibration of Iran's nuclear policy towards a path of pragmatic engagement, seeking to reconcile Iran's right to peaceful nuclear technology under the NPT with efforts to eliminate international concerns (Katzman, 2020). However, the United States' unilateral withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018 under Trump and the reinstatement of sanctions reversed many of the agreements' gains, leading to increased tension. In response, Iran incrementally scaled back its compliance with the JCPOA, highlighting the challenges of maintaining international agreements amidst changing political landscapes (Katzman, 2020).

## 1.2 The Architecture of Power: Understanding the Role of *Velayat-e Faqih*

The concept of *Velayat-e Faqih* exemplifies the integration of religious authority with political governance, shaping Iran's political system (Arjomand, 1988, p. 303). This institutionalised a unique form of political system, blending religious authority with mechanisms for public participation and self-determination (Adib-Moghaddam, 2005, pp. 265-292; The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1981). The concept of *Velayat-e Faqih*, the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist, is intertwined with Shia Islamic norms, according which a senior Islamic cleric, or *Faqih*, is bestowed with guardianship over the people, deriving authority over the religious domain as well as across the political sphere. This characteristic of Iran's political system and its theoretical underpinnings justify the concentration of religious and political power in the hands of the Supreme Leader in alignment with Shia Islamic norms (Kausar and Ahmed, 2019). According to Ayati and Moghaddasi (2016), the concept of *Velayat-e Faqih* is a cornerstone of Iran's post-Islamic Revolution political system.

Iran's political architecture comprises three distinct branches: the legislature, the executive, and the judiciary. Nevertheless, these branches operate under the overarching authority and oversight of the Supreme Leader. Appointed for life by the Assembly of Experts, the Supreme Leader wields expansive authority across the military, judiciary, executive, and legislative domains, thereby consolidating significant influence over all aspects of governance. In this capacity, the Supreme Leader also serves as the commander-in-chief of the armed forces, thereby exercising control over national defence and foreign policy directives (Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1979; Arjomand, 2009). Additionally, the Expediency Council functions as an advisory body. This council plays a crucial role in resolving disputes between the Guardian Council and the Parliament. The Guardian Council is responsible for approving legislation, vetting presidential candidates, and overseeing parliamentary decisions (Moin, 2000). By mediating conflicts and providing counsel, the Expediency Council ensures the alignment of legislative actions with the broader objectives of the Supreme Leader.



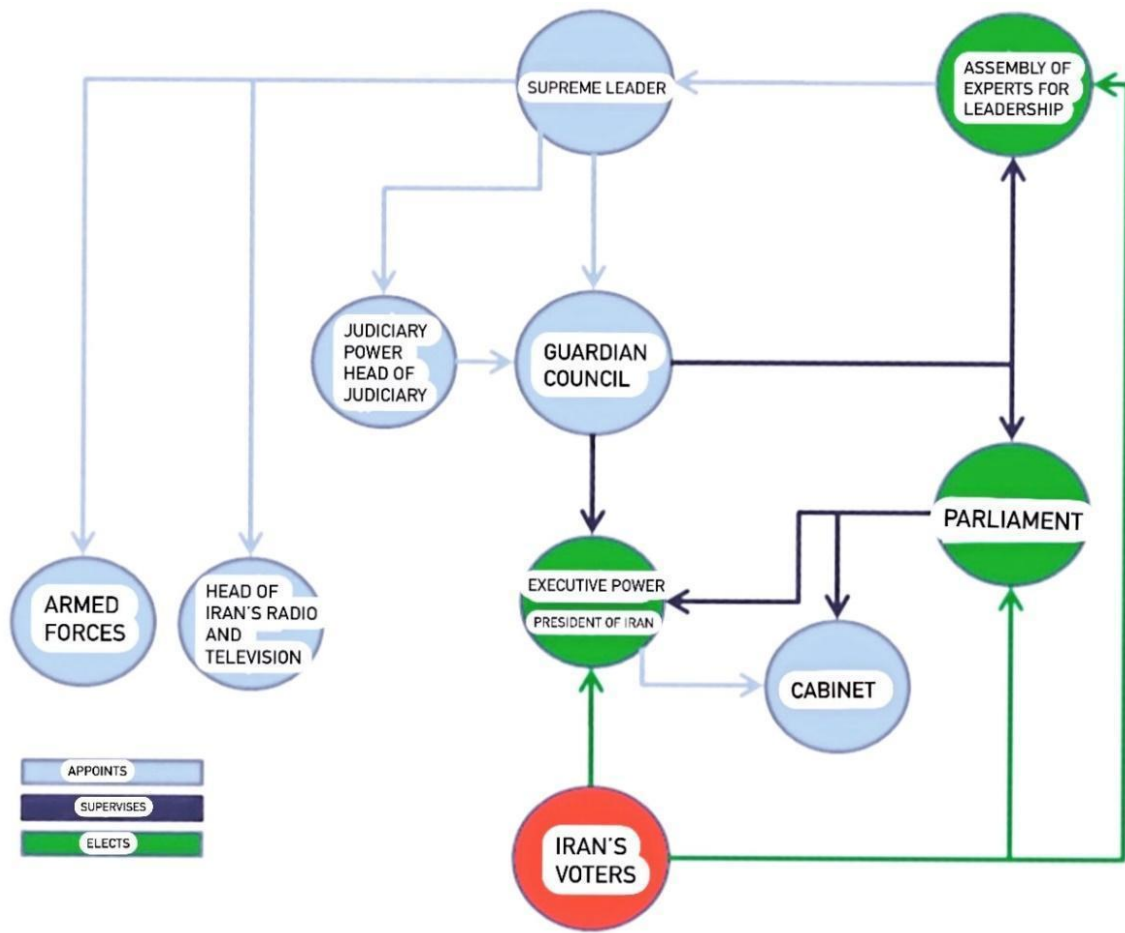


Figure 1. Iran 's Political Structure - Source: Created by the author.

Figure 1 illustrates the core structure of Iran's political system. At its apex lies the Supreme Leader, who embodies the fusion of religious authority and statecraft. The executive branch, overseen by the president, interacts with various institutions to implement the policies. Legislative authority is shared between the Parliament and the Guardian Council. The Parliament reflects elements of participatory democracy, whereas the Guardian Council, with its power to vet legislation, ensures compatibility with Islamic norms. The judiciary, led by the Chief Justice, operates with a degree of independence, upholding the Constitution's principle of separation of powers.

The president is the highest-ranking official after the Supreme Leader of Iran and is elected for a term of four years by a direct popular vote; his re-election is possible consecutively for a term (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 2024). The president operates within the framework of the Supreme Leader's rules and decrees. His executive responsibility remains subservient to the Supreme Leader's fundamental command. The SNSC of Iran, which includes the president, key security officials, and military commanders, is the primary body responsible for formulating and presenting national security policies (Samii, 2008). Established under Article 176 of the Iranian Constitution in 1989, the SNSC is tasked with several critical responsibilities. It formulates defence and national security policies within the framework of the general policies set by the Supreme Leader. It ensures that domestic policies are in harmony with national security objectives.

The Council marshals resources to defend national security from both internal and external threats. The SNSC comprises 12 permanent members, including key figures from Iran's political and military leadership. These members include the President, who nominally presides over the Council, the Speaker of Parliament, the Head of the Judiciary, the Chief of Staff of Iran's Armed Forces, the Commanders-in-Chief of Iran's Army, and the IRGC; the Ministers of Foreign Affairs, Intelligence, and Interior, two representatives of the Supreme Leader, one of whom traditionally serves as the SNSC Secretary. While the SNSC debates and forms a consensus on critical national security issues, all its decisions must ultimately be confirmed by the Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei. This ensures that the Supreme Leader has the final say on all matters of national security and foreign policy. The SNSC has played a significant role in shaping Iran's foreign and domestic policies. For instance, it was instrumental in the negotiations leading to the 2015 nuclear deal with major world powers (United States Institute of Peace, 2019; Bagheri, 2020).

The Council's deliberations on the nuclear programme involve assessing geopolitical risks, managing international negotiations, and ensuring compliance with the broader guidelines set by the Supreme Leader of Iran on national security and questions of sovereignty (Lim, 2015; Kazemzadeh, 2017). The Ministry of Foreign Affairs plays a crucial role in implementing the foreign policy directives set forth by the Supreme Leader, parliament, and the SNSC. This ministry acts as the primary interface between Iran and the international community, overseeing diplomatic relations, international negotiations, and representing Iran's interests on the global stage. The Islamic Consultative Assembly, also called the Iranian Parliament, consists of representatives elected in direct and secret elections over four years. The main task of parliament is to make laws on all matters and issues within the framework of the Constitution (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 2024). The Parliament, or *Majles*, is responsible for crafting legislation (Moslem, 2002). The Guardian Council is a constitutional body that plays a significant role in legislative processes. It has the authority to review and approve the laws passed by the parliament. (Ainsworth and Jones, 2020).

As mentioned, the Council's role includes the verification of candidate qualifications for presidential and parliamentary elections (Roshanzadeh and Habibnejad, 2019). According to Iran's constitution, the Guardian Council has the authority to ensure that electoral candidates adhere to the Islamic Revolution and state principles. This vetting process extends to legislation as well, since the council holds the power to veto parliamentary decisions (Lam, 2011). Judiciary power, one of the three coequal branches of power, is ascribed significant powers by the constitution and is responsible for legal affairs and justice, combating crime, and protecting the rights of individuals and society based on Islamic law. The head of the judiciary is appointed by leadership for five years (The Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 2024).

*Velayat-e Faqih*'s concept is central to the political architecture of the Islamic Republic of Iran, profoundly influencing its domestic and foreign policies, including its nuclear strategy. This doctrine grants the Supreme Leader ultimate authority over the state, encompassing both religious and political domains (Rizvi, 2012). The Supreme Leader, under the doctrine of *Velayat-e Faqih*, is the ultimate decision-maker on national security issues, including the nuclear programme. Ayatollah Khamenei's decisions are influenced by a blend of religious principles and pragmatic considerations, reflecting a cautious approach to nuclear negotiations (Sadjadpour, 2007). The nuclear programme is often framed within the ideological context of resisting Western dominance and asserting national sovereignty. This ideological stance is supported by the principle of *Velayat-e Faqih*, which emphasises the independence and self-reliance of the Islamic Republic (Salamey and Othman, 2011). The doctrine provides the Supreme Leader with legitimacy and authority to ensure that the nuclear programme aligns with national interests and public opinion. This helps manage internal dissent and maintain a unified stance on the nuclear issue (Amirpur, 2014). Ayatollah Khamenei's *fatwa* pointed out that the manufacture and use of weapons of mass destruction were deemed un-Islamic (Khalaji, 2011, p. 14). He declared,

"Enrichment and the other achievements that have been made in the nuclear area are very important accomplishments. And these are only our initial steps in this industry. This industry should be developed to make progress. We are not after nuclear tests. We are not after nuclear weapons. This is not because they (the nuclear powers) are telling us not to pursue these things. Rather, we do not want these things for the sake of ourselves and our religion, and reason is telling us not to do so. Both shar'i and aqli [related to logic and reason] fatwas dictate that we do not pursue them. Our aqli fatwa is that we do not need a nuclear weapon, either in the present or the future. A nuclear weapon is a source of trouble for a country like ours; I do not want to expand on this matter. Nuclear achievements are very important, and pursuing this industry and industrialising the country are important tasks. This should receive attention." (Khamenei, 2015).

This religious decree, purportedly placing nuclear weapons squarely against Islamic principles, signifies a potent declaration of intent, given Khamenei's authoritative position in both political and religious spheres. However, the continued existence of fatwa is debatable. While the *fatwa* serves as a deterrent against nuclear armament, shifting regional dynamics or changes in national identity narratives could lead to the re-evaluation of such religious edicts. The possibility that Iran might move beyond nuclear hedging to produce weapons is a concern that looms large in international relations. While the direct use of nuclear weapons would

contravene the *fatwa* and be considered a grave sin, the evolving nature of international politics and internal ideologies may challenge this position in the future.

## **1.3 Literature Review**

### **1.3.1 Introduction to the Literature Review Process**

Embarking on a systematic literature review, my objective was to explore the nuances and gaps in the existing body of research. To ensure clarity and methodological rigour, I follow a structured process in this systematic literature review, ensuring that each step is purposeful and contributes to the overarching goal of my research. Given the complexity and interdisciplinary nature of the subject, I aim to review the existing research to uncover where current knowledge stands and where gaps lie. The following questions were designed to guide an effective literature search for this research project by applying social constructivism to Iran's nuclear policy. In terms of the theoretical framework, I asked how social constructivism contributes to our understanding of the state motivations behind nuclear programmes, as opposed to realist perspectives. What insights do existing studies offer on the role of national identity narratives, as constructed by political elites, in shaping state decisions regarding nuclear programmes? Specifically, with regard to Iran's nuclear programme, I was interested in knowing how evolving narratives of national identity (e.g., modernity, security, self-reliance) during the presidencies of Khatami, Ahmadinejad, and Rouhani influenced Iran's nuclear policy decisions and what a social constructivist lens tells us. Moreover, I was interested in knowing what continuities and changes can be identified in Iran's national identity narratives across these presidencies and how these shifts correlate with its nuclear policy choices. The aim was to explore gaps in the scholarly literature regarding the social constructivist explanation of the interplay between national identity narratives and Iran's nuclear policy. Moreover, I aim to explore how a social constructivist approach provides a more comprehensive understanding of Iran's nuclear decision-making process, particularly in areas where existing research falls short or requires further exploration. By pinpointing specific shortcomings in the current research, this project aims to contribute to a more nuanced understanding of the unexplored or insufficiently examined aspects of Iran's nuclear policy through a social-constructivist lens.

### **1.3.2 Why do states pursue nuclear programmes?**

Taliaferro's (2006) exploration of neoclassical realism enriches our understanding of state behaviour in the international system, which shows how a state's external vulnerabilities and quest for power shape its internal balancing strategies (Taliaferro, 2006). The economic process model developed by Keohane and Nye (1978) offers a great perspective on state behaviour, especially in terms of how economic and technological advancements can precipitate regime changes. This model argues that states may initiate regime shifts to secure economic benefits and adapt to global interdependencies. This perspective adds a layer to our understanding of regime dynamics, suggesting that technological and economic developments can act as catalysts for change, particularly in a highly interdependent world. However, while this model highlights the significant role of economic and technological factors in influencing state actions, it acknowledges its limitations in fully capturing the complexity of regime evolution (Keohane and Nye, 1973). This approach contrasts with more traditional views, which primarily focus on the pursuit of power or nuclear weapons as a means of ensuring national security. By integrating the economic process model into the analysis, we gain a more comprehensive understanding of why states might engage in such pursuits not only for power but also for economic stability and growth.

Keohane and Nye's (1973) exploration of interdependence provides a critical framework for understanding the complexities of international relations beyond mere reciprocal benefits. This broader perspective of interdependence, recognising both costs and constraints on autonomy, is crucial for analysing Iran's nuclear policy. It allows us to appreciate the subtleties of Iran's engagements on the global stage, where its actions are not just responses to immediate threats but are deeply embedded in a complex tapestry of historical, ideological narratives, and strategic (economic and security) calculations. This approach to interdependence highlights that relationships marked by mutual dependence, such as those between nuclear states under deterrent postures, involve significant costs and are not inherently beneficial. Iran's case illustrates how nuclear capabilities are seen not only for physical security but also as integral components of national identity and sovereignty, reflecting broader societal norms and historical narratives. These factors collectively shape Iran's nuclear strategy, which is both a response to external pressure and a reflection of internal expectations.

Narang (2017) then extends the conversation to the strategic domain, offering a granular analysis of nuclear policy strategies beyond the binary classification of nuclear vs. non-nuclear states. Through the lens of strategies such as hedging, Narang unveils the multifaceted nature of states' nuclear ambitions, with Iran's hedging strategy highlighting a balance between maintaining nuclear potential and professing peaceful intentions. While Narang's framework provides valuable strategic insights, it also invites a deeper investigation into the ideational and geopolitical nuances that shape a state's nuclear policy (Narang, 2017). The pursuit of nuclear weapons by states remains a central concern in international relations. Realism, a dominant theoretical perspective, offers a framework for understanding this phenomenon by emphasising the importance of power, security, and the anarchic nature of the international system (Waltz, 2010).

In a world lacking the central authority to enforce order, states prioritise their survival and act in their perceived self-interest. Nuclear weapons, with their unparalleled destructive capabilities, are seen as the ultimate instruments of power capable of deterring existential threats and guaranteeing a state's survival (Mearsheimer, 2003). The logic of deterrence is a core tenet of realism. States primarily acquire nuclear weapons to deter potential adversaries from attacking them using nuclear weapons or conventional forces (Sagan, 2004). The threat of massive retaliation serves as a disincentive for aggression and creates precarious stability. When a regional power acquires nuclear weapons, it alters power dynamics and compels other states to react (Waltz, 1967). Realist international relations theory posits that the anarchical structure of the global system, lacking a central authority, compels states to prioritise their own survival. This emphasis on self-preservation translates into a strong drive for states to acquire nuclear weapons as deterrents against existential threats. From a realist perspective, nuclear weapons have become a strategic imperative, allowing states to safeguard their security and maintain sovereignty in a competitive international environment (Waltz, 1979). However, the realist framework presents only a limited view of nuclear proliferation. While it sheds light on the role of power politics and security concerns in motivating states' nuclear ambitions, it tends to overlook the complexities of nuclear disarmament processes. Realism often downplays the influence of ideational factors, ethical considerations, and historical experiences that shape a state's nuclear decision-making (Wendt, 1987).

In the discourse on nuclear proliferation, a more comprehensive approach is necessary to transcend the power-centric view of realism. While realism emphasises the pursuit of national security as the primary driver, nuclear (dis)armament efforts are influenced by a broader array of factors. Incorporating ideational elements, such as international norms against proliferation, alongside ethical considerations, historical context, and the legacies of wars, offers a richer understanding of state nuclear policies (Goure, 1999). This multifaceted perspective acknowledges that state decisions regarding nuclear weapons are not solely driven by security concerns but are also shaped by evolving international norms, ethical imperatives, and historical experiences. This can lead to horizontal proliferation, where neighbouring states feel compelled to develop their own nuclear programs to maintain a balance of deterrence. The nuclearisation of India and Pakistan exemplifies this dynamic, where regional rivalry fuels nuclear ambitions on both sides. Realism acknowledges that nuclear weapons can enhance a state's international prestige and status, signifying its technological prowess and membership in an exclusive club of nuclear powers. For example, North Korea's acquisition of nuclear weapons bolstered its bargaining position in international negotiations. Realism, with its focus on state power and the pursuit of security within a competitive international system, posits that states gravitate towards nuclear armament to enhance their positions and deter potential threats. Relative power among states is central to understanding the patterns of international organisation and global governance (Rendall, 2022).

A realist focus on deterrence can lead to a dangerous security dilemma. In this scenario, one state's nuclear programme is likely to be perceived as a threat by another, triggering a proliferation cascade. Neighbouring or rival states, driven by a perpetual quest for security and power in a competitive international system, develop their own nuclear capabilities in response. This phenomenon aligns with the core tenets of realism, which emphasise the constant struggle for survival and dominance within an anarchical international system. The resulting security dilemma highlights the paradoxical effects of nuclear deterrence, in which efforts to enhance national security can inadvertently lead to increased instability and the spread of nuclear weapons. Therefore, despite the valuable insights realism provides into the motivations for state nuclear programmes, its emphasis on power politics creates a blind spot, which hinders our understanding of the intricate processes involved in nuclear disarmament and the multifaceted influences shaping a state's nuclear policies. My research seeks to transcend the confines of traditional realist interpretations by delving into the ideational, ethical, and



historical context to understand Iran's nuclear policy while accounting for both material and ideational factors.

Transitioning from the realist discourse, constructivists, as Jae-wook (2013) articulates, challenge the realist emphasis on material power by highlighting the role of ideas, beliefs, and cultural factors in shaping state actions. This approach suggests that the concept of power is not entirely materialist and that the environment in which states operate is defined through historical and cultural mediation. Constructivism contends that national identities, cultural values, and historical experiences play a pivotal role in determining state behaviour (Zürn and Checkel, 2005). Constructivism offers a richer understanding of international relations by encompassing the ideational, historical and cultural contexts that mediate human interactions with the environment (Rocha de Carvalho, 2020). Constructivists emphasise the importance of ideas, norms, values, and identities in shaping political processes and outcomes (Rocha de Carvalho, 2020; Agius, 2013). Constructivism reveals how the human world is not pre-given but that the human world is constructed through the interactions of actors (Agius, 2013). Actors' identities and interests are socially constructed and influenced by intersubjectively held norms (Broome, 2013). Realist international relations theory, emphasising material capabilities and national security concerns, offers a valuable framework for analysing state behavior. However, its application to Iran's nuclear programme reveals limitations. Realist interpretations primarily focus on Iran's pursuit of nuclear capabilities as a strategic move for security and power. This perspective, while valuable, may overlook other significant non-materialist factors influencing Iranian decision-making.

Social norms and interactions play pivotal roles in the development of policy environments by exerting both regulatory and transformative influence. These norms, defined as shared expectations of behaviour within a group or society, provide a framework through which individual and collective actions are governed and understood. The transformative impact of social norms and interactions extends beyond mere regulation and influences the ideological foundations of policymaking. Through dynamic social interactions, existing norms can be challenged and redefined, leading to shifts in policy orientation (March and Olsen, 1989). This process is evident in how social movements and public discourse reshape norms around issues such as environmental conservation, human rights, and public health, subsequently influencing legislative agendas and policy frameworks (Finnemore and Sikkink 1998).

Social norms are not static; they evolve as they interact with changing socio-political, economic, and technological landscapes. As such, understanding the interaction between social norms and policy development requires a multidimensional approach that considers the complex interplay between cultural values, historical contexts, and the current socio-economic environment (Haidt, 2012). Thus, the study of social norms and interactions in relation to policymaking offers a rich field of exploration and insight into how policies can be shaped and adapted to meet the evolving needs and values of society. Social constructivism, as articulated by Barbehön (2020), offers a valuable lens for examining the motivations behind state nuclear programmes. This framework emphasises how a nation's motivations are not solely driven by objective realities but are also shaped by the social construction of these realities. Social norms, historical narratives, and cultural interpretations play a role in shaping a state's perception of threats and the need for nuclear programmes. Barbehön (2020) argued that traditional research approaches, often rooted in positivism, tend to overlook the diversity of perspectives on knowledge and reality. This can lead to a simplified understanding of state motivations, neglecting the role of social construction and interpretation. This perspective highlights the importance of examining how the state frames security threats, shaped by historical narratives and cultural perceptions that can influence its nuclear ambition. Evolving international norms regarding nuclear proliferation and disarmament can constrain or incentivise states' nuclear programmes. National identity narratives, emphasising vulnerability or historical grievances, can contribute to perceptions of the need for nuclear weapons for security. By incorporating a constructivist perspective alongside strategic considerations, this research offers a more detailed understanding of the complex factors driving states' nuclear policies. This approach delves beneath the simplistic notion of “national security” and investigates the deeper social constructs that truly shape state motivations for pursuing nuclear capabilities.

### **1.3.3 The National Identity and Iran's Nuclear Programme**

Dorraj (2006) examines the intricacies and motivations behind Iran's nuclear programme and the resulting international tensions. Iran asserts that its nuclear programme is primarily aimed at addressing its energy needs, especially given its large and growing population. However, most informed estimates speculate that Iran is 5–10 years away from achieving its nuclear capability. For the Islamic Republic, possessing a credible nuclear deterrent is increasingly considered vital for its survival. There is a significant perception divide between Iran and the West regarding nuclear issues. This divide exacerbates distrust and fuels conflict, as many Western politicians and the media often interpret Iran's nuclear ambitions as belligerent and nefarious. Iran's motivations for seeking nuclear capability are similar to those of other nations that have pursued such ambitions. Iran's pursuit of nuclear capability is driven by a combination of energy needs, national security concerns, and aspirations for greater international influence. The profound perception divides between Iran and the West complicates the situation, with Western fears often viewing Iran's ambitions through the lens of hostility and instability. This complex dynamic continues to fuel the ongoing nuclear standoff and shapes the broader discourse on regional and international security (Dorraj, 2006).

My research aims to go beyond this perception in understanding Iran's nuclear policy by incorporating a constructivist perspective that emphasises the importance of ideas, shared norms, and identities in shaping state behaviour. The evolving landscape of nuclear proliferation and disarmament, including the growing significance of non-proliferation treaties and the potential consequences of violating these norms, influences state behaviour by shaping perceptions of acceptability and potential consequences. Additionally, shifts in global power dynamics can impact state perceptions of security threats and strategic calculations regarding nuclear capabilities. The rise and decline of major powers, along with the formation of new alliances, alter the threat landscape and influence decisions regarding the nuclear programme. National identity narratives create a sense of vulnerability or historical grievances, potentially leading to a perception of the need for nuclear weapons for national security. Similarly, the pursuit of prestige and regional influence can be intertwined with a decision to acquire nuclear capabilities. By examining these factors alongside strategic considerations, this study aims to offer a more comprehensive understanding of the multifaceted motivations driving Iran's nuclear programme.

Sherrill's (2012) examination uncovers layers beyond conventional security paradigms, and we may position Iran's nuclear interests within the framework of domestic politics and ideological orientations. This perspective challenges the defensive realist narratives, suggesting that Tehran's pursuit of nuclear capabilities is intertwined with a complex matrix of offensive goals and ideological leanings. The US-Iran nuclear standoff, deeply entrenched in a complex web of historical, ideological, and geopolitical tensions, has been analysed through a constructivist lens by Shoaib (2015). This approach underscores how revolutionary ideology and anti-Western sentiments emerging from the 1979 Islamic Revolution have shaped Iran's national identity and foreign policy. Shoaib points out that the policies adopted by both the US and Iran, driven by entrenched negative perceptions of each other, have perpetuated a long-standing nuclear standoff. The narratives constructed by each side fuelled ongoing distrust and suspicion, making resolution challenging. The nuclear agreement marked a critical point in these dynamics, initiating the potential deconstruction of adversarial perceptions. However, for this process to be sustainable, it requires ongoing dialogue and positive interactions, with Iran needing to move away from its entrenched anti-West stance and the US adopting more incentive-based approaches than punitive ones. The reciprocal perception of threat has been exacerbated by harsh rhetoric from Iranian religious hardliners and the corresponding Western narrative of Iran as part of an "axis of evil," solidifying enmity and distrust that obstructs diplomatic solutions.

Ray Takeyh (2003) examines the complexities of Iran's nuclear policy and the international response, particularly from the United States. As the Bush administration intensively addressed the issue of nuclear proliferation in the Middle East, Iran emerged as a primary concern for Washington. Initially, many Western analysts believed that Iran's nuclear programme was confined to the Bushehr installation near the Persian Gulf, which was overseen by the IAEA. The official purpose of this facility was to provide Iran with an alternative energy source to gas and oil. It is not inevitable that Iran will become the next member of a nuclear club. Within Tehran's clerical corridors, there is an ongoing debate on the wisdom of crossing the nuclear threshold. The Islamic Republic's decisions largely depend on its evolving relationship with the United States and the security dynamics of the Persian Gulf. A creative U.S. policy could still influence Iran's decisions, potentially swaying those within Iran who wish to remain within the NPT framework, to which Iran is a signatory (Takeyh, 2003).

Contrary to Western assumptions, Iran's nuclear calculations are not driven by irrational ideologies. Instead, they are the result of a calculated effort to establish a viable deterrent in the face of regional and international pressure. In summary, Takeyh's analysis highlights the significant strategic considerations behind Iran's nuclear programme and the potential influence of U.S. policy in shaping Iran's nuclear trajectory. The debate within Iran and the broader geopolitical context play a crucial role in determining the future direction of its nuclear capabilities (Takeyh, 2003). However, the analysis neglects that ideological motives, historical context, and the sense of Iranian victimisation are relevant, if not predominant, in influencing Iran's nuclear agenda, overshadowing strategic realist concerns. At the domestic level, Iranian national pride and anti-Western sentiment have been significant drivers of its nuclear programme. Historical grievances, including past Western interventions and perceived double standards, especially in comparison to Israel, have intensified Iran's nuclear pursuits. These grievances fuel a narrative of victimisation and resistance to Western dominance.

Karacasulu and Uzgören (2007) illustrate that identities, norms, and strategic cultures are actively shaping state behaviour and the international security landscape. This article explains the constructivist approach to security studies, arguing that it offers a necessary challenge to the traditional rationalist perspective. Constructivism addresses security issues by focusing on norms, identity, and social interactions, which rationalist approaches often ignore. Constructivists assert that material structures are socially constructed and that their meanings can evolve through interaction. They view security as a social construct and actors as role players rather than rational utility maximizers, thereby explaining behaviours that rationalist approaches based on power and interest fail to account for. My research project aims to contribute to a deeper understanding of Iran's nuclear policy through a constructivist lens. This approach will explore how Iran's national identity narratives, particularly its self-perception in relation to the international community, interact with strategic and security considerations to shape its nuclear policy decisions. This study intends to bridge the gap between theoretical frameworks and empirical case studies, facilitating a fundamental understanding of the interplay among identity, security concerns, and strategic calculations in Iran's pursuit of a nuclear programme.

Hayes (2009) goes into detail about the divergent reactions of the United States towards the nuclear programmes of India and Iran, attributing these differing stances to the process of securitisation influenced by democratic identity and norms. Through this lens, Hayes argues that the U.S. considers a shared democratic identity as a foundation for trust and cooperation, which leads to a favourable attitude towards India's nuclear endeavours. However, Iran is perceived as an undemocratic state, and a potential threat in the eyes of the U.S. This perception aligns with Iran's lack of democracy and a predisposition for weapons proliferation, thereby legitimising stringent countermeasures against Iran. On the other hand, India's democratic identity fosters a sense of partnership, tempering the U.S. response to its nuclear programme despite potential conflicts with U.S. preferences (Hayes, 2009). My research seeks to deepen the exploration of how the US and Iran disputed the nuclear programme, offering a detailed analysis of the nuclear negotiations and further investigating how different perceptions or interests affect the dispute.

Nia (2011) provided a holistic constructivist analysis of Iranian foreign policy, highlighting the influence of internal and international normative environments. Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, two key factors have shaped Iran's foreign policy: domestic social discourse and systemic international interaction. Domestically, Iran's social narratives have driven it to adopt a more ideological approach towards the West, particularly the United States. This ideological approach has intensified as Western confrontational policies have radicalised Iran's stance. Over the past three decades, these dynamics have fostered a context of antagonistic identities between Iran and the West, creating a tragic cycle of misunderstanding and missed opportunities for reconciliation. The analysis critiques rationalist theories for inadequately addressing ideational and normative influences on Iran's foreign policy, advocating for a holistic constructivist approach. This perspective suggests that material structures gain meaning in social and normative contexts, making Iran's policy decisions more ideologically and normatively driven than purely materialistic. By highlighting the importance of norms and identities, the study challenges materialist dominance in international relations discourse, focusing on the contrast between the 'logic of consequentialism' and the 'logic of appropriateness'. It presents holistic constructivism as a suitable framework for understanding the interplay between Iran's domestic ideological narratives and its foreign policy, particularly its antagonistic stance towards the West. This study acknowledges the potential limitations of a purely constructivist perspective and emphasises the importance of a balanced approach that also incorporates rationalist explanations of Iranian foreign policy.

Entessar and Afrasiabi (2016) employ constructivism, emphasising the role of norms and identity in shaping state behaviours, such as Iran's nuclear policy. The authors assert that while the JCPOA aims to be a mutually beneficial agreement, it could disproportionately favour Western interests, thus introducing risks that might compromise Iran's national security through stringent inspections or exacerbate regional tensions. Constructivism, highlighted as a major theoretical pillar alongside realism and liberalism, underscores that states act based on identities shaped by historical, political, and social contexts, which in turn define their behaviours within the international system. Entessar and Afrasiabi critiqued the JCPOA, suggesting that it may not fully resolve the nuclear crisis because of the agreement's complex legal and NPT-related parameters, which could lead to unforeseen geopolitical shifts. They urge cautious optimism, recognising the JCPOA as a short-term non-proliferation success and cautioning that its long-term effectiveness depends on various political and strategic factors that are yet to unfold. The discussion on the benefits of the JCPOA could be strengthened by incorporating empirical data to support the impact of the agreement from various perspectives (e.g., economic and political). It aims to provide a rich historical context, appreciate the domestic politics of Iran, and examine the context of three case studies with a comprehensive consideration of the material and non-material interests of stakeholders. My research sheds light on how domestic political landscapes and norms interact with broader international factors, leading to a richer picture of Iranian nuclear policy.

Khalili (1996) introduces the Strategic Identity framework to redefine our understanding of state behaviour in the nuclear arena, suggesting that a state's nuclear policy is an extension of its intrinsic strategic identity, moulded by desires for power, security, and a coherent sense of self. Khalili's work reveals gaps, especially in its empirical investigation of how individual states craft their nuclear strategies. My research seeks to bridge these gaps by delving into the ways in which Iran develops its nuclear policies and integrating the critical influence of non-material and material factors on Iran's nuclear policy. Iran's pursuit of peaceful nuclear technology is, *inter alia*, an attempt to gain recognition within international non-proliferation norms. The nuclear agreement highlighted a shared commitment to non-proliferation and acknowledged Iran's legitimacy in the global nuclear arena. Few studies have rigorously applied a social constructivist lens to examine how Iran's national identity narratives specifically influence its nuclear decision-making.

Torkashvand (2021) presented an analysis of the evolution of Iran's nuclear policy through the lens of cultural identity and international interaction, demonstrating how Iranian officials' perceptions of themselves and the world around them shaped Iran's stance on the nuclear question. From Khatami's era of striving for global dialogue to Ahmadinejad's confrontational posture to Rouhani's era of pragmatic engagement, resulting in the JCPOA, Torkashvand illuminates the complex dance between identity and policy and offers foundational support to my research, particularly regarding identity construction and its profound impact on policy making. My research draws on Torkashvand's exploration to further dissect how these evolving identity narratives inform and fundamentally drive Iran's policy decisions in the international context. Embarking on Torkashvand's insightful exploration, my research goes into the greater depth of Iran's identity-driven nuclear policy.

Chubin's (2006) analysis provides insight into the web of factors driving Iran's nuclear motivations, suggesting that a mix of national security imperatives, the quest for regional hegemony, technological aspirations, and responses to international pressures and sanctions drive Tehran's nuclear decision-making. Chubin deals with the intersection of domestic politics and international diplomacy, yet there is an absence of in-depth discussion of how specific national identity narratives mould Iran's nuclear pursuits. This gap presents an avenue for my research to illuminate how narratives of Iran's national identity are operationalised in nuclear policymaking. Dingli's (2006) analysis highlights the international dynamics at play. He demonstrates how Iran's nuclear programme has become strategically significant for China, forcing it to navigate a delicate balance between supporting Iran's economic growth and upholding its broader international obligations regarding nuclear proliferation. This perspective enriches the focus on the intricate relationship between national identity and foreign policy and demonstrates how external actors and their strategic calculations profoundly influence a state's nuclear programme. Bahgat's (2006) examination delves deeper into the motivations that drive Iran's nuclear policy. He provides a foundational framework by outlining the historical, domestic, and international factors that contribute to Iran's pursuit. Kibaroglu (2007) further expanded this discourse by examining Iran's endeavours to master the entire nuclear fuel cycle. This includes uranium processing, heavy water production, and spent-fuel reprocessing. Kibaroglu's analysis underscores the multifaceted nature of Iran's nuclear policy, highlighting not only security considerations but also the interplay between Iran's quest for scientific advancement and its desire for technological self-sufficiency. By incorporating these diverse perspectives, this research aims to provide a detailed examination of how strategic



considerations, national identity narratives, the influence of external actors, and the pursuit of scientific and technological advancement contribute to a state's decision-making regarding nuclear programmes.

Doe (2018) provided valuable insights into this phenomenon by examining the resurgence of Persian nationalism in Iran. His work emphasises the role that pre-Islamic cultural symbols and narratives play in shaping contemporary Iranian identity. This perspective is further enriched by Roe's (2019) analysis of the tension between Iran's deep-seated national pride in its ancient heritage and the post-1979 Islamic revolutionary ethos. Roe's work highlights the contestation and complexities inherent in the Iranian national identity. My research seeks to bridge the gap between Iran's national identity and its foreign policy behaviour. It aims to elucidate how the interplay between national identity and Iran's self-perception manifests in its engagement with the international community, particularly with regard to nuclear negotiations. This approach resonates with the work of scholars who emphasise the role of identity in shaping a state's foreign policy. As states navigate the international system, their national narratives, historical experiences. By focusing on Iran's nuclear negotiations, this study has the potential to shed light on how a state's national identity can shape its approach to sensitive international issues, particularly those with significant implications for regional and global security.

Holliday's (2010) work offers a valuable exploration of Khatami's discourse, providing insights into the complexity of his approach to Iran's national identity. Khatami's conceptualisation of Iranian national identity is interpreted as a resistance discourse grounded in Iranian-Islamic culture, 'dialogue among civilisations', and Islamic *mardomsalari*, challenging Western hegemony and promoting Iran's political Islam on the global stage. Khatami called for 'dialogue among civilisations' to assert cooperation and challenged Western normative dominance. Khatami interpreted Iranian-Islamic culture by 'Iranianising' Islam and positioning it within the framework of Iranian political Islam, thereby resisting Western hegemony and affirming a distinct Iranian-Islamic identity at both regional and international levels (Holliday, 2010). The emphasis on the Islamisation of Iran's foreign policy (Ansari, 2006) and the influence of the IRGC (Bazoobandi et al., 2023) illustrates the integral role of ideology in shaping Iran's nuclear policy. The intertwining of religious norms and revolutionary ideals with state policies underscores the complexity of Iran's strategic decisions. The IRGC's influence, in particular, reflects its commitment to preserving the ideological purity of the Islamic Revolution while advancing national security objectives.

Ehteshami's (2017) analysis of Iran's political landscape elucidates a multifaceted governance system that intertwines religious authority with republican-political structures. His study reveals a nation perpetually in flux, grappling with the challenges of reform and resistance within a neo-authoritarian framework. This cycle of change and the internal political stresses it engenders—spurred by the rise of new political forces and the resultant tensions—paint a picture of a country striving to reconcile its revolutionary ideals with the realities of governance and modernisation. Ehteshami (2017) places emphasis on the Islamic Republic's ongoing reform efforts, which seem to be a difficult task of trying to actualise the aspirations that fuelled the 1979 revolution. The struggle for the soul of the Islamic Republic, as Ehteshami (2017) articulates, reflects an unresolved tension between the founding of revolutionary ideals and the pragmatic demands of governing a modern state. Key questions remain on how these processes influence Iran's nuclear policy goals. Understanding how Iran's domestic political evolution has impacted its foreign policy is crucial. This study seeks to investigate the interplay between Iran's internal politics, governance dynamics, and nuclear policy. Reardon (2012) underscores that Iran's nuclear programme symbolises its quest for independence and self-sufficiency from the West, positioning it as a narrative of technical progress and modernisation. This connection highlights the nuclear programme as not just a technological pursuit, but as a symbol linking Iran's past with its aspirations for a future free from dependence. The narratives surrounding Iran's nuclear programme underscore the link between national identity and technological advancement.

Iranian leaders have consistently maintained that Tehran's nuclear activities are solely for peaceful purposes, emphasising their view that the nuclear programme is an inalienable right of the Iranian nation (Safarian, 2011). However, shifts in presidential leadership have demonstrably impacted Iran's foreign policy approach. From Khatami's "Dialogue Among Civilisations" initiative to Ahmadinejad's confrontational stance and Rouhani's pursuit of the JCPOA, these transitions reflect both ideological and strategic adaptations (Petito, 2007; Ansari, 2017; Menashri, 2013). Beyond leadership styles, Iran's nuclear programme is intricately linked to national identity and pride. Javad Zarif, Iran's Foreign Minister, highlights the contributions of Iranian scientists and views the programme as a source of national dignity (Zarif, 2015). Similarly, Marandi (2015) argues that the programme transcends its practical applications, symbolising national values such as sovereignty and self-reliance. This interconnection underscores the complexity of the nuclear issue in Iran, where technological pursuits are inseparable from national identity. Ahmadinejad's team's confrontational rhetoric

often clashed with this sentiment, while Rouhani's team of pragmatic career diplomats adopted a more conciliatory approach during negotiations (Mohseni, 2015). This dynamic underscores the interplay between leadership, national identity, and Iran's pursuit of its nuclear programme.

## **1.4 Research Statement**

### **1.4.1 Research Gap and Research Question**

The realist and rationalist perspectives in international relations focus primarily on material factors such as power, resources, and strategic interests. However, these perspectives often overlook the significant influence of ideational factors, such as national identity narratives and historical consciousness, which play a crucial role in shaping Iran's strategic decisions. National identity narratives and historical consciousness are deeply embedded in Iran's political culture and decision-making processes. These ideational factors can explain actions that may seem irrational from a purely materialist perspective. National identity is constructed through a shared history, culture, and values. Iran's national identity is heavily influenced by its ancient Persian heritage, Islamic revolution, and resistance to foreign intervention. These narratives foster a sense of pride and resilience, frequently leading to policies that prioritise independence, national sovereignty, self-reliance, and cultural integrity over material gains. For instance, Iran's insistence on maintaining its nuclear programme can be seen as a reflection of its desire to assert its technological and scientific capabilities, which are integral to its national identity.

Historical consciousness refers to the collective memory of past events that shapes a nation's current policies and attitudes. Iran's historical experiences, such as the 1953 CIA-backed coup and the Iran-Iraq War, have instilled a deep-seated distrust of foreign powers, particularly the United States and its allies. This historical consciousness has influenced Iran's strategic decisions, leading to actions that prioritise security and self-reliance. The interplay between material and ideational factors is crucial for understanding Iranian decision-making. Although material interests such as economic sanctions and military capabilities are important, they can be interpreted through the lens of national identity and historical consciousness. Realist and rationalist theories emphasise utility maximisation and strategic interactions based on material interests. However, in Iran, these calculations are deeply intertwined with ideational factors.

For instance, Iran's insistence on maintaining the enrichment programme despite the heavy costs of international sanctions or the Iranian strategic alliances with countries such as Syria and non-state actors such as Hezbollah are not solely based on material benefits. They are also based on shared normative, ideological, and historical ties. The outcomes of Iran's policies often reflect a synthesis of realist and constructivist elements. While realist approaches focus on the logic of consequences, constructivist approaches emphasise the logic of appropriateness, where actions are guided by norms and values. Iran's foreign policy, therefore, can be seen as a blend of strategic interests and normative commitments, where actions are justified not only by their material benefits but also by their alignment with national identity and historical narratives (Banerjee and Bhattacharya, 2019; Fearon and Wendt, 2002). While realist and realist perspectives provide valuable insights into the strategic calculations of states, they fail to explain the full spectrum of decision-making processes in Iran. National identity narratives and historical consciousness are powerful ideational undercurrents that significantly influence Iranian policy. Understanding these factors is essential for a comprehensive analysis of Iran's actions on the international stage, which may appear irrational from a purely materialist perspective but are deeply rational within the context of its national identity and historical experiences.

The research gap identified in the literature revolves around the limitations of traditional realist and realist perspectives in fully explaining the strategic decisions behind Iran's nuclear programme. These perspectives often focus on material factors such as power, resources, and strategic interests, but tend to overlook the significant influence of ideational factors such as national identity narratives and historical consciousness. The focus of many existing scholarly works dismisses the relevance of values and ideas, which can be crucial in understanding state behaviour. They fail to account for the role of national identity and historical consciousness in shaping strategic decisions. These ideational factors can explain actions that might seem irrational from a purely materialist perspective. Thus, there is a need to provide a more comprehensive explanation of strategic political decision-making in the contemporary era of geopolitical interdependence. This convergence is necessary to bridge the gap between material and ideational factors.

This study aims to address this critical gap by incorporating national identity and historical context into the analysis of Iran's nuclear policy. By incorporating national identity narratives and historical consciousness, this study provides a more nuanced understanding of Iran's motivations. This approach moves beyond the traditional focus on material factors to include the cultural and historical dimensions that influence state behaviour. It applies this integrated framework to the specific case of Iran, offering empirical insights into how national identity and historical experiences influence its nuclear policy and broader strategic behaviour. This study addresses the following research question:

How have narratives of Iran's national identity (such as “modernity,” “justice and national rights,” “sovereignty,” “independence,” and “anti-oppression”) and the influence of external factors, such as sanctions and negotiations with the P5+1, shaped Iran's nuclear policy during the administrations of Presidents Khatami, Ahmadinejad, and Rouhani?

#### **1.4.2 Research Objective**

Iran's nuclear policy has long been a focal point of international security studies, given its significant geopolitical implications. One primary objective of this study is to bridge the gap between theoretical frameworks and empirical case studies by employing a constructivist approach. By focusing on the interconnections between identity, security, and strategic calculations in Iran's nuclear policy, this study shifts the focus from Iran's nuclear capabilities (the “what”) to the motivations and decision-making processes behind its nuclear programme (the “why” and “how”). The interaction between national identity narratives and historical consciousness plays a crucial role in shaping Iran's nuclear policy. Iran’s national identity is constructed through a blend of historical, cultural, and ideological elements. These narratives are deeply embedded in political culture and influence the decision-making processes of Iranian elites. Moreover, Iran's ancient Persian heritage contributes to a sense of national pride and a desire to reclaim its historical status as a major regional power.

This historical consciousness drives Iran's pursuit of technological and scientific advancements (modernity), including its nuclear programme, as a means to demonstrate its capabilities and assert its sovereignty. The 1979 Islamic Revolution introduced a new ideological framework that emphasised resistance against foreign intervention and the promotion of Shia Islamic norms. This revolutionary identity is intertwined with Iran's nuclear policy, portraying the nuclear programme as a symbol of independence and resistance against Western hegemony. The desire to modernise and close the technological gap with the West is another significant aspect of Iran's national identity. The nuclear programme is seen as a pathway to achieving technological sophistication and self-reliance, which are integral to Iran's vision of itself as a modern and capable nation.

Historical consciousness refers to the collective memory of past events that shape a nation's current policies and attitudes. In Iran, several historical experiences have profoundly influenced its nuclear policy, including the Constitutional Revolution, the 1953 CIA-Backed Coup, the Islamic Revolution of 1979, and the Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988). The nuclear programme is portrayed as a unifying symbol of national pride, independence, and technological prowess. This narrative is used to rally domestic support and legitimise the government's policies. Historical experiences of foreign intervention and conflict have ingrained a strong sense of resistance and a need to protect national sovereignty. The nuclear programme is seen as a means of ensuring Iran's security and autonomy in the face of external pressures. Furthermore, Iranian leaders often invoke national identity and historical narratives to justify their nuclear policy aspirations. Terms such as “dignity,” “technological advancement,” and “resistance” are frequently used in political discourse to frame the nuclear programme as an essential component of Iran's national identity and strategic objectives. The interaction between national identity narratives and historical consciousness shapes Iran's nuclear policy. These ideational factors provide a framework for understanding Iran's motivations and actions, which might appear irrational from a purely materialist perspective but are deeply rational within the context of its national identity and historical experiences. By incorporating these factors into the analysis, we can gain a more comprehensive understanding of Iran's strategic behaviour and policy decisions.

This study explores the impact of national identity narratives on Iran's nuclear policy across the presidencies of Khatami, Ahmadinejad, and Rouhani. These narratives particularly include those emphasising modernity, justice, sovereignty, independence, and anti-oppression. This research project proposes a framework that incorporates the critical role of national identity narratives and the historical context that influences Iran's construction of national identity. Moreover, this research integrates domestic Iranian political dynamics. Iranian elites employ narratives of national identity and historical consciousness to justify and legitimise their actions and Iran's nuclear policies. The Iranian leaders framed the nuclear programme as a symbol of national pride, independence, and Iran's scientific and technological capabilities (Moheballi, 2017; Moheballi, 2015). They presented the nuclear programme as a means to ensure national sovereignty, self-reliance, and deterrence against external threats and intervention, and framed resistance to Western pressure on the nuclear issue as defending national dignity and Iran's inalienable rights. The nuclear programme is tied to the revolutionary ideology of resistance against perceived Western hegemony, and it is portrayed as an embodiment of Iran's independence and resistance to foreign dictates and the core tenets of the 1979 Islamic Revolution (Moheballi, 2017).

Leaders invoke historical experiences such as foreign interventions and the Iran-Iraq War to rally domestic support behind the nuclear programme and present it as a means of restoring Iran's rightful place as a leading power in the region after past humiliations (Moheballi, 2017). Hence, Iranian leaders emphasise normative commitments over material gains and tend to justify the nuclear approach not solely based on strategic considerations but rather tend to connect it with national identity narratives. In essence, Iranian elites weave together strands of national identity rooted in history, culture, ideology, and perceptions of external threats to construct the nuclear programme as an indispensable part of Iran's national identity, sovereignty, and rightful aspirations as a nation. This ideational framing helps legitimise nuclear policies domestically and internationally.

### **1.4.3 Building the Framework: Theory and Methodology**

The study's employment of a social constructivist framework is well aligned with the theoretical underpinnings of constructivism in international relations, which emphasises the role of social norms, identities, and ideas in shaping state behaviour and international interactions. This approach diverges from traditional realist and liberalist perspectives by focusing on intangible ideational elements that influence foreign policy decisions. Constructivism posits that the behaviour of states is influenced by social norms and identities. These norms and identities are not static, but are continuously constructed and reconstructed through social interactions and discourse (Hoffmann, 2010). The historical experiences and collective memory of a nation play a crucial role in shaping its national identity and, consequently, its foreign policy. For Iran, historical events such as the 1953 coup and the Iran-Iraq War have deeply influenced its national consciousness and stance on sovereignty and independence. Constructivism emphasises the importance of interactions between states and other international actors. These interactions help shape the identities and interests of states, which in turn influence their foreign policy decisions (Hoffmann, 2010). In Iran, its interactions with the P5+1 and the imposition of international sanctions have been pivotal in shaping its nuclear policy.

Iran's pursuit of nuclear capabilities is deeply intertwined with its national identity, which encompasses the national identity narratives of modernity, justice, sovereignty, independence, and resistance against external pressures. These themes are not merely rhetorical but central to Iran's self-perception and its interactions with the international community. By employing a social constructivist lens, this study moves beyond purely realist analyses that focus solely on tangible threats and material capabilities. Instead, it highlights how Iran's nuclear policy is influenced by powerful ideational elements, such as national pride, historical grievances, and the desire for technological advancement and modernity. The study also considers how external factors, such as international sanctions and negotiations with the P5+1, interact with Iran's national identity and societal norms to shape its nuclear policy. These external pressures are perceived through the lens of Iran's historical experiences and its narrative of resistance against oppression.



Constructivism provides a proper theoretical understanding of international relations by emphasising the role of non-material factors such as norms and identities. It facilitates a deeper comprehension of how these factors influence state behaviour and international interactions, promoting a more sophisticated interpretation of global issues (Hoffmann, 2010). This framework allows us to understand why Iran might adopt seemingly counterintuitive stances or resist external pressure. These actions are not simply reactions to material threats, but rather reflect how Iran constructs its national identity through narratives and a shared societal commitment to modernity, legitimacy, self-preservation, and sovereign autonomy.

This study employs a qualitative methodology, detailed comprehensively in a dedicated chapter. This approach, particularly the analysis of various documents and speeches, aligns seamlessly with the social constructivist framework. First, qualitative methods enable a rigorous examination of how historical experiences are narrated and grievances are framed within these narratives. By transcending a superficial understanding of historical events, this approach delves into the subjective interpretations and emotions embedded in these narratives. This analysis reveals how Iran constructs its national identity through these narratives, fostering a deeper understanding of the ideational underpinnings shaping its foreign policy. Second, a qualitative approach facilitates critical analysis of speeches, policy documents, and media portrayals. Third, qualitative methods offer valuable tools for mitigating potential bias within the research process. Through a critical examination of the language used and perspectives presented in the materials, we can identify and address potential biases within both the data and our own interpretations. To ensure a comprehensive and unbiased understanding, this research employs a multi-source data collection approach, allowing for the cross-verification of findings and triangulation of data.

#### **1.4.4 Expected Contributions**

This dissertation aims to fill a gap in the existing literature on Iran's nuclear programme by emphasising the critical role of national identity in shaping Iran's nuclear policy. Grounded in social constructivism, this study demonstrates the importance of ideational factors, such as national identity, historical consciousness, and societal norms, in understanding Iran's nuclear ambitions. The study argues that traditional realist approaches, which focus on material capabilities and security concerns, are insufficient to capture the full spectrum of factors influencing Iranian decision-making. By foregrounding national identity, this study offers a more comprehensive understanding of Iran's nuclear policy. The use of a social constructivist framework enables the study to explore how ideational factors shape Iran's foreign policy.

The research delves into Iran's internal context, examining how different presidencies with varying styles and agendas have affected the country's nuclear policy. Through the analysis of three major case studies, including nuclear negotiations, resolutions, agreements, and sanctions, as well as the leadership transitions from Khatami to Ahmadinejad to Rouhani, the study provides a comprehensive analysis. It recognises the interplay between internal and external forces, demonstrating how external pressures interact with the internal narratives of national identity to shape Iran's nuclear policy.

This thesis employs a qualitative, data-driven approach to explore the relationship between national identity and Iran's nuclear policy. Data sources included international resolutions, sanction documentation, JCPOA proceedings, and content analysis of policy statements and public declarations by Iranian leaders. By identifying key narratives of modernity (e.g., achieving scientific and technological advancements), justice (e.g., redressing past grievances), sovereignty (e.g., self-reliance and independence), and resistance (e.g., countering external pressure), and unveiling the specific pathways through which these national identity narratives translate into concrete policy decisions, this study offers a detailed understanding of the motivations shaping Iran's nuclear policy.

## **1.5 Study Organisation**

Chapter 2: Theoretical Framework makes the theoretical framework of this study, in which I delve into social constructivism and its emphasis on ideational factors. This theoretical foundation is crucial for understanding the socially constructed nature of Iran's nuclear policy as a reflection of its national identity. This chapter examines social constructivism and its emphasis on ideational factors, such as norms, identities, and beliefs, that shape state interests and actions. It establishes a critical foundation for understanding Iran's nuclear policy as a socially constructed reflection of its national identity and narratives. It defines national identity in general and then examines clearly how Iran's national identity and its narratives are defined. Furthermore, it argues that realist approaches focusing solely on material capabilities are insufficient to analyse Iran's nuclear policy, which is deeply rooted in ideational factors such as national identity.

Chapter 3: The Methodological Approach outlines the qualitative research design and data collection method employed. It explains the rationale for using qualitative methodology to scrutinise primary and secondary sources, allowing an in-depth examination of how national identity narratives influence nuclear policy. It provides a robust methodological foundation to ensure that the findings are grounded in a rigorous analysis of the dynamics at play. The methodological approach outlined the data collection methods used in this study.

Chapter 4: Historical Underpinnings examines the historical context that shaped the evolution of Iran's national identity narratives. It traces the development of these narratives over time, providing a crucial historical context for understanding their current manifestations and implications for Iran's nuclear policy, which is pivotal for contextualising national identity narratives. The subsequent chapters present case studies on the presidencies of Khatami, Ahmadinejad, and Rouhani.

Chapters 5-7: Case Studies (Khatami, Ahmadinejad, and Rouhani) provide an in-depth analysis of how each presidency interpreted Iran's national identity and “others.” They examine how national identity narratives were operationalised to construct and justify nuclear policy decisions across different administrations. These case studies utilise a variety of primary and secondary sources to comprehensively understand each presidency's approach. In each case study, the nuclear deliberations as well as the international and domestic contexts are discussed extensively.

Chapter 8: The Conclusion provides an overview of the key contributions and outputs of the study. It discusses the key contributions to the field of international relations and the implications of the findings. It also suggests avenues for future research on the nexus between national identity and nuclear policies.

## ***Chapter 2. Theoretical Framework***

### **2.1 Introduction**

This chapter discusses the theoretical underpinnings of this dissertation by selecting social constructivism as the primary analytical framework. The choice is driven by social constructivism's fundamental capability to deconstruct the socially constructed nature of national identities and foreign policies, which is crucial for deciphering the complexities of Iran's nuclear policy. This theoretical approach is particularly apt for examining how Iran's nuclear policy is not merely a response to external pressures and internal dynamics but is also profoundly shaped by narratives of modernity, justice, sovereignty, independence, and resistance. The preference for social constructivism over paradigms such as realism or liberalism is rooted in its focus on the formative influence of historical legacies and societal norms in shaping state behaviour and policy outcomes. This perspective is vital for this research, as it directly addresses the dissertation's core aim: to explore the intricate ways in which Iran's national identity narratives inform and underpin its nuclear policy decisions. The alignment of social constructivism with the qualitative methodology of this study is particularly beneficial. This supports the methodological choice of employing detailed case studies, enabling a comprehensive examination of the interplay between Iran's evolving identity narratives and its foreign policy decisions across various administrations. This theoretical framework facilitates an in-depth analysis of how shifts in societal norms and identity perceptions catalyse foreign policy adaptations. Through this lens, this dissertation examines the dynamic relationship between ideational factors and tangible policy actions, providing insights into the mechanisms through which national identity narratives shape Iran's nuclear agenda.

## 2.2 Social Constructivism

Social constructivism, as explained by Alexander Wendt (1999), underscores the importance of social interactions, norms, and collective identities in shaping international relations. Wendt's assertion, "Anarchy is what states make of it," underlines that the international system's nature is not inherently given but is constructed through state interactions, which determine whether states view each other as friends, rivals, or enemies. This perspective is key for analysing Iran's nuclear policy, highlighting how perceptions and interactions at the international level influence policy formation and implementation. Wendt (1999) further illuminates how states' identities and interests are not pre-determined but are dynamically shaped through social interactions. This theoretical framework can be used to understand how Iran's national identity and stance on nuclear policy are influenced by its historical experiences, interactions with other states, and position within the international community.

Wendt's (1999) analysis reveals how the identities and interests of states are not static but are continuously shaped through their interactions and shared meanings within the international community. Ted Hopf (2002) demonstrates the role of identity in international politics and the social underpinnings of state behaviour. Social constructivism offers a profound lens through which to examine the fabric of social reality, asserting that knowledge and reality are constructed through interactions, language, and collective interpretation. This theoretical stance, framed by Berger and Luckmann (1966), challenges the existence of objective reality independent of human perception and interaction. Instead, this suggests that our understanding of the world is a complex construct shaped by the cumulative effects of social processes. By emphasising the role of societal processes in the creation and maintenance of shared beliefs and knowledge systems, social constructivism invites a re-evaluation of how we understand constructs, such as national identity. The constructs are not static entities, but are continuously shaped and reshaped within the social fabric, highlighting the dynamic interplay between individual and collective meaning-making practices.

Giddens' (1984) introduces an examination of the interplay between structure and agency, proposing that societal structures and individual actions are mutually constitutive. This concept is instrumental in understanding how societal norms and individual behaviours co-create the social world, including the realms of national identity and international policy. Lev Vygotsky's (1978) emphasis on the sociocultural basis of cognitive development further complements constructivist thought by highlighting how knowledge and understanding are embedded in specific cultural and historical contexts. Vygotsky's work elucidates the process through which social interactions within a cultural framework contribute to the formation of individual and collective identities. Given the focus of social constructivism on how realities are socially constructed through interactions, language, and shared norms, qualitative research methodology facilitates the exploration of the complex dynamics of identity formation and policymaking (Yin, 2009). Incorporating ethnographic methods or historical analysis can enrich constructivist research by offering insights into the cultural and historical contexts that underpin the formation of national identities and policy decisions (Geertz, 1973). Social constructivism is not only a theoretical framework but also informs the methodologies used by researchers. This is particularly true in studies that examine the interplay between national identity and nuclear policy decisions. Researchers often emphasise analysing narratives, public discourse, and historical interpretations to understand how national identity shapes policy decisions (Schwandt, 2000; Wendt, 1992).

Scholars of social constructivism, such as Alexander Wendt (1992) and Peter J. Katzenstein (1996), provide a valuable framework for analysing the intricate interplay between national identity and foreign policy. This theoretical lens emphasises the dynamic nature of national narratives, which, as Philip Hymans (2006) argues, are shaped by both internal and external pressures. These narratives are not static but constantly evolve, influencing the ideational underpinnings of policy decisions (Katzenstein, 1996). Public pronouncements by states, as highlighted by Fierke (2005), serve as valuable data points for understanding these evolving narratives. Through this constructivist lens, Iran's pursuit of nuclear capabilities can be understood in the context of its self-constructed perceptions and evolving national identity. It underscores the role of actors in constructing identities and the meanings attached to them. In Iran, this narrative emphasises its status as a sovereign, independent, and technologically advanced nation (Selbee, 2022). This self-perception, bolstered by historical and cultural factors (Pierce et al., 2014), fuels Iran's insistence on exercising its right to peaceful nuclear enrichment—a right enshrined within the NPT. Social constructivism indicates the

complexities of this situation. Iran must navigate a delicate balance, reconciling its national image with the established norms of the global nuclear order embodied by the NPT, while simultaneously addressing international anxieties concerning the potential military applications of its programme.

A social constructivist approach effectively explains the motivations underlying Iran's nuclear programme by emphasising the crucial role of ideational factors in shaping state behaviour. This perspective posits that Iran's self-perception as a historically and culturally significant regional power fuels its quest for international recognition as a legitimate, independent, and modern state. States aspiring to global recognition and legitimacy are more likely to pursue peaceful nuclear applications, aligning themselves with this dominant and influential norm. This argument supports social constructivism by demonstrating how national identity, interactions, and international norms interact to shape Iran's nuclear policies. Social constructivism emphasises that evolving norms, shifting state identities, and the desire for acceptance within the international community are crucial in shaping policy decisions and interactions among states. This theoretical perspective highlights the dynamic and fluid nature of global norms, in which actors continuously adapt their actions based on the changing expectations and pressures emerging from inside their communities and the international community. Thus, the interplay of norms and expectations within the international system shapes Iran's nuclear policy behaviour. Iran's self-constructed identity fuels its insistence on exercising its right to peaceful nuclear enrichment, as enshrined within the NPT. Iran navigates a delicate balance, reconciling its national image and domestic demands with the established norms and expectations of the global nuclear order as embodied in the NPT. This dual approach reflects Iran's effort to assert its sovereignty and pursue technological advancement while adhering to international legal frameworks. By aligning its nuclear programme with the NPT's regulations, Iran seeks to legitimise its actions on the global stage, aiming to gain legitimacy, respect, and recognition from the international community.



### 2.3 What is National Identity

National identity is a general concept that includes the collective identity of a country's citizens, influenced, *inter alia*, by social, historical, and cultural factors. Azada-Palacios (2021) presents the idea of hybridity, arguing that cultural and historical narratives are constantly altered and interpreted, which have a changeable impact on national identity. Edensor (2020) investigated how people feel and express their national identity in popular culture and daily interactions. The argument posits that popular culture serves as a potent framework for the re-definition of national identity, mirroring the ever-changing and dynamic interactions between individuals and their countries. Gibbons (2023) underscores the importance of understanding the historical context in which national identity is formed. Wendt (1994) interprets identity as a combination of shared meanings associated with both self-perception and the perception of others, underscoring the relational aspect of identity. Narratives are used to convey a sense of shared history, values, and beliefs, which help strengthen the identity of a particular group (Ardelean, 2023). In the context of war, narratives are used to construct post-war identities and continuously reinforce them by retelling war stories (Vlaisavljević, 2022). National identities are constructed through narratives that draw boundaries between the collective 'we' and the 'others' (Humblebæk, 2018). Narratives also play a role in developing a shared sense of purpose and achieving domestic and international goals (Hatherell and Welsh, 2021). Narratives are used as a means of communication to interpret experiences and reflect on the future (Mong'are, 2022).

According to Brubaker (1992), civic national identity is derived from the political structures and legal-political foundations of the state, including democracy, the rule of law, and citizenship rights. Regardless of ethnicity or culture, this inclusive identity unites them behind a common set of civic duties and political beliefs. It emphasises how shared political convictions and active participation in state civic life serve as the foundation for a sense of national identity. However, ethnic national identification emphasises a shared heritage by identifying similar cultural characteristics, including language, religion, and traditions. According to Smith (1991), this form of identification tends to be restrictive and places the needs of the state's ethnic majority above those of other ethnic groups. According to Hobsbawm (1990), national ceremonies, myths, legends, and social norms play crucial roles in defining the shared past as well as the present. In the context of globalisation, the idea of post-national identity, as defined by Soysal (1994), incorporates aspects of global culture, supranational

institutions, and transnational organisations, reflecting how the world is becoming more linked, and how flexible and inclusive identity types are emerging to meet the needs of diverse modern societies. Hopf (1998) contends that national identity shapes the moral and behavioural codes that guide states' foreign policy actions, proposing that a state's historical and cultural background plays a significant role in its international behaviour.

Social constructivism postulates that national identity is not a fixed attribute but is continuously constructed and reconstructed through social practices (Wendt, 1992). Social constructivism posits that identities coalesce through social interactions and discourses, thereby shaping and being shaped by foreign policy decisions (Wendt, 1992; Adler, 1997). National identity presents itself through narratives woven from experiences, cultural values, and political ideologies (Hopf, 1998). Hopf extends this argument, illustrating that foreign policy is a manifestation of national identity, acting as a 'code' for deciphering external threats and opportunities (Hopf, 1998, p. 174). Educational systems transmit histories and promote common languages, which are essential for constructing a cohesive national identity (Gellner, 1983). National identity is a multifaceted concept that intertwines the individual and collective dimensions of identity.

Media and political discourse play a pivotal role in reinforcing national identity by emphasising shared experiences and achievements, thereby solidifying the sense of a unified community (Castells, 1997). States operate within a global system in which their identities, interests, and alliances are in constant flux, which can affirm, challenge, or transform national identities (Wendt, 1992). Social interaction involves the articulation of shared narratives that define a nation's characteristics, values, and aspirations. For instance, the narrative of resilience and resistance to foreign domination shapes the national identity of many countries, including Iran. At its core, identity is an awareness of the self that situates individuals within both social and psychological contexts and requires reciprocal recognition from others. This recognition involves a sense of permanence and unity that spans time. National identity is a modern phenomenon characterised by fluidity and dynamism. Despite its changing nature, the consciousness of forming a nation can remain constant over extended periods, although the underlying factors that underpin this awareness may vary. Common elements contributing to national identity include a shared culture, history, language, religion, and a sense of shared destiny. These shared experiences contribute to a sense of continuity and shared meaning among members of a nation, even if the nation itself lacks a formal state structure.

National identity consists of a set of attributes shared by those belonging to a particular nation. These attributes arise from the specific ways a nation is defined. Psychologically, national identity emerges from the conscious feeling of constituting a group based on perceived closeness and shared experiences. Culturally, it involves shared practices, values, and symbols that bind people together. The territorial dimension underscores the importance of a clearly demarcated homeland, while the historical aspect connects the present identity to shared past and collective memories. Politically, national identity encompasses the right to self-determination and governance (i Berdún, 2007). On this basis, national identity emerges as a shared construct, constituted by a set of attributes and experiences held in common by those belonging to a particular nation. It arises not only from objective elements such as shared history and territory, but also from subjective perceptions and interpretations that characterise a nation's self-understanding. This interplay between the objective and subjective dimensions creates a dynamic and evolving sense of national identity.

## **2.4 Iran's National Identity**

This section explains Iranian national identity and the key narratives that inform it. This snapshot aims to provide readers with a foundational understanding of Iran's national identity through social constructivism and narratives that inform Iran's national identity. For readers seeking a deeper dive into the rich historical, political, and cultural context of Iran, a dedicated chapter (Chapter 4) in this dissertation offers extensive exploration. This study argues that Iranian identity is a multifaceted construct with rich historical, cultural, and religious narratives that have evolved over centuries. This identity is continuously shaped and reshaped by internal development and external interactions (Dahbour, 2002). The Persian language, literature, art, architectural landmarks, and national celebrations reinforce the collective memory and identity of Iranian people. These symbols represent Iran's historical depth and cultural richness (Merhavy, 2019).

I argue that Iran's self-perception refers to how it views its role, status, and itself within the international community. Self-perception is a dynamic construct shaped by social, historical, and cultural factors, rather than a fixed or predetermined reality. It is not an inherent or unchangeable trait but rather a product of social construction, formed through historical experiences, evolving ideational narratives, and ongoing political discourse. Iran's national identity is characterised by a strong emphasis on sovereignty, resistance to external domination, and the pursuit of modernity. These core narratives, along with others, such as justice and anti-oppression, have been continuously shaped and reshaped throughout history. The central narrative is that of sovereignty, deeply rooted in Iran's historical experience of foreign intervention and imperialism. Repeated encounters with foreign powers, from the invasions of Alexander the Great and Arab conquests to more recent interventions, have ingrained a profound commitment to maintaining national independence and resisting external control. Thus, this socially constructed identity is not a predetermined reality but a product of Iran's unique historical trajectory and the collective memory of its people. The interplay between past events and present political and cultural narratives continues to shape how Iran perceives itself and interacts with the global community. For instance, the nationalisation of Iranian oil under Prime Minister Mossadegh in 1951 and the subsequent CIA-backed coup d'état in 1953 are specific historical events that continue to inform Iran's narrative of resistance to external domination. The emphasis on sovereignty evolves in response to Iran's historical encounters and desire to assert autonomy in the face of external pressure (Saleh and Worrall, 2015, p. 83).

Constructivism suggests that these elements are interpreted and reinterpreted by individuals and groups within Iranian society, leading to a dynamic and evolving national identity. I assert that the essence of Iranian identity can be understood through narratives, which shed light on the complex processes by which Iranians negotiate their sense of belonging and cultural distinctiveness. These narratives demonstrate that Iran's national identity is actively constructed through the interplay of social forces and shared meanings. From a constructivist perspective, this study argues that Iran's pursuit of civilian nuclear technology is a matter of high national interest in asserting its scientific prowess and modernity on a global stage. Iran's identity is informed and underpinned through narratives that emphasise the country's right to technological advancement and self-sufficiency, challenging Western narratives that seek to limit its nuclear programme's motivations to security interests only (Akbarzadeh and Barry, 2016, p. 620).

Scholars such as Bloom (1990) emphasise the critical role that national identity plays in shaping individual and collective self-perception. Iranian national identity transcends a singular definition and emerges as a complex interplay of historical, political, and cultural forces. Identity is linked to a nation's geopolitical aspirations and positions within the international order. Iran has a rich and ancient history, with empires such as the Achaemenids under Cyrus the Great establishing a foundation for enduring national pride. The enduring achievements of these empires in governance, architecture, and cultural development continue to resonate deeply within the Iranian psyche (Saleh and Worrall, 2015; Litvak, 2017). This imperial past serves as a source of inspiration, embodying the values of cultural sophistication, tolerance, and effective governance that remain central to the Iranian national historical consciousness. Even contemporary Iranian architecture reflects a conscious engagement with its historical legacy. The presence of architectural elements from various dynasties, seamlessly integrated with modern Islamic styles, serves as a powerful symbol (Vale, 2014).

This architectural fusion underscores both the evolution of Iranian national identity and its enduring connection to its past. The 1979 Islamic Revolution marked a turning point, intertwining religious governance with the modern state (Bloom, 1990). The subsequent establishment of the Islamic Republic further embedded Shia Islam's norms within its political and social fabric. This fusion of Islamic principles with a sense of national identity aligns with Habermas's (1990) concept of constitutional patriotism, in which national identity finds anchorage in a nation's core values enshrined in its governing documents. Robust civic national identity and social capital among Iran's diverse ethnic groups are mutually reinforcing (Mirfardi et al., 2022). A shared sense of national identity fosters social cohesion, whereas strong social bonds within modern Iran bolster the sense of national unity. Thus, the Iranian national identity is a rich tapestry woven from the threads of history, religion, and geopolitics.

The 16th-century decision by the Safavid dynasty to declare Twelver Shi'ism the official religion of Iran was a pivotal moment in the nation's history. This seemingly theological decree triggered a cascade of effects that profoundly impacted the development of Iranian national identity. By embracing Shi'ism, the Safavids established a clear religious distinction between Iran and its powerful Sunni neighbours, particularly the Ottoman Empire. This fostered a sense of unique identity as Iran became a champion of the minority Shi'a faith. This distinction became a cultural and political marker, uniting diverse ethnicities within Iran under a shared banner of opposition from the Ottomans. Shi'ism provided Iran with a new framework for forging connections with other Shi'a communities beyond its borders. Centres of Shi'ite learning, such as Qom and Mashhad in Iran and Najaf and Karbala in modern-day Iraq, became revered pilgrimage destinations for the Iranians. This practice fostered a sense of belonging to the larger Shi'a world, reinforcing the notion of a shared history and religious destiny separate from the Sunni world. It is important to acknowledge the ongoing interplay between the religious and secular forms of nationalism in Iran. While the Safavids laid the foundation for a Shi'a-centric national identity, subsequent rulers and historical forces introduced elements of secular nationalism. This dynamic sometimes led to conflicts, as seen in the tensions during the Pahlavi dynasty and even after the Islamic Revolution of 1979 (Newman, 2003; Aghaie, 2004).

Shia Islam's emphasis on justice, martyrdom, and resistance to oppression has deeply influenced Iran's cultural and political discourse (Ahmadi, 2005). This religious element of national identity has been instrumental in shaping national discourse, particularly in the context of the Islamic Revolution of 1979, which further solidified the intertwining of national and religious identities (Holliday, 2007). Persian historical novels play a pivotal role in constructing terrains of belonging by textually linking the past to the present and intertwining national identity with ancestral memories and historical narratives, such as the Constitutional Revolution, a period recognised for its socio-political awakening and efforts to preserve cultural legacies, which historical fiction further reinforces by maintaining a sense of belonging and nationhood alive (Farahmandfar and Abdollahi, 2022). Iranian culture has been influenced by the aspirations of modernity, state intervention in shaping culture, the role of religion, and nationalism. All of them have moulded Iranian society and state-society relationships (Henderson, 2023).

Iranian culture is fundamentally influenced by four dominant tendencies: modernity, the role of the state in shaping culture, the impact of religion on societal organisation and behaviour, and the force of nationalism. These elements are not isolated but interact dynamically to determine the nature of Iranian society and the multidimensional relationship between the state and society (Henderson, 2023). Modernity reflects the tension between traditional values and the pressures of contemporary global influences. The state's role as a cultural influencer demonstrates a top-down approach to influencing societal norms and values, often for political ends. Religion, particularly Islam, has a deep-rooted detrimental effect on Iranians' way of life, affecting both personal beliefs and legal and social frameworks. Nationalism serves as a unifying force, yet it also contributes to internal and external political discourse, particularly in relation to Iran's place in the world. Collectively, these dynamics create a unique societal fabric that is distinctly Iranian, reflecting the country's historical legacy, geopolitical context, aspirations, and challenges (Henderson, 2023).

The Pahlavi government played a crucial role in shaping modern Iran's intellectual foundation and national identity (Madani, 2023). The efforts during that period were directed towards fostering national unity, loyalty to the monarchy, and the adoption of modernity as part of the state-building process. These reforms were rooted in the pre-existing idea of a singular state, culture, and nation, which was instrumental in the formation of modern government and society in Iran (Madani, 2023). The Pahlavi era attempted to modernise Iran while reviving pre-Islamic Persian heritage, creating tensions between modernisation efforts and traditional values (Boroujerdi, 1998). However, the Islamic Revolution reasserted Islamic identity (Akbarzadeh and Barry, 2016). The rivalry between secular and religious nationalism has left Iran torn between modernity and tradition, with both ideologies struggling to build a cohesive national identity (Sedghi et al., 2022). These dynamics showcase Iran's ongoing endeavour to balance modern influences with historical and cultural legacies in defining its national identity.

Resistance to external domination is similarly constructed through social interactions. The Constitutional Revolution and the later Islamic Revolution of 1979 serve as pivotal moments, symbolising the collective rejection of foreign influence. The Constitutional Revolution of Iran (1905–1911) marked a shift in rejecting foreign influence and reasserting sovereignty (Bergonse, 2023). It was a response to the Qajar dynasty's failures and foreign economic exploitation, leading to increased dependence on external powers. Similarly, the 1979 Islamic Revolution reflected a rejection of Western influence on Iran's domestic politics. The revolution's 'Islamic' nature was emphasised through ideological framing. The Iranian Islamic Revolution's 'Islamic' nature was formed by a combination of ideological concepts and strategic presentations that aimed to differentiate it from both Western and Eastern influences and to embed it firmly within a certain interpretation of Islamic ideology. The Islamic Republican Party played a crucial role in this process by ideologically framing Marxist competitors as 'eastoxicated', thereby positioning the revolution as a rejection of both Western ('*gharbzade*') and Eastern influences in favour of an authentic Islamic governance model (Gustafson, 2022). This conceptualisation was part of a broader discourse that aimed to reclaim Iranian culture and identity from foreign influences, a theme prevalent among Iranian intellectuals who objected to imperialism and advocated for a transformation to the authentic self through revolt, as expressed by Ali Shariati (Lolaki, 2020). The ideological underpinnings of the revolution were further articulated through the contributions of key figures such as Ayatollah Khomeini, Shariati, and Bazargan, who collectively contributed to the development of a political structure infused with Islamic ideologies (Lolaki, 2020).

Ayatollah Khomeini's theory of *Velayat-e Faqih* was influential, proposing a system of governance that merged theocratic and democratic principles, thereby eliminating the distinction between Islam and the state and advocating for the direct rule of clergy in politics (Ardalan, 2020). Ayatollah Khomeini's ideological innovation, as seen in his doctrine of the Guardianship of the Jurist, highlights the critical role of Islamic values and ideological principles in shaping the revolution's Islamic nature (Glombitza, 2022). These historical developments symbolise a collective will to reclaim national identity and values, steer away from foreign interference, and embrace Islamic principles in public and political domains (Gustafson, 2022).



## **2.5 National Identity Narrative's Influence on Policy Formation**

Iran's development of civilian nuclear technology serves as a significant point of national prestige, symbolising its aspiration for modernisation and energy independence (Sheyholislami, 2017). It reflects a broader trend in international relations known as state revisionism, where Iran seeks to challenge the established global order dominated by a few nuclear powers. This pursuit exemplifies a burgeoning phenomenon in international relations: state revisionism. In this context, Iran seeks to reconfigure the prevailing global order, which currently concentrates nuclear power among a select few. Driven by a profound desire for modernisation and a national identity centred on scientific and technological prowess, Iran aims to assert itself as a leading regional power. However, this aspiration creates a double-edged sword, inviting both admiration for technological advancements and scrutiny from the international community, which fears potential military applications (Behraves, 2018).

To fully understand Iran's motivations, it is crucial to recognise the interplay between its quest for modernisation and the geopolitical tensions it navigates. Iran's pursuit of civilian nuclear technology exemplifies the intricate interplay between its domestic aspirations and international security concerns. This programme serves to foster domestic narratives of scientific advancement and national pride, while simultaneously generating anxiety among regional actors and raising international concerns about proliferation. In other words, Iran's development of civilian nuclear technology presents a bifurcated outcome. Domestically, it cultivates narratives of scientific progress and national pride. Conversely, this same pursuit engenders anxiety among regional actors and fuels international concerns regarding nuclear proliferation. This dynamic underscores Iran's strategic calculus: achieving technological and energy independence while simultaneously asserting sovereignty, strategic autonomy, and a modern national identity within a volatile geopolitical environment.

This study argues that Iran's pursuit of civilian nuclear technology is not merely a technical endeavour, but a strategic effort intertwined with its national identity. Narratives of modernity, independence, and resistance drive this pursuit, illustrating a causal relationship between national identity and nuclear aspirations. Iran's quest for nuclear technology reflects its desire for self-reliance, its challenge to the established global order, and its aim to project strength on the international stage. By unpacking this interplay between national identity and strategic goals, we see how Iran's nuclear policies become integral tools for asserting sovereignty and enhancing its international standing. Recognising this interplay between national identity and nuclear aspirations helps us understand why Iran views its nuclear programme and related policies as fundamental elements in asserting its sovereignty, modernity, and achieving greater international standing.

Iran's national identity is layered with narratives that emphasise modernity, justice, national rights, sovereignty, independence, and anti-oppression. These narratives are foundational pillars shaping Iran's policy agenda and priorities, particularly in the realm of nuclear policy. The narrative of modernity, independence, and resistance that drives this pursuit illustrates Iran's national desire for self-reliance and its challenges to the established global order. Technological achievements, such as advancements in nuclear science, have become powerful symbols of national strength, solidifying Iran's identity on the international stage. The influence of these narratives is evident across different administrations, and each leverages these identity constructs to justify and navigate Iran's nuclear policy in the international arena. This dynamic underscores the significance of technological progress, which not only serves as a practical goal but is also understood as fundamental to reinforcing national identity and asserting Iran's position within the global hierarchy. By understanding this interplay, we gain deeper insights into the motivations behind Iran's nuclear policy and the broader geopolitical tensions they evoke.

### 2.5.1 Modernity

This study argues that Iranian identity is characterised by the narrative of modernity, positioning the nuclear programme as a symbol of scientific progress and technological advancement. This narrative aligns with Iran's desire to be recognised as a modern state capable of contributing to global scientific knowledge. The objective of highlighting modernity in nuclear policy was to demonstrate Iran's status as a technologically advanced nation in the international community. At the core of Iranian identity lies the narrative of modernity, intricately tied to its aspirations for technological advancement and scientific progress. This narrative has been constructed and evolved through Iran's historical context, in which the desire to be recognised as a modern and technologically advanced nation has been a consistent theme. Since its establishment, the Islamic Republic of Iran has continued to position itself as a leader in the scientific and technological fields at the regional level, viewing such advancements as essential to national progress and sovereignty.

Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's speeches on nuclear energy and science reflect how the narrative of modernity is articulated within the framework of Iran's national identity. Khamenei (2012) has consistently emphasised Iran's right to scientific development, framing it as a non-negotiable aspect of the country's pursuit of modernity. The narrative of modernity is deeply embedded in a broader discourse on progress, self-sufficiency, and national pride. Iran articulates its vision as a forward-looking nation committed to scientific advancement and technological sovereignty. Modernity, therefore, is emblematic of Iran's broader aspirations for independence within the international community. Iranian senior officials, including the Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, have emphasised the importance of the nuclear industry in the country, calling it a fundamental and important component of national prestige as well as a source of strength, power, and development. According to Ayatollah Khamenei,

"This industry is important both in terms of the country's progress and capabilities in technical, economic, health, and other fields that bring prestige to the country and improve people's lives, as well as in terms of the country's global and international political weight. Thus, that is a source of prestige for the country. The existing nuclear industrial infrastructure should not be neglected. Over the years, managers, officials, and activists in this industry have performed important work and created important infrastructure. You may want to reach agreements in some areas; that's fine, but the infrastructure should not be touched; it should not be destroyed; it is the product of the hard work of others." (Khamenei, 2022).

The discourse surrounding Iran's pursuit of nuclear technology encapsulates a broader narrative of modernity and self-reliance that is deeply rooted in the nation's identity. This narrative posits nuclear capability not only as a strategic asset but also as an inevitable step towards modernisation, echoing the nation's drive to achieve technological parity with developed nations. The framing of nuclear technology as an indispensable future necessity highlights a proactive stance against dependency on external entities, a recurrent theme in Iran's post-revolutionary political ethos. The urgency of this need is articulated through a hypothetical scenario in which the failure to develop nuclear technology today could result in compromised national sovereignty tomorrow. Despite numerous setbacks, including international sanctions, sabotage, and targeted assassinations of its key scientists, Iran's nuclear programme has been depicted in the political establishment, religious elites, and academic circles as a testament to the resilience and ingenuity of its people. The narrative often celebrated by Iranian leaders, particularly the Supreme Leader, underscores the achievements under duress, portraying the programme as a symbol of national pride and scientific achievement. This portrayal reinforces the country's resolve to maintain its course despite external pressures and serves to galvanise public support around a narrative of defiance and independence.

The research acknowledges that national identity narratives are not monolithic entities but rather dynamic and contested. The narrative of modernity, for example, is also contested if we consider the tensions around the nuclear programme and its economic ramifications for Iran. This includes exploring how Iran's pursuit of a nuclear programme as a symbol of modernity interacts with the challenges posed by international sanctions. This study investigates how the emphasis on modernity and self-reliance affects Iran's willingness to engage in international diplomacy to address concerns about its nuclear programme. In summary, while Iran's policy of nuclear advancement as an embodiment of modernity and self-reliance has bolstered its domestic legitimacy and international stance, it also presents challenges and triggers policy responses, which I examine in detail in the case studies.

### 2.5.2 Justice and National Rights

This study contends that the multifaceted nature of Iranian identity is shaped by a narrative of justice and national rights, which is central to Iran's argument regarding its right to develop and possess nuclear technology for peaceful purposes. These narratives challenge the perceived inequities in the global nuclear order, advocating for Iran's sovereign right to utilise nuclear energy under the NPT rules for its development needs. It is operationalised in policy through Iran's insistence on its rights under international treaties, such as the NPT, and calls for a more equitable international nuclear regime. This argument maintains that the narrative of justice and national rights forms a critical underpinning of Iran's stance on its nuclear programme, positioning it within the broader discourse of international law and equity. This study posits that Iran's historical legacies play a pivotal role in crafting its national identity—the narrative of justice—which is rooted in Iran's perception of itself as a sovereign nation with an inalienable right to pursue peaceful nuclear technology under the frameworks established by the NPT. Iran's advocacy for an equitable global nuclear regime is predicated on the principle that no nation should be discriminated against in the pursuit of nuclear technology for peaceful purposes. This stance is emblematic of Iran's broader commitment to justice and national rights at an international level.

Foreign Minister Zarif (2014) emphasised Iran's steadfast commitment to the NPT and its principles of nuclear non-proliferation, arguing that Iran's nuclear ambitions are aligned with its rights under international law. Adib-Moghaddam (2006, 2014) explored the cultural genealogy of Iran's international politics and illustrated how the narratives of justice and national rights extend beyond the nuclear issue to encompass Iran's vision of itself as a regional power and defender of the oppressed in the international system. Importantly, the narrative of justice intertwined with the quest for legitimacy underpins Iran's insistence on its right to develop nuclear technology for peaceful purposes, framed within the context of sovereignty, independence, and resistance against perceived Western oppression. Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's nuclear *fatwa*, a religious decree stating that the production, stockpiling, and use of nuclear weapons were forbidden under Islam. It encapsulates the intertwining of religious beliefs with foreign policy, serving as a moral stance for Iran to legitimise its nuclear activities on the international stage (Sabouri, 2016). By grounding its nuclear programme within the framework of Islamic ethics, Iran seeks additional legitimacy and aims to portray its nuclear programme as aligned with a moral and just pursuit (Yousuf and Hussain, 2022).

The invocation of religious principles in the context of its nuclear programme transcends mere piety, reflects a calculated strategic approach, and serves a multipronged purpose, as outlined by Gerami (2018). Primarily, it fosters domestic consolidation by appealing to the strong Islamic elements of identity of a significant portion of the Iranian population. Framing the nuclear programme within a religious context resonates with the public and portrays the government as a protector of cherished Islamic ideals. Second, it serves as a tool to counter the narratives often presented by Western powers. By couching its nuclear programme with Islamic principles of justice, Iran attempts to establish its legitimacy and challenge the portrayal of its programme as a threat to international security. Furthermore, religious justification can strengthen Iran's negotiation position.

Iran's invocation of religious principles in its nuclear programme is a deliberate strategic manoeuvre. It serves to garner domestic support, challenge Western narratives, bolster its negotiating position, and reaffirm its historical and cultural significance. By leveraging the nuclear *fatwa* and its principles, Iran seeks to frame its nuclear programme as a legitimate and ethical endeavour in line with its national identity and religious convictions (Rezaei, 2019). This narrative justifies Iran's nuclear programme in terms of legal rights and moral principles, seeking to garner both domestic and international support for its stance. Iranian media and state officials often propagate the narrative that the nuclear programme is not merely a technological programme but a fundamental right under international law, specifically citing the NPT. This treaty, to which Iran is a signatory, ostensibly grants all parties the sovereign right to pursue nuclear technology for peaceful purposes, such as energy production and medical applications (NPT, Article IV). From this perspective, Iran's pursuit of nuclear capabilities is framed as an exercise of national sovereignty—a legitimate endeavour to secure economic and technological development akin to that of the developed world. This framing taps into broader themes of justice, implying that denying Iran the right to nuclear technology is an act of international inequity. This narrative is bolstered by references to the NPT and used to challenge the fairness of the global nuclear order, which is perceived to be dominated by Western powers that possess nuclear weapons.

### **2.5.3 Sovereignty and Independence**

This study argues that the narratives of sovereignty and independence resonate within Iran's national identity, profoundly influencing its nuclear policy through an unwavering commitment to autonomy in decision making. This narrative underpins Iran's resistance to external pressures and conditional negotiations that might compromise Iran's autonomy and sanctions, portraying its nuclear programme as an emblem of national sovereignty and defence against foreign domination. Sovereignty and independence lie at the heart of Iran's discourse on its nuclear programme, symbolising a commitment to autonomy in its decision-making processes. This narrative, entrenched in Iran's national identity, acts as a counter to external pressures and sanctions, emphasising Iran's right to self-determination and pursuing its nuclear programme free from foreign interference.

Iran's historical legacies play a pivotal role in crafting its national identity. Sariolghalam (2008) sheds light on Iran's self-perception and the quest for sovereignty. He argued that Iran's focus on sovereignty and independence is part of its broader quest for self-definition, with profound implications for foreign policy and nuclear strategy. Zahir (2012) highlights the nuclear programme as a key component of Iran's strategy to assert its independence and resist external influences. Similarly, Tabarani (2008) examines Iran's strategic objectives and emphasises the nuclear programme's role in Iran's broader goals to bolster its sovereignty and independence, positioning itself as a pivotal security player in regional politics. Iran's steadfastness in developing an indigenous nuclear programme is also rooted in its history, marked by events such as the 1953 coup d'état and the Iran-Iraq War, which have nurtured a sense of national resilience and a determination to protect sovereignty. In a number of speeches, the Supreme Leader underscored the nuclear programme as a symbol of national pride and technological advancement, asserting Iran's right to develop nuclear energy for peaceful purposes as a sovereign nation. By championing its indigenous nuclear programme, Iran signals its refusal to succumb to external pressures or compromise its national rights.

Iran's nuclear policy is interwoven with narratives of sovereignty and independence, reflecting the interplay between historical, political, and cultural factors (Clarke, 2013). This narrative is reinforced by discourses of independence, justice, and resistance, which have been integral to Iran's identity since the establishment of the Islamic Republic, making Iran's persistence in its nuclear policy a matter of national pride and identity (Moshirzadeh, 2007). The media's portrayal of sovereignty in political discourse mirrors Iran's use of narratives to assert its position and influence public perception, emphasising the nation's right to defend its interests and maintain its independence. In addition, nuclear capability is seen as a symbol of national prowess and independence. The Ahmadinejad era marked a significant period in which nuclear capability was celebrated as part of a new secular nationalist identity, intertwining sovereign rights with religious missions (Rezaei, 2017). In a meeting with Eslami, the head of the Atomic Energy Organisation of Iran, a senior cleric and the representative of the Supreme Leader highlighted that achieving nuclear energy technology with the efforts of Iranian scientists is a "lasting honour for the Iranian people, independence, and non-reliance on Western countries." He noted, "Reaching indigenous nuclear technology by the country's scientists and youth is an indicator of Iran's independence and non-reliance on Western countries." (Mehr News Agency, 2022). In a similar vein, a member of the Expediency Discernment Assembly said: "Success in nuclear technology is a symbol of the country's independence, and the decision of the Islamic Republic is to move forward in the field of nuclear technology as a reputable and pioneer country."

From the perspective of national identity, the mastery of nuclear technology is a symbol of scientific and technological progress, reflecting Iran's intellectual and industrial capabilities. Secondly, the emphasis on nuclear technology underscores Iran's commitment to maintaining its sovereignty. The development of nuclear technology in Iran is often viewed as a response to the perceived dominance of western powers in the region. This perception can lead to a view of nuclear technology as more than just a scientific achievement. It has become a symbol of self-reliance and a means of asserting national sovereignty. This perspective is particularly relevant in a geopolitical landscape where dependence on foreign technology can be seen as creating vulnerability. The pursuit of nuclear capability can then be framed as a defensive strategy against external pressures as well as a symbol of resilience and autonomy in the face of international sanctions and diplomatic isolation (Chubin, 2006, p. 47; Ehteshami and Zweiri, 2007, pp. 92–95).



Iran's senior clerics frequently emphasise the adversarial nature of the country's relationship with Western powers, attributing this hostility to Iran's steadfast commitment to independence and resistance to external pressure. This perspective is rooted in a historical context in which Iran has often positioned itself in opposition to external influence, advocating for self-reliant and sovereign national policies. Such statements reflect a broader narrative within Iran that frames its geopolitical stance as a defence against Western attempts to undermine its sovereignty and impose external control. This narrative reinforces the idea that Iran's defiance and pursuit of an independent path provoke antagonism from Western powers, which are seen as unwilling to accept a strong, autonomous Iran (Keddie, 2006, pp. 232-234; Takeyh, 2009, pp. 89-91). However, critics argue that Iran's nuclear advancements could trigger an arms race in the Middle East, potentially destabilising the region and threatening international peace and security. Additionally, the pursuit of nuclear technology, ostensibly in the name of sovereignty and independence, may be perceived as a strategy to divert attention from pressing domestic issues such as economic hardship and political dissent. Emphasising external adversaries could be a tactic to consolidate internal power and distract from critical domestic challenges that equally influence national identity and autonomy (Kaye, 2013, pp. 56–58).

A member of the Expediency Discernment Assembly echoed this sentiment by stating, “Success in nuclear technology is a symbol of the country's independence, and the decision of the Islamic Republic is to move forward in the field of nuclear technology as a reputable and pioneer country” (IRNA, 2021). He added that despite Western attempts to pressure Iran, the country has continued to advance its nuclear technology, achieving significant developments in centrifuge technology and production processes. The official emphasised that nuclear technology is a natural national right and a symbol of independence, suggesting that succumbing to external pressures would lead to a regression in science and technology. Moreover, Agha Mohammadi asserted that the decision of the Islamic Republic is a “logical dialogue and principled negotiation to preserve national interests, whereas Iran seeks negotiations that do not affect national interests. The Islamic Republic will continue its efforts to achieve nuclear achievements” (IRNA, 2021). This statement reflects Iran's stance on negotiations that safeguard its sovereignty while pursuing nuclear development.

Iranian speeches and debates illustrate that the pursuit and attainment of nuclear technology are seen as symbols of the nation's resilience and ability to thrive independently of Western powers. Iran's emphasis on nuclear technology underscores its commitment to maintaining sovereignty. Developing nuclear technology represents Iran's efforts to achieve technological self-sufficiency, reducing dependence on foreign powers for energy, and scientific advancement. The pursuit and progress of nuclear technology are celebrated within Iran as symbols of national pride and resilience. This fosters a strong sense of national identity and unity, reinforcing the idea that Iran can achieve great technological feats despite external adversity. By continuing its nuclear programme despite international sanctions and diplomatic pressures, Iran signals its refusal to bow to external demands. This stance is portrayed domestically as a defence of national rights and sovereignty against foreign interference. Nuclear technology provides Iran with significant strategic leverage. The ability to develop nuclear energy and its nuclear hedging policy are seen as deterrents against external threats and as a means of ensuring national security, further solidifying its sovereign stance. Nuclear energy offers a long-term solution to Iran's energy needs by reducing its reliance on imported fuel and diversifying its energy sources. This contributes to economic sovereignty by stabilising energy supplies and potentially enhancing export capacity. Thus, from this perspective, the Iranian emphasis on nuclear technology is a multifaceted strategy to bolster sovereignty, reflecting a blend of technological ambition, national pride, resistance to external control, strategic security, and economic independence.

#### **2.5.4 Anti-Oppression**

This study argues that the anti-oppression narrative forms the basis of Iran's nuclear policy. This narrative is strategically employed to legitimise Iran's nuclear policy. By positioning itself as a defender of the oppressed and a challenger of perceived Western imperialism, Iran seeks to delegitimise discourses that portray its nuclear programme as a threat to the world. Instead, Iran promotes a counter narrative that emphasises self-determination and resistance. The anti-oppression narrative encapsulates Iran's historical and contemporary experiences of resistance in the international arena and underscores its desire to assert sovereignty, challenge global inequities from its perspective, and advocate for a more just international order. The narrative of anti-oppression is used to emphasise resilience, resist external coercion, and ultimately rally

domestic support and international solidarity, portraying Iran's nuclear pursuits as a stand against unjust international practices and sanctions.

Mousavian (2012) revealed how Iran has consistently conceptualised its nuclear policy within the discourse of resisting global hegemony and advocating for all nations' equal rights to peaceful nuclear technology. Torkashvand (2021) described the anti-oppression narrative as serving as a key facet of Iran's nuclear diplomacy to galvanise domestic support, legitimise its actions on an international stage, and challenge the prevailing norms of the global nuclear regime. The anti-oppression narrative resonates with Iran's historical and contemporary experiences and is rooted in Iran's long-standing opposition to colonialism, particularly in the context of resistance to perceived Western domination (Filin et al., 2022). The development of indigenous nuclear technology in Iran is fundamentally tied to national identity and narratives of sovereignty and independence. Iranian speeches and debates illustrate that the pursuit and attainment of nuclear technology are seen as symbols of the nation's resilience and ability to thrive independently. This emphasis on nuclear technology reflects Iran's commitment to maintaining sovereignty (Dolat, 2023). According to the Vice President and Head of the Atomic Energy Organisation of Iran:

“The world of arrogance will never accept that we enter these fields and take steps on the path of progress independently, without following them, and based on the indigenous knowledge of our committed scientific and research forces. The enemies of the Islamic Republic of Iran cannot tolerate this extensive effort that is being made to create scientific and technological power. More importantly, they have persistently tried to prevent the implementation of the capacities emphasised in international laws. Not only do they not support Iran's peaceful nuclear activities, but they also cause destruction and disruption, and they do not give up any conspiracy or unjust action. Global arrogance has tried to block our path of progress by martyring our scientists.” (Dolat, 2023).

The Supreme Leader of Iran, Ayatollah Khamenei, has emphasised the importance of understanding the characteristics, behaviours, and motivations of what he perceives as the “arrogant system” (Khamenei, 2022). From this perspective, the nuclear programme exemplifies the way the perceived arrogant system aims to oppose Iran’s rights in pursuing nuclear technology to prevent Iran from pursuing its nuclear programme through mechanisms of sanctions, sabotage, or threats of military strikes. This draws attention to the need for nations to stand firm in their pursuit of legitimate rights and resist arrogant systems. The perspective articulated by Iran's Supreme Leader embodies the national identity narrative of anti-oppression, a critical determinant of Iran's approach to various international challenges, notably its nuclear programme. This narrative challenges the arrogant system, predominantly represented by the United States, which is portrayed as embodying imperialistic ambitions underpinned by a sense of superiority (Khamenei, 2022). He believed:

“The fundamental characteristic of the arrogant system is its belief in its own inherent superiority over others. This self-superiority manifests itself in various ways. An arrogant system believes that it has the right to dictate to others and intervene in their affairs. It attempts to impose its values and norms on other cultures while disregarding their unique identities and traditions. It seeks to dominate the world, asserting its control over resources, markets, and political decision-making.” (Khamenei, 2022).

Ayatollah Khamenei's rhetoric contrasts the Islamic Republic's ideals of justice, equality, and human dignity with Western arrogance. This resistance against perceived Western domination forms a cornerstone of Iran's policy, particularly its entitlement to nuclear technology under international frameworks such as the NPT. Such positioning not only aims to assert Iran's sovereignty but also frames its nuclear pursuits as legitimate and peaceful. However, this narrative overlooks the multifaceted aspects of international diplomacy and simplifies its dynamics into binary opposites. The narrative's portrayal of Iran's nuclear policy is intended to justify its programme as peaceful. Despite these assertions, global apprehensions about potential military dimensions persist and are fuelled by Iran's activities. This tension suggests a pressing necessity for Iran to engage more transparently with international nuclear authorities to mitigate global concerns regarding its nuclear programme. While the anti-oppression narrative powerfully articulates a national identity focused on resistance and sovereignty, it poses challenges for Iran in fostering successful international relationships and lacks a balanced approach that recognises Iran's rights and international obligations to enhance mutual understanding and cooperation.

## **2.6 Translation of Intersubjective Norms into Foreign Policy**

Hoffmann (2017) articulates a social constructivist view, positing that societal norms significantly shape foreign policy decisions in international relations. Unlike traditional theories that prioritise material interests and power, social constructivism suggests that international relations encompass a community with shared expectations and norms (Hoffmann, 2017). These norms do not merely influence state interactions; they fundamentally shape state behaviour and self-perception within the international system. From a constructivist perspective, norms function in three primary capacities: they set expectations, guide socialisation, and drive changes within the international order. For instance, the norm against chemical weapons not only discourages their use, but also shapes states' policies regarding armament development. Furthermore, through socialisation, states internalise international expectations, which can lead to the adoption of new norms such as the universal acceptance of human rights, thereby altering how states treat their citizens (Hoffmann, 2017). Contemporary research has shifted towards understanding states' responses to these norms, focusing on compliance, whether and how states adhere to these norms, and contestation—how states may challenge existing norms based on internal debates or differing interpretations (Hoffmann, 2017). Understanding the impact of norms on state behaviour necessitates an examination of internal debates within states regarding norm adherence and perceived membership within the international community, which influences how norms are applied and enforced. In the case of Iran, we examine how its subjective perceptions of its international environment interact with the international community's intersubjective realities, thereby enriching our understanding of the complex interplay between societal norms and state actions on a global stage (Hoffmann, 2017).

Behavioural expectations play a pivotal role in shaping the actions of states on the global stage. These expectations, characterised by a high level of communality, transcend individual social groups and are attributed to the collective entity known as 'society.' Such norms, which are universally shared within society, are often encapsulated in the term national identity (Ingebritsen/Larson 1997; Marcussen/Risse 1997). Another alternative term is political culture (Hudson 1997; Ulbert 1997; Berger 1996; Risse-Kappen 1994). The origins of these societal norms can be traced back to collective historical experiences, which imbue them with a sense of legitimacy and inevitability.

Berger (1996) provides a compelling illustration of this dynamic by examining how the historical experiences of militarism and the Second World War have influenced the foreign policy orientations of Germany and Japan. In both nations, a consensus has emerged among a broad array of social actors that military power should be wielded with extreme caution. This normative stance has become an integral part of their national identities post-1945, fundamentally shaping their approach to international relations and military engagement. The strength of the norms shared across society lies in their unquestioned acceptance in the societal context. Therefore, social constructivism posits that such norms exert a particularly potent influence on foreign-policy decisions.

The social constructivist perspective highlights the dual pressure of adhering to international norms while also responding to domestic expectations. From a social constructivist viewpoint, Iran's nuclear activities reflect both national security interests and deep connections to national identity narratives, emphasising sovereignty, resistance to perceived external dominance, and the right to scientific progress. Social constructivism posits that state behaviour is shaped by both international norms and domestic social structures. Iran faces the challenge of aligning its nuclear policy with international expectations, such as non-proliferation agreements, while simultaneously satisfying domestic demand for national pride and technological advancement. Iran's nuclear policy is not solely driven by security concerns, but is also deeply embedded in its national identity. The pursuit of nuclear technology is seen as a symbol of Iran's sovereignty and as a means of resisting foreign domination. This dual emphasis on security and identity shapes Iran's approach to its nuclear programme. Social constructivism highlights how Iran's nuclear ambitions are framed within narratives of resistance to external pressure. The nuclear programme is portrayed as a legitimate exercise of Iran's right to scientific and technological progress, reinforcing the country's sovereignty and independence. The right to pursue scientific and technological advancements is a key component of Iran's national discourse. The nuclear programme is celebrated as evidence of Iran's capabilities and resilience, reinforcing its stance against perceived external attempts to undermine its progress.

Iran's policymakers must navigate the interplay between adhering to international norms, such as those set by the IAEA, and responding to domestic narratives that emphasise national pride and resistance to foreign influences. The focus on adhering to global norms and responding to national identity themes underscores the complexity of Iran's approach to its nuclear programme. Internationally, Iran's nuclear strategy is influenced by norms established under treaties such as the NPT, to which Iran is a signatory. These norms allow nations to develop nuclear technology for peaceful purposes while obligating them to avoid the proliferation of nuclear weapons. The scrutiny of the international community and the imposition of sanctions reflect concerns about Iran's adherence to these norms. The constructivist perspective suggests that Iran's interpretation of these international norms can vary, influenced by internal discourse and narratives promoted by its leaders.

In Iran, national identity is entwined with a historical legacy and a strong sense of sovereignty, influencing societal norms and collective values. This identity has consistently supported the narrative that nuclear development for peaceful purposes is both a right and a symbol of national pride and technological advancement. Across different administrations, this consensus reflects the belief in nuclear energy as integral to Iran's modernisation and self-sufficiency. From a social constructivist perspective, understanding Iran's foreign policy, particularly its nuclear policy, requires an exploration of the historical context, how each administration applies national identity narratives, and these deeply ingrained societal norms. This approach moves beyond materialistic explanations of state behaviour, integrating historical experiences and shared norms as key drivers. It posits that strong societal agreement on the nuclear issue, evident from the absence of significant domestic opposition, enhances the legitimacy of Iran's nuclear activities. This consensus frames Iran's nuclear policy not just as a strategic endeavour but also as an embodiment of national identity, resonating deeply with the public and uniting various political factions.

According to social constructivism, policymakers endeavour to organise the international environment in alignment with the values and principles that underpin their own political and social systems (Kittel, Rittberger, and Schimmelfennig, 1995, p. 68). The transmission of domestic norms to the international arena presupposes the absence of established and specific foreign policy norms. Anne Marie Burley's (1993) analysis of American foreign policy in the immediate post-World War II era exemplifies this dynamic. She argues that the United States sought to apply the principles of the New Deal—characterised by government intervention to correct market failures and enhance economic and social welfare—on an international scale. This norm, deeply ingrained within American society, influenced U.S. policymakers to shape the international economic order in accordance with the expectations set by the New Deal, thereby affecting U.S. foreign policy. Another illustration of the extension of internal social norms to foreign policy can be found in the literature on democratic peace theory, which observes that democracies are less likely to engage in war. Social constructivist explanations attribute this phenomenon to democratic governments' adherence to the domestically validated norm of non-violent conflict resolution, which they extend to interstate conflicts, preferring non-violent methods of dispute resolution (Weart, 1994; Russett, 1993).

These examples demonstrate that norms originating in domestic politics, which claim validity solely within that sphere, can possess a high degree of communality, making them conducive to social constructivist explanations. However, for these domestic norms to influence foreign policy effectively, they must delineate appropriate and inappropriate behaviours in the international context. The impact of these norms on a state's foreign policy is contingent upon the clarity with which societal behavioural expectations distinguish between acceptable and unacceptable actions. The transfer of domestically validated norms to the realm of foreign policy is the cornerstone of a constructivist understanding of international relations. Thus, from a social constructivist perspective, this study argues that Iran's foreign policy is predominantly influenced by norm-based expectations of appropriate behaviours prevalent within Iranian society.



This perspective suggests that the norms governing domestic political behaviour shape the approach to foreign policy. Iran's persistent pursuit of its nuclear programme, despite significant international opposition and sanctions, is fundamentally driven by the complex interplay of national identity narratives and societal norms that emphasise sovereignty, scientific advancement, and resistance against external domination. Iran's national identity is reinforced by historical experiences of foreign intervention and manifests as a collective determination to resist external pressure. Iranian society values technological advancement and scientific achievement deeply, perceiving them as essential indicators of progress and civilisational status. This emphasis is rooted in national identity and seeks to restore Iran's historical renown as the centre of scientific and intellectual activity.

The normative framework legitimises Iran's nuclear endeavours and impacts how these efforts are perceived and justified on the international front. The educational system and media in Iran play pivotal roles in reinforcing and amplifying the norms and identity narratives central to the nation's societal and policy frameworks. These institutions serve as vital conduits through which national identity narratives can be infused into various policy domains, including Iran's nuclear policy. This process of embedding norms into policy actions is intricately shaped by a network of institutional frameworks that facilitates the translation of abstract national ideals into concrete policy actions. Political leadership and institutional debates play a crucial role in this translation process, articulating and reinforcing national narratives of technological advancement and historical prominence. The education system further institutionalises these narratives, embedding them in the national consciousness from an early age, thereby ensuring continuous reinforcement of the values associated with national pride and scientific progress. Meanwhile, the media disseminate these narratives widely, shaping public opinion and maintaining a consistent message that aligns with the government's policy objectives. State-controlled media in Iran serve as a critical channel through which the government propagates its view of the nuclear programme as a legitimate and proud manifestation of Iran's national identity (Sreberny and Torfeh, 2014). The *Majlis* debates and legislative actions in support of expanding Iran's nuclear programme, even in the face of stringent international sanctions, exemplify the institutional commitment to upholding Iran's sovereignty and independence. Legislative backing is a critical component of how norms and national identity narratives are translated into concrete legal frameworks for nuclear policy actions.

## 2.7 Conclusion

This chapter discussed the theoretical framework of social constructivism and the concept of national identity in international relations. From a social constructivist perspective, the importance of structural determinants is contingent upon the prevailing ideational and normative assumptions within the system, as well as the representations formed by others. State identities are moulded by perceptions of the self and others within the international system. Social constructivism underscores the role of ideational factors in foreign policy formulation, illustrating how deeply ingrained sociocultural narratives and historical experiences shape Iran's international interactions. By focusing on how societal norms and national identities transform into concrete policy actions, social constructivism highlights the dynamic interplay between internal norms and external pressures. It reveals how Iran's national identity—characterised by narratives of modernity, justice, sovereignty, and resistance—interacts with external factors, such as international sanctions and diplomatic negotiations, to shape its nuclear policy.

Constructivism posits that national identity is not a fixed entity but rather a dynamic social construct shaped by historical experiences, narratives, and discourse. This framework suggests that Iran's foreign policy choices are fundamentally rooted in its national identity, a construct shaped by historical experiences, yearning for self-determination, and fierce resistance to external domination. The social constructivist approach adopts an ideational ontology, emphasising the role of norms, identities, and intersubjective understanding in shaping Iran's nuclear policy. The study argues that Iran's nuclear policy is socially constructed. The meaning and implications of anarchy are not predetermined but depend on how actors perceive and interpret the international structure. Moreover, Iranian nuclear policies, as I examine in chapters 5, 6, and 7, are shaped by the logic of appropriateness derived from their identities, norms, and social roles. Consequently, from a theoretical perspective, the study argues that nuclear policy and associated national interests are endogenous and malleable, constantly (re)constructed through social interactions and processes of interpretation. The subsequent chapter transitions from a theoretical discussion to the methodological framework of this study. It details the qualitative methodologies employed to explore the intricate relationships between national identity narratives and foreign policy decisions. This methodological approach is crucial, as it underpins the entire research design, data collection, and analysis, ensuring that the study's insights are robust and grounded in empirical evidence.

## ***Chapter 3. Methodology***

### **3.1 Introduction**

This chapter provides the methodological framework deployed to explore the relationship between Iran's national identity and its nuclear policy, central to the research question: How have elements of Iran's national identity—such as modernity, justice and national rights, sovereignty, independence, and anti-oppression—and external influences such as international sanctions and negotiations with the P5+1 shaped its nuclear policy across the administrations of Presidents Khatami, Ahmadinejad, and Rouhani? Given the complexity of dissecting the nuanced interplay between abstract concepts and their manifestations in policy decisions, a qualitative research approach was chosen for this study. This approach is particularly adept at uncovering the subtle dynamics that govern the operationalisation of national identity narratives within the sphere of Iran's nuclear policy. The methodology section details the qualitative techniques employed, including content analysis of policy documents, speeches, and media outputs. These methods were designed to capture and interpret the ways in which Iran's national identity narratives influence and are reflected in its nuclear policy decisions. The focus on qualitative analysis allows for a deep exploration of the ideological underpinnings that guide Iran's foreign policy choices, ensuring that the findings are empirically grounded and contextualised within Iran's socio-political fabric. This methodological approach ensures a comprehensive understanding of how national identity narratives shape policy outcomes, providing insights into the broader implications of Iran's nuclear strategy on international relations and nuclear non-proliferation discourse.

### **3.2 Why a Qualitative Methodology**

Qualitative methodology involves using non-numerical data to understand complex phenomena, track unique events, and illuminate experiences from various perspectives (Sofaer, 1999). It provides rich descriptions and insights into complex settings and interactions that are not easily quantifiable (Sofaer, 1999). Qualitative research enriches the diversity of perspectives considered in this study by allowing an examination of the experiences, views, and interpretations of events. The systematic and rigorous approach of qualitative research seeks to reduce bias and enhance the reliability and validity of findings (Sofaer, 1999).

Qualitative methods enrich research by providing a deep understanding of social phenomena, capturing unique human experiences, and emphasising multiple realities (Moriarty, 2011). This approach also facilitates reflexivity, enabling researchers to learn about themselves and others throughout the research process, leading to new understandings and insights (Sofaer 1999). By focusing on qualitative data collection techniques such as in-depth interviews, narrative analysis, and ethnography, researchers can delve into the intricacies of human behaviour and societal dynamics, ultimately enhancing the rigour and depth of research findings (Thies, 2002). The qualitative approach's emphasis on depth, complexity, and meaning provides a rich understanding of social phenomena, making it particularly suited for exploring the layers and dimensions of national identity and policy formation (Myers, 2019; Sofaer, 1999).

Qualitative research methodologies are often associated with constructivist epistemologies, which posit that reality is socially constructed through human interactions and interpretation. Constructivism values the subjective perspectives of research participants, making qualitative methods particularly suitable for exploring complex social phenomena within this paradigm. However, it is important to recognise that qualitative research is versatile and can be adapted to various epistemological contexts. This flexibility allows researchers to tailor their methodological approaches to best fit the theoretical orientations and specific objectives of their studies, whether these are grounded in constructivism, critical theory, or other perspectives that seek to understand the depth and nuances of human experiences and social contexts. The significant practical implication of adopting this methodology aligns with the approach recommended by Thies (2002). He advocated the interpretation of documents within their historical, situational, and communicative contexts to achieve a more precise understanding of their content and implications. This approach is critical in avoiding misinterpretations of history, such as reliance on secondary sources without a thorough understanding of their limitations or the context in which historical facts were produced (Thies, 2002). This methodology also underscores the inherent bias in selecting primary sources, necessitating a critical and reflective approach to source selection, as Thies (2002) suggests. Moreover, it highlights the subjective nature of historical analysis and the importance of continuously revising and critically engaging with historical narratives. Accordingly, this study advocates for more informed engagement with cases and historical evidence, employing a qualitative analysis that emphasises rigour, critical engagement, and reflexivity.

Qualitative methods complement social constructivism by providing detailed insights into the complex social interactions and phenomena that shape human understanding and societal norms (Moriarty, 2011). By focusing on subjective experiences and the meanings that individuals or groups attribute to events, actions, and interactions, qualitative research facilitates a deeper understanding of the socially constructed nature of reality, aligning with the fundamental principles of social constructivism. These methods allow researchers to explore subjective experiences and perspectives, shedding light on the construction of social realities and meanings (Sofaer, 1999). Through techniques such as grounded theory, case studies, and ethnography, qualitative research enables the exploration of diverse social constructs, contributing to a deeper understanding of how individuals and groups create and interpret their social world (Bennett and Elman, 2007). By examining narratives and norms, qualitative research unveils the ideational factors that underpin policy decisions, providing insights into the motivations and challenges that influence Iran's nuclear strategy. This approach is instrumental in analysing how narratives shape Iranian national identity and the resultant impact on policy choices. Through detailed exploration of statements, speeches, policy documents, and media discourse, researchers can capture the complex interplay between national identity narratives and nuclear policy decisions.

### **3.3. Case Studies and Operationalisation**

Hennink et al. (2020) identified five pivotal traditions that underpin qualitative research: ethnography, narrative, phenomenology, grounded theory, and case study research. Each tradition provides distinct methodological insights that enhance our understanding of human experience and social structures. Specifically, case study research is distinguished by its focused, in-depth investigation of a single case or a limited number of cases set within their real-world contexts. This approach is particularly valuable for exploring intricate issues in detail, thereby allowing researchers to understand the interplay of factors at play within specific instances. Case studies are especially effective in illuminating the complex dynamics of situations in which theoretical propositions have been developed, making them ideal for examining phenomena such as Iran's nuclear policy within the broader framework of its national identity narratives. This approach is particularly suited to studies that aim to understand the intricacies of phenomena deeply embedded in specific environmental, historical, or cultural settings (Gerring, 2017). The case study method is characterised by its

intensive examination of one or more cases, offering detailed insights into the context and processes that underlie the phenomena of interest. Case studies can be based on individuals, groups, organisations, or events and employ multiple sources of evidence to provide a comprehensive understanding of the case(s) under study (Yin, 2009).

The choice of case study approach is justified in the context of examining Iran's national identity narratives and their impact on nuclear policy decisions. This method is particularly adept at delving into how these narratives interact with and influence policies across different presidential tenures in Iran. By facilitating an in-depth exploration of how national identity narratives shape Iran's nuclear policy, this case study approach provides a profound understanding of the dynamic interplay between ideational factors and policy outcomes. Further, the case study method allows for a nuanced investigation of the construction and influence of national identity narratives within Iran's distinctive historical and political contexts. This approach is especially pertinent for this research, as it captures complex political dynamics and provides a methodological pluralism that enhances the analytical depth and breadth of the study. Such a focused examination underscores the transformative impact of these narratives, offering valuable insights into their operationalisation in the realm of foreign policy. Therefore, this methodology not only substantiates the theoretical claims of social constructivism but also amplifies the empirical richness of the research, making it an essential choice for investigating the intricate relationship between national identity and policy formation in Iran.

The selection of the presidencies of Khatami, Ahmadinejad, and Rouhani as case studies is predicated on their significant and distinctive impact on the evolution of Iran's nuclear policy. Each administration embodies a critical phase in Iran's international diplomacy and domestic political development, providing a granular view of the transformations and consistencies in nuclear policy amid changing political ideologies. Khatami's era is noted for its reformist approach and attempts at international engagement; Ahmadinejad's presidency is marked by heightened confrontation and nuclear assertiveness; and Rouhani's term is characterised by a strategic pivot towards negotiation and diplomacy with the West. This delineation allows for an in-depth examination of how differing leadership policy agendas and priorities influence Iran's approach to the development of the nuclear programme and its negotiation tactics with the international community.

By analysing these pivotal periods, this study examines the correlation between shifts in the presidency and corresponding adjustments in Iran's nuclear policy. This provides insights into the interplay between ideological forces and material interests that have driven Iran's actions in the international arena. The operationalisation of concepts such as modernity, justice, sovereignty and independence, national rights, and anti-oppression within Iran's nuclear policy can be traced through the presidencies of Khatami, Ahmadinejad, and Rouhani, each of whom represented different facets of these narratives in their approach to Iran's nuclear policy.

The selection of case studies—encompassing the presidencies of Khatami (1997–2005), Ahmadinejad (2005–2013), and Rouhani (2013–2021)—was strategically chosen to illustrate pivotal periods in the evolution of Iran's nuclear policy and national identity narratives. This temporal framework allows for an in-depth exploration of the research objectives. Each presidency reflects a distinct shift in Iran's approach to international diplomacy and internal political dynamics, offering a comprehensive view of how national identity narratives underpin policy decisions. Khatami's presidency is analysed for its reform approach and efforts at international dialogue, highlighting a period of attempted compliance and engagement with global norms. Ahmadinejad's term is examined for its confrontational posture and significant nuclear development, reflecting a period of defiance and strategic decoupling from Western pressures. Rouhani's tenure, known for achieving JCPOA, marks a strategic pivot for negotiation and diplomacy. This analysis captures the fluctuations in Iran's nuclear policy—from dialogue to defiance and back to diplomacy—providing a comprehensive analysis and insights into the research objective. By examining these distinct periods, this study aims to reveal how internal debates, political factionalism, and external factors such as sanctions and diplomatic engagements contribute to cycles of compliance and defiance in Iran's nuclear strategy. This methodology ensures that the complexities of Iranian foreign policy are adequately contextualised.

Operationalisation is a critical process in qualitative research that involves defining abstract theoretical constructs in terms of specific, measurable variables or indicators. This process is essential to bridge the gap between conceptual theories and their practical and observable manifestations in the real world. In this study, operationalisation facilitates the systematic interpretation of national identity narratives within Iran's nuclear policy context. In practical terms, operationalisation transforms the abstract concepts of modernity, justice, sovereignty, independence, national rights, and anti-oppression—each integral to Iran's national identity—

into specific, observable policies and actions, which are then examined through textual or observational data, allowing for a detailed analysis of how these narratives influence Iran's stance on nuclear issues. This approach enhances the transparency and replicability of the research findings. Moreover, operationalisation provides the necessary precision to conduct an empirical investigation of theoretical constructs. By clearly defining what is measured and how, this research avoids potential ambiguities and ensures that the conclusions of the study are based on a solid empirical foundation. For instance, the concept of 'modernity' in Iran's nuclear discourse is operationalised by identifying specific statements and policy actions that reflect modernist aspirations within the government's public communications. This meticulous approach to operationalisation enables the study to capture the complex interplay between Iran's deeply rooted national identity narratives and its nuclear policy decisions. The operationalisation of national identity narratives within the context of Iran's nuclear policy is conducted through a detailed analysis of various textual sources. This includes a systematic review of policy documents, official speeches, and media reports that discuss Iran's nuclear programme. The aim was to extract references and themes related to national sovereignty, modernity, and resistance to external pressures.

To effectively operationalise these narratives, the research focuses on the following:

- I. Legal and Official Narratives: Examining Iran's legal frameworks and official texts that underline its right to nuclear technology under international law, such as the NPT. This includes statements that assert Iran's autonomy in nuclear decision-making, highlighting its sovereign rights and the legitimacy of its nuclear pursuits.
- II. Public and Political Discourse: Analysing speeches by political leaders and media narratives that frame Iran's nuclear endeavours as a form of national self-sufficiency and independence. This involves identifying rhetoric that portrays Iran as a victim of perceived unjust sanctions, thereby emphasising the themes of oppression and resistance.
- III. Symbolic Assertions of Sovereignty: Documenting instances where Iran declares its independence in terms of nuclear capabilities, such as responses to international sanctions or diplomatic pressure. This includes an examination of how these declarations were used to reinforce Iran's stance on maintaining full control over its nuclear policy decisions.



By closely examining how these narratives are articulated and reinforced through different channels, this study sheds light on the complex interplay between Iran's national identity and its nuclear policy. This operationalisation not only clarifies the role of identity narratives in shaping policy but also provides a robust framework for understanding how Iran navigates its geopolitical and strategic challenges.

### **3.4 Data Selection Methods**

#### **3.4.1 Primary Sources**

The data collection strategy for this study was designed to gather in-depth, relevant information directly from a range of sources. Primary sources are original, first-hand accounts or direct evidence concerning a topic or event created by witnesses or recorders who experienced the documented events or conditions. These sources provide direct access to the subject of the study, allowing researchers to interpret and analyse data in its most authentic form (Sileyew, 2019). The primary sources offer distinct types of information that contribute to the depth and breadth of this study. The significance of primary sources extends to understanding the broader context of Iran's foreign policy and its negotiation strategies with the international community, as well as assessing the consistency and changes in Iran's foreign policy orientations, particularly regarding its nuclear programme.

The use of primary sources provides direct insights into the leadership's intentions and strategies and enables me to delve deeper into the complexities of Iran's nuclear policy and its ideological underpinnings. The research also underscores the challenges and limitations inherent in collecting and analysing primary data, especially on sensitive topics such as nuclear policy. Despite these challenges, primary sources remain indispensable for a comprehensive understanding of Iran's nuclear policies. The types of primary sources include official documents, such as government publications, policy documents, and legal texts, which provide insights into the official stance and policy decisions regarding Iran's nuclear programme. These sources are instrumental in understanding the formal articulation of national identity narratives and their operationalisation in policy.

Moreover, agreements, treaties, and negotiations involving Iran and international bodies (e.g., the NPT, UN Resolutions, and JCPOA) are analysed to understand how Iran's national identity narratives intersect with its international engagements and obligations. In addition, public speeches by key political figures, including presidents, ministers, and other influential policymakers, were used, where necessary, to capture the narratives as articulated by Iran's leadership. These sources have been drawn from official press releases, government publications, the websites of ministries, embassies, and other official bodies with direct involvement in negotiations, nuclear policymaking, and other relevant interactions.

### **3.4.2 Secondary Sources**

Secondary sources interpret, analyse, or summarise information from primary sources. They are removed from the original events or conditions and provide commentary, analysis, or criticism based on the primary data. Secondary sources are useful for gaining an overview of a topic, understanding debates within a field, and situating primary findings in a broader context (Kipping et al. 2014). Secondary sources form a critical component of this research and include reports from reputable news outlets, policy and academic studies, assessments, and articles by leading Iranian and non-Iranian news agencies, national and international newspapers, journals, think tanks, and policy publications by various Iranian and non-Iranian academics (whose members occasionally act as foreign policy advisors to the governments) whenever they provide direct insight into research dynamics and databases that offer contemporary accounts of developments related to Iran's nuclear programme, international negotiations, and sanctions. The selection criteria for secondary sources are their relevance, credibility, and contribution to the research objectives, providing insights that enhance the analysis of the primary data. These sources provide timely information and diverse perspectives on Iran's nuclear policy and its reception, both domestically and internationally. They will also be used to observe what policy changes have occurred in conjunction with or in response to changes in national identity.

### **3.4.3 Persian Language Proficiency**

Utilising my proficiency in the Persian language is advantageous for augmenting the depth and quality of this research. Being a native speaker of Persian allows for direct engagement with primary sources in their original language. This is particularly important for accessing official documents, speeches, and media reports, which are often not available in English or other languages. Direct access eliminates the potential for misinterpretation or loss of meaning that can occur during the translation process, ensuring that the analysis is based on the most accurate and authentic information available. Moreover, language is not just a tool for communication, but also a carrier of culture, embodying contextual meanings that are deeply embedded in the choice of words, phrases, and expressions. Proficiency in Persian enables me to gain a deeper understanding of these cultural and contextual nuances, particularly in the articulation of national identity narratives and their manifestation in policy discourse. Interpreting data in a manner that accurately reflects the intended meaning and significance of the narratives under examination is of paramount importance. Language proficiency enriches the empirical base of the study as it allows for the inclusion of voices and viewpoints that might otherwise be overlooked, contributing to a more balanced and inclusive analysis. Furthermore, it provides insights grounded in a thorough understanding of the linguistic and cultural contexts. Hence, leveraging language proficiency in Persian is a key methodological strength of this research, enhancing the rigour, authenticity, and comprehensiveness of the study.

### **3.4 Ethical Considerations**

This dissertation adheres to ethical standards guided by the principles of respect for people, research integrity, and accountability. This commitment manifests in transparent communication regarding research objectives, methodology, and findings. Researching Iran's national identity and nuclear programme necessitates meticulous attention to ethics, safeguarding both the integrity of the study and the safety of those involved. Given the potential privacy and security risks associated with identifying individuals, this study prioritises information anonymisation during data analysis and reporting. Primary source details, such as names, locations, and specific dates, were redacted to minimise any associated potential risks. Permission to access and utilise primary sources was obtained through relevant archival reviews in Iran to ensure respect for copyright and proprietary rights. Legal compliance was prioritised to avoid violations. The research strategy involved continuous consultation with supervisors, advisors, and ethical review boards. This collaborative approach ensured rigorous scrutiny of the research methods and ethical considerations, guaranteeing alignment with both institutional and international ethical standards. Furthermore, the socio-political context of Iran and the broader world were continuously monitored to identify and address the potential risks associated with publishing and disseminating the findings. By upholding these robust ethical standards, this study upholds academic integrity and contributes to the discourse on Iranian foreign policy in a manner that is both scientifically sound and socially responsible. This commitment to ethical rigour extends beyond the aforementioned practices. The research process also involved a critical source evaluation to ensure the overall ethical consciousness of the investigation.

### **3.5 Reflexivity in Qualitative Research**

Reflexivity refers to a researcher's awareness of its influence on the research process and outcomes (Moriarty, 2011). This involves acknowledging personal and methodological concerns, understanding the impact of the researcher's background on the study, and making the relationship between the researcher and the participants explicit. Qualitative research often involves reflexivity to enhance rigour and minimise bias (Palaganas et al., 2017). Reflexivity enriches research outcomes by fostering a deeper understanding of the relational dynamics between researchers and their subjects (Palaganas et al., 2017). Through reflexivity, researchers can critically examine their epistemological stances and methodological approaches, leading to more authentic and comprehensive insights (Palaganas et al., 2017). Reflexivity invites researchers to maintain a balance between empathy and academic distance, ensuring that the research remains credible while being informed by intersubjective meaning attributions between researchers and participants (Palaganas et al., 2017). Reflexivity in qualitative research serves as a critical introspective process in which researchers examine its influence on the research process and outcomes. It involves a conscious awareness of the researcher's role and the mutual shaping of both research and researcher, acknowledging that researchers cannot remain 'outside' their study topic (Palaganas et al., 2017). Reflexivity is thus paramount in qualitative research, as it fosters critical self-awareness and the examination of how researchers' personal backgrounds and biases shape the data collection and analysis processes, thereby contributing to the construction of knowledge. It enhances the transparency and credibility of the research by making explicit the researcher's positionality and impact on the research findings.

In this study, reflexivity was an essential component of the research process, enabling a critical examination of my own biases, assumptions, and the influence of my background on the interpretation of data. Throughout the research, I engaged in a continuous reflective process that involved questioning the preconceptions I brought into the study and re-evaluating them as I interacted with the data. This approach has not only heightened the rigour and depth of the analysis but also ensured a more accurate understanding of Iran's national identity and nuclear policy. By systematically reflecting on how my perspectives might shape the research findings, I strived to enhance transparency and accountability in the research process. The reflexivity helped in identifying potential biases in data interpretation and in the selection of sources, ensuring that the conclusions drawn were the result of rigorous analysis rather than pre-existing

opinions. Moreover, this reflective practice fostered greater awareness of the complex interplay between the researcher's own views and the social world being studied, thereby enriching the research outcomes with a balanced and critical perspective.

Hence, this study employs reflexive practices to critically examine the construction and mobilisation of national identity narratives within Iran's nuclear policy framework. Reflexivity is vital in understanding how different administrations use these narratives to justify or contest nuclear policy decisions, acknowledging that these narratives are not just policy tools, but are deeply ingrained in Iran's cultural and historical contexts. By systematically reflecting on my own biases and cultural standpoints, reflexivity helps mitigate the risk of imposing my interpretation of the data. This practice is crucial for dissecting how Iran's national identity is represented and understood in various political discourses. It allows for a clearer analysis, acknowledging the researcher's influence on the interpretation process while striving to present a balanced view that respects the complexity of Iranian sociopolitical dynamics. Moreover, this reflective approach enhances the research by revealing how personal and academic backgrounds might colour the analysis of sensitive topics, such as national identity and nuclear policy. Through this process, the study aims to offer a thoughtful examination of Iran's motivations and actions that acknowledge both the researcher's perspective and the multilayered reality of Iranian political life.

This study acknowledges the potential biases and limitations inherent to qualitative research. Therefore, it is important to ensure the integrity and credibility of my findings by rigorously applying further strategies to uphold their reliability and validity. A key strategy is the triangulation of data sources, which is crucial for enhancing reliability and validity. This approach, as Collier and Mahoney (1996) note, helps mitigate selection bias by corroborating the findings across diverse data sources, including primary and secondary sources. Peer review is an essential mechanism for ensuring analytical rigour. Subjecting the study's methodology, analysis, and findings to academic peer scrutiny allows the identification and correction of potential biases and weaknesses. Mehra (2002) underscores the role of peer reviews in enhancing a study's quality and trustworthiness by addressing biases in qualitative research. Employing methodological triangulation across data sources and analytical perspectives helps counteract these issues, ensuring a balanced and grounded analysis. These approaches strengthened the empirical base and enabled a nuanced exploration of the interplay between

national identity and nuclear policy, ensuring that the contributions of this study are both credible and insightful.

### **3.6 Conclusion**

This chapter delineates the methodological framework of this study, demonstrating a deliberate alignment between the chosen qualitative methods and the social constructivist theoretical foundation that underpins the exploration of the interplay between Iran's national identity and nuclear policy. The key strength of the qualitative approach lies in its comprehensive and detailed operationalisation of key narratives: modernity, justice and national rights, sovereignty, independence, and anti-oppression. This operationalisation process, enriched by methodological considerations in this study, enables careful selection and interpretation of sources and a systematic and objective examination of how these narratives of national identity are constructed and influence Iran's nuclear policy. This qualitative methodology, with its emphasis on interpretative techniques and contextual understanding, allows for a more in-depth examination of the complexities of national identity and its interplay with policy decisions, thus leveraging the strengths of qualitative methods to capture the subtleties of social phenomena. By employing qualitative methods, my research can dissect the layers of meaning and socio-political underpinnings of policy decisions, offering insights that are often obscured in quantitative analyses. Moreover, reflexivity, a fundamental aspect of qualitative research, necessitates acknowledgement of the researcher's influence on the research process.

Reflexivity is crucial for maintaining objectivity and rigour. This compels the researcher to continually question their assumptions, perspectives, and potential biases that might affect the interpretation of data. This ongoing self-examination helps ensure that the findings are the result of rigorous and critical engagement with the data rather than the researcher's preconceptions. The qualitative methodology employed in this study is instrumental in dissecting the intricate relationship between national identity narratives and nuclear policy in Iran. By enabling a contextually rich exploration of how these narratives interact with and influence policy decisions, qualitative research provides insights essential to a comprehensive understanding of Iran's nuclear strategy. This methodological approach captures the complexity of political dynamics and enhances the analytical depth of this study.

The forthcoming chapter examines the historical backdrop, elucidating how Iran's national identity has evolved over time and how this evolution has influenced its current stance on global affairs. Historical consciousness has shaped Iranian foreign policy, spawning resistance to perceived Western dominance. This sentiment manifests in Iran's strategic alliances, such as those with Russia and China, aimed at countering Western influence. Iranian leaders frequently employ anti-imperialist and anti-Western rhetoric to stir nationalist fervour and galvanise public support. The next chapter will explore the significant historical milestones that have moulded Iran's national identity. It highlights how historical events and external pressures collectively influence Iran's foreign policy formulation. By examining these dynamics, we gain a richer perspective on the motivations for Iran's nuclear policy. This historical context is pivotal for understanding how historical context and experiences continue to shape Iran's global interactions. It illustrates the interplay between identity, ideology, and national interests, providing a comprehensive view of how Iran's historical narratives and cultural identity inform and influence foreign policy decisions. Such an analysis is critical for comprehending the depth and complexity of Iran's stance in international affairs, particularly in how it navigates its nuclear programme amidst global pressure and negotiations. This understanding helps to clarify the persistent themes of sovereignty and resistance prevalent in Iran's policy decisions, highlighting the norms that underpin its nuclear policy.



## ***Chapter 4. The Historical Formation of National Identity and Its Impact on Iran's National Consciousness***

### **4.1 Introduction**

This chapter examines the historical underpinnings of this study. This chapter aims to illuminate the complex historical foundation underlying subsequent case studies. Iran's national identity, deeply rooted in its historical experiences, cultural heritage, and transformative political milestones, reflects and responds to the myriad challenges and opportunities it has faced over the centuries. It argues that historical events, cultural heritage, and turbulent political developments play a pivotal role in its foreign policy decisions, particularly concerning its nuclear programme. Historical events have imbued the Iranian national consciousness with a strong sense of sovereignty, independence, and resilience. This chapter discusses that, from the grandeur of the Persian Empire, which instilled a sense of long-standing cultural pride, to the transformative Islamic Revolution that reshaped its political and social fabric, and the resilience forged during the tumultuous Iran-Iraq War, each epoch has added distinct layers to the national consciousness. These layers promote a collective national identity that prioritises sovereignty, independence, modernity, and resilience—narratives that strongly influence Iran's current nuclear policy decisions. The ensuing case studies delve into how these narratives of modernity, justice, sovereignty, independence, and anti-oppression, fundamental to Iran's self-conception, manifest in its strategic policy frameworks.

### **4.2 Historical Milestones: Pre-Islamic Era to the Islamic Revolution (1979)**

Throughout its extensive history of civilisation, Iran has witnessed the rise and fall of numerous dynasties. For over 5,000 years, Iran has stood as a cradle of civilisation. Iran's governance has consistently faced challenges in asserting control beyond its densely populated centres, complicating the demarcation of its national borders. Geopolitically, Iran is located in southwestern Asia, commonly referred to as the Middle East, and shares its borders with an impressive count of 15 countries. Historically, many of these neighbours were once integral to the renowned Persian Empire, as termed by numerous Western scholars. The Achaemenid Empire (550–330 BC) emerged as the cornerstone of the Iranian identity. Under Cyrus the Great, this era was marked by ground-breaking governance and commitment to norms and human rights, which symbolised the empire's dedication to justice, religious freedom, and

governance (Kuhrt, 2007, p. 129). The empire's sophisticated administrative systems and infrastructural achievements, such as the Royal Road, underscore the legacy of unity and efficiency that mirrors Iran's contemporary aspirations for modernity through technological advancements.

Following the Achaemenids, the Sassanian Empire (224–651 AD) further advanced Persian civilisation in science, philosophy, and the arts. The establishment of the Academy of Jondishapour as the intellectual centre of the Sassanid Empire and the centre of learning exemplifies this era's dedication to science, intellectual exchange, and innovation (Daryaee, 2009, p. 84). Contributions to medicine, astronomy, and engineering during this period reflect the continuous pursuit of knowledge. The introduction of Islam in the 7th century marked a transformative period for Iran by blending Persian traditions with Islamic principles and demonstrating its resilience and adaptability. The integration of Shia Islam into the fabric of Iranian national identity redefined the foundations of Iranian identity, setting the stage for the eventual dominance of Shia Islam as a defining element of Iranian identity. The martyrdom of Hussein ibn Ali at the Battle of Karbala has been greatly influential, embedding a narrative of resistance against tyranny and injustice in the Iranian national psyche (Momen, 2017). The integration of Shia Islam into Iranian national identity was advanced by the Safavid dynasty, which established Shia Islam as the state religion, thereby cementing its influence on Iranian culture and society (Arjomand, 1988).

Shia Islam's core tenets—justice, martyrdom, and resistance to oppression—influence Iran's foreign policy strategies, particularly during negotiations and confrontations (Akbarzadeh and Barry, 2016, p. 617). These principles manifest in several key areas. Iran's foreign policy is often justified through the lens of standing up to injustice and defending the oppressed, thus reflecting Shia's commitment to justice. Support for regional Shia groups embodies the principle of assisting fellow believers and upholding justice in the face of perceived persecution. Martyrdom, which involves sacrificing oneself for the righteous cause, also shapes Iran's approach to conflict. This may result in a higher tolerance for casualties during military confrontations or proxy wars, particularly when such actions are viewed as defending core principles and resisting perceived oppressors. By framing foreign policy actions within these religious and ideological narratives, Iran seeks to validate its strategies and reinforce its identity in the international arena.

This collective identity, merging ancient Persian civilisation with Shia Islamic values, contextualises Iran's foreign policy within a religious, historical, and cultural framework that emphasises its legacy as a centre of knowledge, power, and resistance (Mozaffari, 2010). This synthesis of cultural heritage and religious principles reinforces Iran's self-perception as a nation committed to upholding sovereignty and resisting external domination. The historical-religious context of Iran as a centre of scientific and intellectual achievement underpins its modern endeavours, including its emphasis on technological advancement and self-sufficiency. This narrative positions Iran's actions on the international stage as part of a broader continuum, defending its national identity against perceived injustices and oppression. Moreover, the intertwining of Persian and Shia values provides a robust ideological foundation that Iran leveraged to justify its policies and actions. By invoking a rich tapestry of historical achievements and religious duties, Iranian leaders appeal to both domestic and international audiences, seeking to legitimise their strategies and foster a sense of national unity and purpose. This ideological framework also influences Iran's diplomatic interactions, where it often portrays itself as a bulwark against Western hegemony and as a defender of oppressed people. This is a reflection of the deeply ingrained narratives that shaped Iran's worldview and policy decisions.

The Constitutional Revolution (1905–1911) stands out as a pivotal moment in Iran's modern history, marking a significant shift towards political modernisation and embedding enduring principles of sovereignty and resistance against foreign domination into the national psyche. The Constitutional Revolution emerged against the backdrop of the Qajar dynasty's decline, characterised by economic mismanagement and increasing foreign influence. This period of socio-political upheaval aimed at establishing a constitutional monarchy was, consequently, a profound expression of Iran's quest for sovereignty, reflecting a collective desire to safeguard national independence against external interference. Inspired by Western democratic models, the revolution sought to introduce a constitutional government and parliamentary system, advocating for the rule of law, civil rights, and national sovereignty (Bausani, 1965, p. 159; Rezaei, 2006, pp. 1285–1290).

The Constitutional Revolution represents a watershed moment in the nation's history, characterised by a profound shift towards political modernisation and the embedding of enduring principles of sovereignty and resistance against foreign domination. This period marked the first revolution in Iran's history, fundamentally altering the state's administration and setting the stage for significant positive growth and change (Akramova, 2023). Intervention by Russian and British forces following a 1907 agreement had a substantial impact on the revolution's outcomes, reinforcing Iran's anti-colonial sentiments and scepticism towards foreign intervention (Martin, 2013, pp. 340–342; Encyclopaedia Iranica, 2012). Iran's national identity is shaped by historical experiences of foreign invasions and interference. The Constitutional Revolution was a key moment in this resistance, as it emphasised the role of the Shia clergy in mobilising public support for political change. This interdependence between religion and politics in Iran has persisted, influencing the nation's approach to issues such as independence and self-determination (Karimi, 2016).

The Constitutional Revolution marked a critical juncture in Iran's history, as it led to the transition towards modern governance, the assertion of sovereignty, and the foundation for resistance against foreign domination. The Iranian Constitutional Revolution was both a political and cultural awakening that challenged the absolute power of the Qajar dynasty. Inspired by European nations, such as Britain and France, where parliaments limited the power of monarchs, Iranian revolutionaries demanded a written constitution that would establish a representative government and guarantee individual freedoms. This intellectual movement, fuelled by the desire for clear laws, a thriving economy, and a modernised education system, ultimately led to the weakening and collapse of the Qajar system.

The period from Allied occupation during World War II to the eve of the Islamic Revolution in 1979 constituted a critical phase in the evolution of Iran's national identity. During the Second World War, Iran was occupied by Anglo-Russian forces under the claim that it aligned with Nazi Germany. Despite Tehran's formal proclamation of neutrality and its vigorous defence of this stance, the Allied forces invaded and occupied Iran to transform it into a strategic corridor for logistical support between Britain and the Soviet Union, later dubbing it the "bridge of victory." Despite Tehran's formal declaration of neutrality in 1939 and its efforts to maintain this stance during the early stages of World War II, Iran's strategic position and oil resources made its neutrality untenable. The British and Soviet governments, recognising the strategic importance of Iran for both stopping the German advance towards the Caucasus and

supplying the Soviet Union with food and arms, agreed to occupy Iran (Erkan, 2010). This decision was further influenced by the presence of a significant number of Germans in Iran, perceived as a threat to Iranian neutrality and indicative of Nazi Germany's influence on the Tehran government (Erkan, 2010). The occupation transformed Iran into a strategic corridor for logistical support between Britain and the Soviet Union, effectively making it a "bridge to victory" for the Allied forces (Kozhanov, 2012). The occupation's impact on Iran was profound, affecting its political situation and leading to the eventual replacement of Reza Shah with his son (Kozhanov, 2012).

Despite Iran's declared neutrality, the Allied occupation of Iran underscored its foreign influence and the fragility of its sovereignty, which set the stage for subsequent political upheavals, including the 1953 coup and establishment of a close alliance with the United States. These events, however, deepened Iran's scepticism towards foreign intervention and reinforced its desire for political autonomy (Drinik, 1989). The 1953 coup, a watershed moment facilitated by foreign powers, notably the United States and the United Kingdom, catalysed a profound mistrust towards the West. This event is significant in understanding Iran's narrative of victimisation and its persistent quest for sovereignty and resistance against foreign domination, which are visible in its contemporary stance on nuclear development (Gasiorowski, 1991, p. 27; Baqer Aqli, 1994, pp. 470–475).

The events leading up to the 1979 Islamic Revolution significantly impacted Iran's national identity and triggered profound sociopolitical changes. Prime Minister Mossadegh's nationalisation of the Iranian oil industry, previously controlled by British interests, resonated deeply with the Iranian populace's aspirations for autonomy from foreign domination. However, the 1953 coup d'état against Mossadegh, motivated by the Western fear of losing access to Iranian oil and concerns over Soviet influence, abruptly halted these efforts. The reinstatement of Shah Reza Pahlavi and the subsequent consolidation of his power, with significant American support, marked a regression in the quest for national sovereignty and independence. This turn of events fostered a sense of betrayal and loss among Iranians, further fuelling the desire for self-rule. The 1953 coup d'état played a significant role in shaping Iran's national identity. It exposed the country's vulnerabilities to foreign intervention and sowed seeds of distrust towards Western powers, specifically the United States and the United Kingdom. This event became a symbol of the struggle for independence and self-determination, themes that would continue to shape Iran's political discourse and social

movements for decades. The impact of the coup on Iran's national identity and its narratives of independence and sovereignty set the stage for the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The revolution served not only as a rejection of Shah's authoritarian rule but also as a broader repudiation of Western influence. The revolutionaries sought to restore Iran's full political independence and reclaim its sovereignty, drawing on deeply ingrained sentiments of national pride and the desire for self-rule that had been amplified by the events of 1953.

The 1953 coup d'état against Prime Minister Mossadegh stands as a pivotal moment in Iran's national identity. This event shattered Iranian aspirations for self-determination, particularly following Mossadegh's nationalisation of the oil industry, a move that resonated deeply with the Iranian public's desire for independence (Dezhamkhooy, 2023). The coup's aftermath, marked by the Shah's consolidation of power with Western backing, fostered a collective memory of national humiliation and a burning desire to resist foreign domination. These themes—independence, sovereignty, and resistance—became central to Iran's national narrative, resurfacing not only in the 1979 revolution but also finding echoes in earlier movements. The seeds of discontent with foreign influence and a yearning for self-determination were present even before the 1953 coup. The Constitutional Revolution of 1906, though falling short of its full goals, laid the groundwork for future movements. This earlier revolution reflected a broader societal aspiration for modernisation and legal reform, sparking a conflict between tradition and modernity within Iran (Akramova, 2023). While the revolution focused on establishing a constitutional monarchy, it also ignited a yearning for popular participation in governance, a theme that would resonate with later movements seeking a more representative form of government. The 1979 Islamic Revolution, spearheaded by Ayatollah Khomeini, marked the culmination of these historical currents. It undeniably built upon the pre-existing themes of independence and self-determination, fiercely rejecting the Shah's regime and Western influence. However, the revolution also introduced a significant shift by establishing an Islamic Republic and placing Islamic ideology at the core of Iran's national identity. This emphasis on Islam offered a new framework for understanding Iran's place in the world and its relationship with the East and West (Dezhamkhooy, 2023). While the revolution brought about a new form of government, it did so by drawing upon and reshaping the themes of sovereignty, resistance, and societal change that had been simmering for decades.

### 4.3 The Islamic Revolution of 1979 and Its Immediate Aftermath

The establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, following a period of intense political and social unrest, marked a transformation of Iran's national identity. The revolution was not merely a socio-political upheaval, but, in particular, a reassertion of Iran's cultural norms and religious values and the quest for sovereignty, independence, and anti-oppression (Keddie, 1969, pp. 3–31; Ajami, 1988, p. 135). This transition was ideological, reflecting a broader quest for distinct status in the world order (Adib-Moghaddam, 2014, p. 43). The Islamic Republic, with slogans rooted in Islamic fundamentals and anti-imperialist discourses, presented Iran as a contender to oppression. This nationalist drive catalysed a unifying movement that transcended socio-economic and political divisions, galvanising the nation around a shared vision of an Islamic utopia (Adib-Moghaddam, 2014, p. 58). The concept of "Islamic utopian romanticism" as a guiding force in Iran's foreign policy, as discussed by Moghaddam (2005), finds resonance in the analysis of Iran's post-1979 foreign policy dynamics. This concept, characterised by a longing for pan-Islamic unity and a challenge to Western hegemony, was evident in Iran's emphasis on Islamic norms, which prioritises ideological boundaries over political borders, aiming for a unified global Muslim community (*Ummah*). This ideological stance seeks to reassert Islamic values on an international stage (Khelghat-Doost, 2022).

Iran's foreign policy aimed to project revolutionary ideals beyond its borders. This is manifested in its resistance strategy and aligns with Islamic ideals of justice, equality, and rejection of oppression (Ugli, 2023). Iran's foreign policy under the Islamic Republic has been marked by efforts to export the revolution's ideals, support Muslims worldwide, and assert its independence from superpower influences. This approach reflects the broader ideological convictions that underpin the post-revolutionary state, where foreign policy is a means of articulating Iran's reconstituted national identity and its aspirations for global significance (Adib-Moghaddam, 2005, pp. 265-292). This ideological shift was primarily aimed at constructing a national identity that prioritised Islamic governance as a pathway to justice and equity. This ideological reconstitution was not just about altering the political landscape; it was about redefining what it meant to be Iranian in a modern context, connecting deeply with the nation's historical Islamic roots while asserting a new path forward (Adib-Moghaddam, 2014, pp. 43–58). The Islamic Revolution symbolised the domestic renaissance and was characterised by a determination to disseminate the revolution's ideology and support for the Muslim world.

The 1979 Iranian hostage crisis served as a pivotal juncture, fundamentally altering the course of Iranian foreign policy. Longstanding Iranian grievances against the United States, particularly its unwavering support for the Shah's dynasty (1941–1979) following the 1953 coup that overthrew the democratically elected Prime Minister Mossadeqh and its history of perceived interventionism, culminated in the seizure of the U.S. embassy in Tehran (Stickel, 2020). This audacious act served as a rejection of American influence, not just within Iran but also radiating outward throughout the Middle East (Houghton, 2001, p. 45; Scott, 2000, p. 177). The 1979 Iranian hostage crisis was a pivotal juncture in the consolidation of the Islamic Republic. By defying the United States, a historical symbol of Western hegemony, Ayatollah Khomeini and the clerics solidified their domestic authority. The seizure of American hostages became a powerful domestic rallying point, firmly establishing anti-Western imperialism as a core tenet of the nascent Islamic Republic's ideology (Houghton, 2001, p. 67).

This stance resonated far beyond Iranian borders, emboldening anti-Western movements throughout the Middle East and strategically positioning the Islamic Republic as a champion of anti-imperialist ideals (Emery, 2013). Ayatollah Khomeini and his followers saw the U.S. as the primary foreign backer of the Shah (Rubin, 1980). The crisis thus underscored the depth of anti-American sentiment in Iran, fuelled by historical grievances and the perception of the US as a supporter of the Pahlavi dynasty (Asami, 2016; Zarif, 2013). The repercussions of the crisis, including economic sanctions and international isolation, have had lasting impacts on Iran's foreign policy (Jamaran, 1985). The crisis led to a complete breakdown of the US-Iranian bilateral diplomatic ties, replaced by a hostile standoff characterised especially by economic sanctions (Emery, 2010) and a deepening narrative of mutual distrust and enmity (Murray, 2009, p. 102). This episode left an indelible mark on the collective memory of both nations, shaping their foreign policy calculations and perceptions for decades.



#### 4.4 Iran-Iraq War (1980–1988)

This study argues that the war reinforced Iran's national identity pillars—Persian ethnic-linguistic heritage, territorial integrity, and Islamic faith—highlighting the interplay between nationalism and religion in the country's collective consciousness. The origins of war were multifaceted, encompassing territorial disputes, ideological rifts, and regional power struggles. The war initiated by Iraq's invasion of Iran was deeply rooted in territorial disputes and Saddam Hussein's fears regarding the spillover of the Islamic Revolution and its potential influence on Iraq's Shia population (Tabatabai and Samuel, 2017). Central to the war was the Arvand Roud (*Shatt al-Arab*) River dispute, a historic point of contention between Iran and Iraq. Saddam Hussein's regime, under the pretext that the Islamic Revolution could inspire Shia populations within Iraq, sought to pre-emptively solidify dominance (El-Sherbini, 1989).

The commencement of hostilities in September 1980, highlighted by Iraq's invasion of Iran, resulted from its military attacks and ambitions to annex Iran's oil-rich Khuzestan province, which borders Iraq and inhabits Arab-Iranians. Iraq disregarded diplomatic efforts, particularly the 1975 Algiers Agreement, which aimed to resolve the Shatt al-Arab dispute (United Nations, No. 14903, 1976). This conflict is characterised by its brutality, including the use of chemical weapons and the involvement of child soldiers, which left deep scars on both nations, with no decisive gains for either side, despite the massive human and material costs (Khandagh, 2020). Despite their proclaimed neutrality, the superpowers became heavily involved in the conflict by providing intelligence and military support to Iraq. This external involvement emphasised the strategic significance of the Iran-Iraq War within the larger schema of regional and global politics. It showcased the superpowers' vested interests in maintaining their influence in the Middle East, especially in the Persian Gulf region (BBC Persian, 2015).

The Iran-Iraq War underscored Iran's perception of isolation and the need for self-reliance within what it viewed as an unjust international order. The war's narratives were interwoven with classical Persian poetry and mysticism, reflecting the Islamic Republic's use of cultural heritage to foster a sense of unity and resistance to external aggression (Karimipour, 2021). Iran's resilience in the face of Iraq's aggressions, compounded by a lack of international support strengthened the sense of national unity (Litvak, 2017, pp. 10-31; Farzaneh, 2007, p. 86). The end of the war, which was formalised by UNSC Resolution 598 and identified Iraq as the aggressor, did not translate into a clear victory for either side (Security Council Resolution 598, 1987). This conflict enabled the blending of Shia ideology with Iranian secular nationalism, fostering a wide-ranging sense of national solidarity that transcended religious and secular divisions and underscored the further development of narratives of sovereignty, independence, and resistance to oppression (Farzaneh, 2007).

Iraq's use of chemical weapons during the Iran-Iraq War, coupled with Iran's perception of an inadequate international response, fuelled a powerful narrative of resistance to injustice (Wright, 1989). This narrative emphasises self-reliance, national sovereignty, and defiance against oppression, becoming deeply embedded in Iran's national identity. The traumatic experiences of the war and the lack of international condemnation crystallised a collective memory that viewed external powers with suspicion and reinforced the need for self-sufficiency in defence. This ingrained narrative continues to profoundly influence Iran's foreign policy. Iran justifies its pursuit of defensive capabilities, including missile programmes, as essential for securing national security, deterring external threats, and safeguarding its independence. The emphasis on self-reliance and sovereignty reflects a broader world view in which Iran positions itself as a defender of its own autonomy against a backdrop of historical interventions and current geopolitical pressures. The war highlighted the need for deterrent capabilities to ensure national security (Ward, 2009). Iran's leadership reassessed its nuclear programme in response to existential threats and its vulnerability to external aggression (Maloney, 2015).

Iran's isolation during the war, marked by the U.S.-led arms embargo reinforced the belief that Iran must rely on its own resources and capabilities for security and sovereignty, which resonated with the core themes of the 1979 revolution: self-sufficiency, independence, national control over resources, and resistance to foreign intervention (Karsh, 1989). Moshirzadeh (2007) argues that the Iran-Iraq War served as a catalyst for unifying the nation in a collective struggle for independence, sovereignty, survival, and dignity. The war contributed to the evolution of contemporary Iranian national identity narratives. While religious leaders used Islamic symbols to motivate soldiers, the conflict's emphasis ultimately shifted towards national defence, transcending purely religious ideology. Religious leaders played a significant role in mobilising the population, but the war experience led some Iranians to view their national identity as compatible with, but not solely defined by, their religious beliefs. Ultimately, the need to defend the nation as a whole became a more unifying factor, bringing together people from all walks of life, regardless of religious affiliation.

#### **4.5 Iran's Nuclear Policy: Navigating History and Ontological Security**

Iran's nuclear aspirations extend beyond the material calculations of power and security. These objectives are also embedded in the national narrative, which is profoundly influenced by historical experiences and shared cultural values that together fortify Iran's identity. Iran's nuclear policy shifts are grounded in security considerations and the broader construct of ontological security. This concept, originally derived from psychological and sociological disciplines and integrated into international relations theory, emphasises the importance of a state's identity and the continuous affirmation of self-concepts during international interactions. Ontological security is achieved through stable relationships and consistent behaviour that reinforce a nation's sense of self and its role in the global arena (Behraves, 2018; Zarakol, 2017). The reluctance to scale back or negotiate terms regarding its nuclear and missile programmes is thus not solely a strategic manoeuvre for military advantage but is deeply interwoven with Iran's quest for ontological security. This quest reflects a desire to maintain a consistent and coherent identity as a technologically advanced sovereign nation capable of standing resiliently against perceived threats and external pressures. This perspective on ontological security complements the earlier discussions in this dissertation about how Iran's

historical consciousness, shaped by pivotal events such as the Constitutional Revolution, the 1953 coup, and more contemporary geopolitical dynamics.

Iran's nuclear policy is deeply rooted in its historical context and is driven by its quest for ontological security, which emphasises maintaining a consistent national identity and self-concept. As mentioned earlier, the nuclear programme dates back to the late 1950s and was originally supported by Western countries, including the United States. However, the 1979 Islamic Revolution and subsequent geopolitical conflicts, such as the Iran-Iraq War, significantly influenced Iran's security perceptions. These events instilled a sense of vulnerability and the need for self-reliance in Iran's strategic culture (Bahgat, 2006). Following the revolution, Iran faced diplomatic isolation and economic sanctions, particularly from Western powers. This isolation reinforced the determination to assert its independence and develop a self-sufficient nuclear programme as a symbol of national pride and resistance against external pressures (Mokhtari, 2005).

The nuclear aspirations are intertwined with its national identity and pride. This perspective is crucial for maintaining internal legitimacy and coherence (Dolatabadi, 2022). Ontological security theory posits that states seek to maintain a stable sense of self through consistent action and relationships. Iran's steadfastness in pursuing its nuclear programme despite international opposition and sanctions, which I examine in the case studies, reflects its desire to preserve its identity as a sovereign, technologically advanced nation capable of withstanding external threats (Behraves, 2018). Understanding the historical and identity-based motivations behind Iran's nuclear policy is critical to effective international negotiations. Efforts to resolve the nuclear issue must consider Iran's need for ontological security and the symbolic importance of its nuclear programme. Simply focusing on security concerns without addressing these deeper motivations may prove ineffective (Rees, 2023). Acknowledging Iran's ontological security concerns can help formulate more nuanced and respectful diplomatic strategies. Policies that aim to engage Iran constructively by offering security assurances and recognising its technological aspirations might be more successful in fostering compliance and cooperation (Clarke, 2013). Thus, Iran's nuclear policy is a complex interplay between historical experience and the quest for ontological security. Recognising these factors is essential to understanding Iran's actions and crafting effective diplomatic solutions.

## 4.6 Conclusion

This chapter discussed the historical underpinnings of Iran's identity. Based on this historical context, I argue that narratives of modernity, justice, national rights, sovereignty, independence, and anti-oppression are ingrained in Iran's socio-political landscape. The narrative of modernity symbolises progress and self-sufficiency. Rooted in the Constitutional Revolution's call for political and economic reform, the pursuit of modernity encompasses broader aspirations for independence and national rights. Iran's national identity is fundamentally centred on the defence of sovereignty and the pursuit of equitable treatment in the international arena. The perceived persistent struggle against foreign interference—exemplified by resistance to British and Russian influence during the Constitutional Revolution, opposition to Western interference during the 1953 coup, and the anti-imperialist stance of the Islamic Revolution of 1979—has ingrained a deep-seated commitment to resilience, self-reliance, and defence of national sovereignty in Iran's national consciousness. Narratives of modernity, justice, and resistance to external dominance are deeply ingrained in the Iranian psyche.

Narratives of national identity resonate strongly with Iran's stance on nuclear development. This stance is positioned within the context of resisting perceived hegemony and asserting the nation's right to self-determination. These historical developments contribute to the development of a collective national identity that valorises resilience and defiance against perceived threats, reinforcing the nation's commitment to maintaining sovereignty and autonomy in its strategic policies, including its pursuit of the nuclear programme. Throughout its history, Iran has emphasised independence, technological advancement, and self-sufficiency vis-à-vis addressing external threats. The Iranian historical context, including the Constitutional Revolution, the coup against Mosaddegh, the Islamic Revolution, and the Iran-Iraq War, has profoundly shaped the construction of Iranian national identity and its narratives. These events collectively contributed to a national consciousness that emphasises modernity, justice, sovereignty, independence, and resistance against external pressures. The Constitutional Revolution was a pivotal moment in Iran's history, marking the beginning of a movement towards political and economic reform. It aimed to establish a constitutional monarchy and limit the powers of the Shah, reflecting aspirations for modernity and self-

governance. This period instilled a sense of national rights and justice, laying the groundwork for future demands for political and economic independence.

The 1953 coup, orchestrated by the United States and the United Kingdom, was a blatant violation of Iran's sovereignty and a prime example of foreign interference. The coup reinforced the narrative of resistance against external domination and the importance of maintaining national sovereignty. It also contributed to a deep-seated distrust of Western powers, which continues to influence Iran's foreign and nuclear policies. The Islamic Revolution emphasised the themes of anti-oppression, justice, and self-reliance, which became central to the new national identity. The Islamic Republic's stance on resisting Western hegemony and promoting Islamic governance continues to shape its policies, including its nuclear programme. The Iran-Iraq War was a defining conflict that further solidified Iran's national identity around themes of resilience, self-sufficiency, and defence of sovereignty. The war galvanised the Iranian population and reinforced the narrative of resistance against external aggression. The experience of the war underscored the importance of self-reliance in defence capabilities and self-reliance, which are key drivers of Iran's pursuit of nuclear technology.

Iran's nuclear programme is seen as a symbol of technological progress and modernity. It reflects the country's desire to achieve self-sufficiency, and the pursuit of nuclear capabilities is framed as a legitimate right and a matter of national pride, resonating with the historical narrative of modernity and reform initiated during the Constitutional Revolution. The historical experiences of foreign interference, particularly the 1953 coup, have ingrained a strong emphasis on sovereignty and independence in Iran's national identity. The nuclear programme is viewed as a means of asserting Iran's sovereign rights and resisting external pressures. Iran's insistence on the right to develop nuclear technology directly reflects its commitment to maintaining independence and resisting perceived attempts at domination by foreign powers. The Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War reinforced a narrative of resistance against oppression and external threats. The nuclear programme is also seen as a way to ensure Iran's security and deter external threats, aligning with the historical emphasis on resilience and self-sufficiency. Thus, the historical context has profoundly shaped Iranian national identity and its narratives. These events instilled a deep-seated commitment to modernity, justice, sovereignty, independence, and resistance to external pressures. These narratives continue to influence Iran's nuclear policy, driving its pursuit of nuclear capabilities as a means of asserting its rights, achieving technological advancements, and ensuring national security.

## ***Chapter 5. The Presidency of Khatami (1997-2005) and Iran's Nuclear Policy***

### **5.1 Introduction**

The previous chapter laid the groundwork for this exploration by detailing the evolution of Iran's national identity and its shared narratives. Key insights from this chapter highlight how historical events, from the Constitutional Revolution to the Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq War, have cemented narratives of modernity, justice and national rights, sovereignty, independence, and anti-oppression within Iran's national consciousness. Khatami's election was underpinned by reform promises. His “Dialogue of Civilisations” initiative was a testament to this shift, signalling a readiness to engage more constructively with the international community, including a willingness to cooperate with the international community to resolve the concerns raised about the nuclear programme. Through initiatives such as the “Dialogue of Civilisations,” he turned towards pragmatism and a balance between ideology and pragmatism. Khatami and his reformist government carefully cultivated a nationalist nuclear discourse that portrayed Iran's pursuit of nuclear technology as a legitimate right tied to national pride and independence. They framed the nuclear programme as a national project aimed at greater self-sufficiency and scientific progress, appealing to post-revolutionary ideals of independence.

The nuclear programme was portrayed as upholding Iranian sovereignty and prestige in the face of perceived Western efforts to deny technological advancement in Iran. The nationalist rhetoric around the nuclear programme constrained Khatami's ability to compromise in negotiations with Europe over Iran's nuclear activities. Public criticism, especially from conservatives, has highlighted the need to protect Iran's sovereign national rights against uranium enrichment. To placate domestic critics, Khatami repeatedly asserted that Iran would never permanently give up its right to enrichment, limiting negotiating flexibility. Negotiations were portrayed as a decision of the entire system, not just the reformist government, further restricting Khatami's room for manoeuvre.

Khatami advocated a policy of “Dialogue among Civilisations” rather than confrontation, and sought to normalise relations with other countries based on mutual respect and interests. This détente policy helped create a more conducive atmosphere for expanding ties with the West and major powers, although relations with the U.S. remained strained. This initiative portrayed Iran as a rational actor seeking engagement based on mutual understanding, which helped reduce tensions with the West compared with the confrontational approach of previous administrations. The dialogue of civilisations allowed for and legitimised the relative liberalisation of the domestic political environment in Iran, fostering the growth of civil society through the proliferation of non-governmental organisations, independent media outlets, and public discourse on a variety of issues, including reforms and women’s rights issues. His Dialogue of Civilisations was a framework to encourage an Iranian-Islamic vision of national identity that bridged Iran's pre-Islamic and Islamic heritage within the boundaries of the Islamic Republic's system.

## **5.2 Khatami’s Election and “Dialogue Among Civilisations” Initiative**

Khatami’s tenure was characterised by a reformist agenda aimed at fostering a more democratic society and engaging constructively with the international community. His election provided an opportunity to formulate a political and social vision that could motivate both conventional and new voters. The reform party anticipated that they could rely on public concerns and expected authentic reforms (Taysi and Preston, 2001, pp. 57–59). Khatami, who positioned himself as a champion of freedom and social, economic, cultural, and political liberties for Iranian society, pursued a liberal agenda that emphasised social and economic reforms (Ramazani, 1998, p. 180). His election as president in 1997 marked a shift in Iran's internal politics and its approach to international relations, particularly in its engagement with the West. The dialogue among civilisations represented Iran's perception of intercultural communication, aiming to foster mutual understanding and enhance Iran's standing in the international community and within organisations. Khatami's initiative sought to counter the narratives of a “clash of civilisations” by promoting tolerance, respect for diversity, and dialogue, both domestically and internationally (Mehran, 2003). This agenda redefined Iranian national identity through a discourse of resistance against perceived Western hegemony, emphasising Iranian-Islamic culture and advocating for Islamic democracy as a model for governance



(Kayaoglu, 2012). The dialogue among civilisations found resonance in the United Nations, which named 2001 the Year of Dialogue Among Civilisations (Bilgin, 2012).

According to Holliday (2010), Khatami's construction of Iranian national identity is a multifaceted discourse of resistance that challenges both perceived Western hegemony in the international system and the dominance of Western cultural and political values. By integrating Islamic principles with Iranian nationalism, Khatami advocated for an "Iranian political Islam" that redefined the political landscape in Iran beyond the mere politicisation of Islam. Khatami introduced the concept of Islamic *mardumsālārī* (Islamic democracy) as an authentic means of preserving cultural values while promoting religious democracy and strategic resistance on the international stage. Islamic *mardumsālārī*, as conceptualised by Khatami, is rooted in the principles of democracy, emphasising freedom, equality, and the possession of rights, which are fundamental for the enjoyment of civil and political liberties. This concept is strategically positioned as a form of resistance against international pressure and as a means to uphold Iran's sovereignty. Khatami's discourse maintained traditional Islamic values and adapted them to modern political contexts, positioning Iran as a sovereign state capable of resisting external domination while fostering internal democratic principles (Holliday, 2010). However, this initiative faced challenges, including the persistence of ideological conservatism within Iran. Critics and supporters alike debated its effectiveness and its philosophical underpinnings (Carter, 2007).

Contenders believed that such dialogue overlooked deeper insecurities and maintained existing power structures (Wastnidge, 2011). The objective was to foster international cooperation, enhance regional relationships, and build trust as an adaptive response to evolving domestic and global dynamics (Dehghani Firouzabadi and Attai, 2014, p. 103). Moreover, the aim was to promote transcultural tolerance and understanding while seeking to resolve long-standing distrust and hostility. Khatami envisioned moving away from religious traditionalism, ethnocentrism, and a rigidity in Iran's perception of the international system to gain recognition for the importance of international cooperation, diplomacy, and dialogue (Afrasiabi, 2007, p. 70; Bilgin, 2012, p. 1104; Lynch, 2000, p. 307).

The reform agenda led to the reinterpretation of civilisational bonds, embracing the idea that religions and cultural societies could serve as sources of mutual learning and understanding. This revival aimed to integrate Iran into the global community, capitalising on the benefits of cooperation, knowledge, and foreign investments to meet the aspirations of development and modernity (Jafari Valdani, 2005, pp. 34–39; Seifzadeh, 2001, pp. 27–38). The vision of modernity transcended rigid interpretations and recognised shared values and civilisational characteristics over parochial interests and the indispensable role of transcultural understanding and cooperation (Afrasiabi, 2007; Lynch, 2000). Khatami's proposal, articulated in his address to the United Nations General Assembly, made an effort to foster global peace and understanding through cultural dialogue, mutual respect, and the recognition of diverse civilisations (Khatami, 2012; United Nations, 2001). At the core of Khatami's proposal was the idea that civilisation, culture, and religion should engage in open dialogue and that such dialogue should be predicated on equality and respect for cultural diversity, eschewing any form of dominance (Khatami, 2012). He believed that the international community could counteract the forces of extremism and violence (Khatami, 2012; United Nations, 2001). The initiative encouraged intellectual and cultural exchanges, suggesting that shared human values and heritage could serve as a foundation for building a more peaceful and cooperative global order (Khatami, 2012).

Khatami's concepts of reform and inter-civilisational dialogue sought to create and promote an Iranian-Islamic identity. His approach to reform was aimed at modernising Iran while remaining true to its Islamic values. He advocated for political and social reforms that would allow for greater political participation, freedom of expression, and the rule of law, which he believed was compatible with Islamic principles. This approach was intended to present a model of governance that integrated modernity with Islamic values, thereby crafting a distinct Iranian-Islamic identity. Khatami promoted the idea of dialogue between civilisations as a means to foster mutual understanding and peace. This initiative was part of his broader vision, positioning Iran as a bridge between the Islamic world and the West. By emphasising dialogue, Khatami aimed to counter the narrative of a “clash of civilisations” and highlight the commonalities between Islamic and Western cultures (Tazmini, 2018). This effort was also meant to assert Iran's cultural and intellectual contributions, thereby reinforcing a proud Iranian-Islamic identity. Khatami's policies were geared towards fostering a sense of national pride rooted in Iran's rich cultural and religious heritage. By advocating for reforms that were seen as both modern and authentically Islamic, Khatami sought to strengthen the sense of

national identity that was both Iranian and Islamic. This approach was intended to resist external cultural influences and to assert Iran's sovereignty and uniqueness in the global community. Khatami's vision of reform included a more inclusive and pluralistic society, where different voices and perspectives within the Islamic framework could coexist. This inclusivity was aimed at building a more cohesive national identity that could accommodate various cultural and intellectual currents within Iran while remaining true to Islamic values (Tazmini, 2018).

Khatami was trying to affirm allegiance to the shared principles of the Islamic Revolution and the guidelines of the supreme leader of Iran. The reformists needed to convince key figures, including Ayatollah Khamenei, that their ideas were not attempts to undermine the existing political structure. In "Democracy We Desire," Khatami's call for a democracy reflects the narrative of sovereignty and independence, advocating for a system free from foreign dominance and oppressive regimes (ISNA, 2014). His emphasis on the central role of people in shaping governance and the importance of ethical considerations within the Islamic Republic aligns with narratives of anti-oppression. Iran's pursuit of a model that integrates modernity with cultural and religious values rooted in Iran's national identity and historical context aligns with the narrative of modernity. It advocates for a progressive Iran that values its cultural heritage and underscores the narrative of justice and national rights as it seeks to establish Islamic *mardumsālārī*. Furthermore, Khatami's advocacy for democracy, free from oppressive regimes and foreign dominance, echoes the narratives of sovereignty, independence, and anti-oppression, highlighting the interplay between Iran's national identity and its political orientations. The Dialogue of Civilisations initiative sought to revitalise Iran's international engagement, implying a willingness for global cooperation based on shared values and mutual understanding.

### **5.3 Analysis of Nuclear Negotiations between Iran and the EU-3**

Khatami's nuclear negotiations' strategy was aimed at détente with the international community, and building trust. He was aiming to alleviate the country's international isolation and address concerns regarding its nuclear programme through transparency and cooperation with the IAEA. Iran's decision to voluntarily suspend uranium enrichment activities and sign the Additional Protocol was aimed at demonstrating its willingness to engage with the IAEA and to address the concerns raised (Katzman, 2006). The negotiations and subsequent Tehran Declaration were key in seeking a diplomatic solution to the stalemate over Iran's nuclear programme, involving discussions between Iran, the IAEA, and the EU-3. To address concerns over Iran's nuclear programme, the foreign ministers of the EU-3 proposed technical assistance in exchange for Iran's commitment to cease uranium enrichment activities and comply with the IAEA Additional Protocol, which allowed for more stringent inspections (Dehghani Firoozabadi and Nouri, 2011). The turning point in these negotiations was the Tehran Declaration in October 2003. Iran agreed to voluntarily suspend its uranium enrichment activities and adhere to the IAEA Additional Protocol. The declaration outlined Iran's commitment to resolve outstanding safeguard issues, cooperate fully with the IAEA, and permit surprise inspections, thereby enhancing the international community's ability to verify the peaceful nature of its nuclear activities (Katzman, 2006; Kharrazi et al., 2003). Iran's Tehran declaration and subsequent actions, as outlined, aimed to resolve concerns and enhance the IAEA's ability to verify the peaceful nature of its nuclear activity. Iran's commitment to fully cooperate with the IAEA and permit surprise inspections was a vital move towards transparency and building trust.

Despite Khatami's diplomacy, Iran's nuclear programme remained a point of contention, with the United States and the EU expressing scepticism about Iran's intentions and compliance with NPT obligations (Squassoni, 2009). From the IAEA's perspective, Iran's non-compliance constituted a violation of the safeguard agreement, specifically the requirement to inform the IAEA of any decision to construct or authorise the construction of nuclear facilities as early as possible before the facility is built (IAEA, 2003). Persisting concerns about the potential military dimensions of its nuclear programme continued to overshadow Tehran's nuclear activities (United Nations Security Council, 2006). In mid-2004, tensions escalated when the EU-3 accused Iran of violating the Tehran Agreement by providing incomplete information about its nuclear activities and hindering IAEA access to its facilities. This accusation was

compounded by the discovery of undisclosed activities involving advanced P-2 centrifuges in June 2004, which challenged Iran's compliance with international obligations (Security Council Report, 2005; IAEA, 2004). Responding to these developments, Iran contended that its suspension of nuclear fuel cycle activities was meant to be temporary and resumed construction, manufacturing, and enrichment feedstock production. Iran made the argument that there were no legally binding constraints that would prohibit such measures, thereby placing the Tehran Agreement in a precarious position that threatened its collapse (IAEA, 2004).

The quandary led to a follow-up session of negotiations in Paris, initiated by the EU-3 and led by Javier Solana, in November 2004, to address the EU-3's concerns and formulate a set of incentives to ensure Iran's full cooperation. The negotiations led to the establishment of three working groups that focused on political and security matters, technology and cooperation, and nuclear issues, aiming for a comprehensive agreement (IAEA, 2004; Meier and Quille, 2005). Based on the Paris Agreement signed on November 15, 2004, Iran agreed to extend its suspension of enrichment-related and reprocessing activities monitored by the IAEA. This suspension continued as long as negotiations towards a mutually acceptable agreement progressed. The agreement also included Iran's commitment to refrain from seeking weapons of mass destruction and to allow for more rigorous on-site inspections (IAEA, 2004). The Paris Agreement focused on the legal character of the Iranian nuclear programme. Key provisions of the Paris Agreement aimed to address Iran's nuclear programme, ensuring that Iran's nuclear activities were for peaceful purposes only, under strict international supervision (Pedraza and Rezapour, 2015).

From Iran's security perspective, U.S. policies, particularly since the 2001 occupation of Afghanistan and the 2003 war in Iraq, have impacted Iran's security environment. The deployment of the U.S. military in the Middle East, particularly after the 2003 invasion of Iraq, was viewed as a direct threat to Iran's sovereignty and an attempt to surround and initiate a change in government in Tehran (Litwak, 2007). Geopolitical tensions during Khatami's presidency influenced Iran's foreign policy strategies. Khatami sought to shift Iran's foreign policy approach from confrontation to dialogue and engagement with the international community, including the West. His concept of "Dialogue Among Civilisations" aimed to ease tensions and foster better relations, particularly with Western nations (Barnekow Rasmussen, 2009). While powerful narratives of resistance against external oppression and perceived threats from the U.S. and its allies persisted, Khatami recognised opportunities for engagement. His administration balanced these anti-oppression narratives with efforts to improve Iran's international image and relations through diplomatic initiatives such as the Dialogue Among Civilisations initiative (Barnekow Rasmussen, 2009).

Khatami's administration worked to improve Iran's relations with the Arab states in the region. His visits to Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Qatar in 1999 were the first visits to the Arab world by an Iranian head of state in 20 years. This reflected Iran's efforts to ease tensions and enhance regional cooperation despite geopolitical rivalries (Alam, 2000). Khatami pursued a policy of rapprochement with Western nations, including visits to European countries, including Italy, France, and Germany. This outreach aimed to normalise relations and counter the perception of Iran as a threat, despite ongoing tensions with the U.S. over Iran's nuclear programme and support for non-state actors (Alam, 2000). While Khatami advocated for dialogue and engagement, hardline conservative factions within Iran remained opposed to relations with the U.S. and Israel, citing historical grievances and perceived threats. Khatami had to balance these competing domestic factions in his foreign policy approach (Alam, 2000). The tensions between Iran and the United States persisted, influenced by a history of complex interactions, including the US-backed coup in 1953 and the labelling of Iran as part of the "axis of evil" in the 2000s (Heradstveit and Bonham, 2007). The US's strategy towards Iran remained focused on non-proliferation goals and ending Iranian support for the armed forces in regional conflicts. Moreover, Iran's military advancements, particularly in missile technology, added another layer of complexity to the perceived threat from Iran in the eyes of the United States and its allies.

Despite Khatami's reformist agenda and focus on dialogue, the geopolitical realities of the time, marked by mutual suspicion and tension, limited the effectiveness of these diplomatic overtures. The reformist government aimed to resist what it viewed as unjust external pressure, advocating for a foreign policy based on dialogue, mutual respect, and non-interference in the internal affairs of states. This stance was reflective of a broader narrative of anti-oppression, particularly in the context of U.S. hegemony in the Middle East (Chubin, 2006; Pollack, 2004). Khatami's *détente* policy had a limited impact on improving Iran's relations with the United States during his presidency. While the policy created a more congenial atmosphere and there were some symbolic gestures, substantial progress in the U.S.-Iran ties remained elusive due to mutual suspicion, a lack of trust, and unresolved core issues. His *détente* policy aimed to normalise relations with all countries, including the U.S., through a more open and conciliatory approach. However, his policies were somewhat symbolic and indicated substantial progress in U.S.-Iran relations was limited due to the “wall of distrust” and wounds from the past (Barnekow Rasmussen, 2009). Iran remained cautious about improving its ties with the U.S. The U.S. also maintained concerns about Iran's support for terrorism, opposition to the Middle East peace process, and the pursuit of weapons of mass destruction (Maloney, 2001).

The 2003 Tehran Declaration aimed to suspend Iran's uranium enrichment and reprocessing activities in exchange for technical support and the recognition of its right to peaceful nuclear energy. The EU-3 persuaded Iran to sign and implement the Additional Protocol, commit to addressing all outstanding questions regarding its nuclear past, and temporarily suspend its full fuel cycle activities (Held et al., 2007). However, the declaration did not achieve its objective of halting Iran's nuclear activities completely. The EU-3 did not establish a legally binding consensus on how the norms should be interpreted and enforced for an IAEA member state found in non-compliance with its Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement. Additionally, there was a lack of understanding among the EU-3 of the internal political dynamics in Tehran, particularly concerning the suspension of uranium enrichment as a precondition for a comprehensive settlement. This oversight contributed to the declaration's failure to achieve its intended outcome, as the internal pressures and strategic priorities within Iran continued to drive the progression of its nuclear programme (Held et al., 2007). Khatami's government was not in a position to fully abandon Iran's nuclear programme due to domestic political pressures and the importance of the programme for national pride and strategic interests. Consequently, Iran refused to comply with the requests to suspend enrichment and reprocessing activities.

Disagreements persisted over several key issues: the extent of Iran's nuclear enrichment rights, the nature of the incentives package offered, and the United States' scepticism, particularly its refusal to provide security guarantees. These factors collectively limited EU-3's ability to present a proposal that would satisfy all parties involved. Iran's elites, particularly the Supreme Leader and other influential conservatives in the political apparatus, were frustrated with what they perceived as an insufficient reciprocation of Iran's goodwill gestures. The impression was that the United States and the EU remained opposed to diplomatic efforts and continued to exert pressure on Tehran (Dehghani Firoozabadi and Atai, 2018; Abrahamian, 2013). Iran perceived that the US, in particular, did not reciprocate the Iranian gesture of goodwill in suspending enrichment. Consequently, Iran restricted its cooperation with the IAEA and terminated negotiations on regional security concerns in Afghanistan (Dehghani Firoozabadi and Atai, 2018).

The situation deteriorated further in August 2005, when Iran resumed uranium conversion activities in Isfahan, leading the IAEA Board of Governors to express “serious concern” and call for the reinstatement of the full suspension of enrichment-related activities (IAEA Board of Governors, 2005). In its September 2005 report to the Board of Governors, the IAEA stressed the importance of advancing discussions on the scope and timeline of Iran's nuclear programme because of difficulties in assessing contamination issues (IAEA Board of Governors, 2005, pp. 4–5). The IAEA called on Iran to reinstate the full suspension of enrichment-related activities as previously requested, allowing the Director General to reseal the removed seals at the Uranium Conversion Facility (UCF) (IAEA Board of Governors, 2005). The negotiations between the EU-3 and Iran, culminating in the Tehran and Paris Agreements, were essentially temporary solutions.



## 5.4 Dynamic Analysis of National Identity Narratives

### 5.4.1 Operationalisation

The Khatami administration's approach to the identity and Iran's nuclear programme marked a shift. His nuclear policy aimed to achieve dual objectives: pursuing Iran's right to develop nuclear technology for peaceful purposes while simultaneously seeking international recognition and legitimacy within the international system. Khatami's construction of Iranian national identity, as highlighted by Holliday (2016), was firmly grounded in a discourse of resistance, emphasising Iranian-Islamic culture, dialogue among civilisations, and *mardumsālārī* as foundational pillars. This approach under Khatami signifies a strategic and ideational shift towards increased transparency and negotiation in Iran's nuclear policy, aiming for recognition and legitimacy on the international stage. The influence of national identity on Iran's foreign policy, as discussed by Karimifard (2012), underscores the cognitive aspect of national identity in shaping Iran's policy orientation and treatment of foreign policy. Nekouei (2016) explored the evolution of factional politics, revealing the significance of societal demands and the elites' perception of these demands in shaping policy decisions.

Wastnidge's (2019) exploration of transnational identities and their utilisation in support of foreign policy decisions underscores the multifaceted nature of identity narratives in shaping Iran's diplomatic engagements. National identity narratives in Iran are not static constructs; their evolving interpretations directly influence the direction and development of nuclear policy decisions. These narratives are constructed to assert Iran's right to technological and scientific advancement free from external interference. They inform policy decisions across various domains, including international negotiations, adherence to norms such as the NPT, and agreements with global institutions. Iran drew upon narratives of transnational identities that extend beyond its borders, such as religious (Shia Islam) and ethnic (Persian) identities, to cultivate networks and spheres of influence in other states and regions. These transnational identity narratives served as vectors through which Iran pursued strategic foreign policy objectives and developed compelling justifications for its actions in its perceived sphere of influence.

### 5.4.2 Modernity

Under Khatami, the narrative of modernity was explicitly linked to efforts to present Iran as a technologically advanced and cooperative actor that valued international institutions and norms and was ready for dialogue and cultural exchanges. This narrative was evident through various initiatives, including the promotion of “Dialogue Among Civilisations”. His emphasis on modernity was not merely about technological advancement but also about modernising Iran's political and social outlook. Khatami emphasised the importance of a distinctive Iranian-Islamic identity, a form of political Islam that aimed for peaceful coexistence with the West. This approach was founded in Khatami's “Dialogue Among Civilisations” initiative, which sought to reconcile Islamic customs with modern governance and harmonise Islamic values with intercultural understanding. Khatami's approach to modernity can be characterised as a combination of acknowledging the dissimilarities between Islam and the West. He contended that the exclusion of nations from accessing peaceful nuclear technology constituted a form of technological apartheid fundamentally at odds with fair international cooperation and especially the egalitarian spirit envisioned by the NPT. This reflected the ethical imperative for equitable access to cutting-edge technology, such as nuclear energy (Mousavian, 2012).

The narrative of modernity was explicitly linked to efforts to present Iran as a technologically advanced and cooperative actor that valued international institutions and norms and was ready for dialogue and cultural exchanges. Khatami's concept of “Dialogue among Civilisations” was aimed at challenging the perceived Western victory of liberal democracy and promoting Iran as a modern, cooperative actor on the international stage. It was an antithesis to Huntington's “Clash of Civilisations” thesis and sought to present Iran as valuing international institutions such as the UN, where the idea gained traction (Holliday and Wastnidge, 2023). His intellectual endeavours were based on simultaneously engaging with Western political thought, Islamic philosophy, and Iran's pre-Islamic heritage. His approach reflected an aspiration for how post-colonial Muslim societies could engage with colonial powers while maintaining post-colonial authenticity (Holliday and Wastnidge, 2023). He saw the capacity in all civilisations to find dialogue as a way to reach truth, challenging the West/non-West dichotomy. His vision posed essential questions about the association between tradition and modernity, aiming to present Iran as a modern actor prepared for cultural exchanges while maintaining its traditions. (Holliday and Wastnidge, 2023).

### **5.4.3 Justice and National Rights**

The administration of Khatami outlined the pursuit of nuclear technology within a legal framework, highlighting its entitlement as a signatory to the NPT to develop and use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. Khatami engaged constructively with the international community based on the 'Dialogue of Civilisations' initiative, which indicated an effort to establish Iran's nuclear policy and rights within a peaceful, legalistic discourse, in line with the nation's rights as a signatory to the NPT. The reformist-moderate agenda was indicative of a wide reform campaign that adopted a policy of *détente* and *rapprochement*, moving away from the confrontational approach of previous administrations. The policy aim was to improve relations with the international community based on mutual interests, which ultimately led to improved bilateral relations with the EU, Central Asia, and the GCC (Alam, 2000). Khatami moderated Iran's rhetoric and advocated dialogue over conflict and cooperated with the IAEA and the EU-3, disseminated information related to nuclear development, and adhered to the NPT safeguards agreement. His administration demonstrated a commitment to transparency and international cooperation. This approach was part of his administration's strategy to underscore Iran's pursuit of nuclear technology for peaceful purposes within the bounds of Article IV of the NPT, which stipulates that signatories have the “inalienable right” to research, produce, and use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes while also committing to non-proliferation and disarmament efforts (Joyner, 2011).

By invoking these provisions, Khatami aimed to align Iran's nuclear activities with international law and NPT obligations, thereby positioning Iran as compliant with global norms and standards. This legal framing was crucial for countering accusations and emphasising Iran's commitment to peaceful nuclear development. Khatami sought to achieve an equitable application of international norms, particularly the NPT, by advocating for Iran's fair treatment and mutual respect in global affairs. This approach was rooted in a proactive strategy aimed at building trust and enhancing diplomatic relations within a cooperative, multilateral framework. By prioritising dialogue, Khatami sought to foster an atmosphere conducive to mutual understanding and conflict resolution, thereby promoting a more stable regional environment.

Framing Iran's nuclear programme within the broader context of legal and ethical standards, Khatami aimed to promote his commitment to a foreign policy that balanced ideological principles with pragmatic and legal considerations. Khatami's goal was to position Iran as a responsible actor in the international community, advocating for equitable treatment. This dual focus on legality and ethics was intended to legitimise Iran's nuclear activities and challenge the narrative of Iran as a rogue state. He sought to balance Iran's revolutionary ideals with the pragmatic necessity of international cooperation. His policies aimed to create a space where Iran could preserve its independence while engaging constructively with the global community. This integration was seen as crucial for Iran to uphold its core values while achieving economic and technological progress. By advocating for equitable treatment and mutual respect, Khatami aimed to transform Iran's international relations and promote a more just and cooperative global order (Alam, 2000). Khatami's administration aimed to secure Iran's place as a sovereign and influential nation in the international community by promoting a pragmatic foreign policy that gained respect for its people and their interests while maintaining Iran's ideological foundations (Wastnidge, 2016).

#### **5.4.4 Sovereignty, Independence, and Anti-Oppression**

Scholars such as Mohammad (2012) and Wunderlich (2020) posit that historical grievances, particularly the long history of foreign intervention, fuel Iran's desire for self-reliance and resistance to perceived hegemonic influence. Iran has a long history of being perceived as a counter-hegemonic norm-breaker. The display of an antagonistic attitude and the propagation of a normative alternative aim towards a reform of the Western liberal-shaped normative order rather than its complete overthrow (Wunderlich, 2020). This ideological stance, characterised by a yearning for national autonomy, shapes Iran's nuclear policy in profound ways. Iran's nuclear programme was imbued with potent symbolism. It was portrayed domestically as a powerful emblem of national resilience, technological advancement, and independence. Khatami's nuclear policy embodied Iran's resolute assertion of its sovereign right to pursue scientific advancement, economic prosperity, and national security. Central to this narrative was the general rejection of external interference and a refusal to be subordinated to the dictates of other states (Jackson, 2007). The pursuit of nuclear technology, therefore, served as a powerful tool to demonstrate Iran's capabilities and right to develop peaceful nuclear energy under the NPT, a treaty to which Iran remained a signatory.

As Katzman (2017) and Maloney (2015) emphasise, Khatami's stance on nuclear policy reflected a broader Iranian aspiration to navigate the international system as an independent and respected actor, free from external domination. This emphasis on self-determination and national identity served as a critical undercurrent in shaping Iran's nuclear policy under Khatami's leadership. While Khatami promoted dialogue and cooperation, he simultaneously upheld the right to nuclear technology as a symbol of national pride and independence. This dual approach aimed to reconcile Iran's desire for peaceful international engagement with its determination to maintain sovereignty and technologically advance. Thus, Khatami's policies underscored Iran's multifaceted strategy to achieve respect and recognition on the global stage while safeguarding its national interests. Iran's anti-oppression narrative is inextricably linked to historical consciousness, firmly rooted in seminal events, such as the 1953 coup d'état that toppled Prime Minister Mossadegh (Abrahamian, 2018).

Thus, Khatami drew on Iran's rich cultural and historical legacy, emphasising the nation's long-standing contributions to civilisation and global culture. By celebrating Iran's heritage and achievements, he fostered a sense of national pride and unity. This approach helped to rally the population around a shared identity and common purpose, reinforcing support for his policies. He leveraged historical narratives that highlighted periods of Iranian influence and leadership in regional and global affairs. By reminding both domestic and international audiences of Iran's past as a significant player on the world stage, he aimed to counteract contemporary views of the country as isolated or marginalised. This historical perspective helped to reframe Iran's current position and potential in a more positive light. Importantly, Khatami's administration promoted a dialogue of civilisations, which drew on Iran's historical role as a crossroads of various cultures and peoples. This initiative aimed to foster mutual understanding and cooperation between Iran and other nations, presenting Iran as a proactive and constructive participant in global diplomacy. This approach was designed to build bridges and reduce tensions, thereby advocating for a more equitable and inclusive global order. By invoking historical experiences of resistance and independence, such as the constitutional revolution and struggles against foreign domination, Khatami underscored Iran's enduring commitment to sovereignty. At the same time, he emphasised historical periods of constructive engagement and cooperation with other countries. This dual focus helped to balance the narrative of national independence with the benefits of international collaboration, promoting a foreign policy that respected Iran's autonomy while seeking positive global interactions. This strategy was key to advocating for Iran's active participation in a more equitable global order.

## **5.5 Causal Analysis**

### **5.5.1 Iran's Nuclear Policy and National Identity**

As argued, Khatami's tenure through his "Dialogue Among Civilisations" initiative represented a departure from the confrontational rhetoric that had characterised the Islamic Republic's early years towards a more conciliatory policy. This shift aimed to reposition Iran as a constructive, peace-seeking member of the international community (Sadjadpour, 2009). After Ayatollah Khomeini passed away, Iran's political landscape became more liberal, encouraging discourse on the nature of Iranian society, its traditions, and its norms among political and intellectual elites as well as religious reformers. Three opposing philosophies arose from these exchanges, which Kamrava classifies as secular, reformist, and conservative. The nuclear programme became a focal point for national technological progress and modernity aspirations, symbolising autonomy and scientific achievement (Kamrava, 2008). Intellectuals and reformists associated with Khatami's administration supported the notion of dialogue and international cooperation, arguing for Iran's long-term interest in reducing tensions through exchanges within a legal framework and cooperation. Iran's conservative religious leaders insisted on Iran's full entitlement to pursue peaceful nuclear technology as a sovereign right, framing Western opposition as an attempt to undermine Iran's independence, its rights within the NPT, and the Islamic revolution overall (Takeyh, 2009).

Iran's nuclear policy was guided by its emphasis on transparency and engagement with the international community. The nuclear energy policy aimed to cooperate effectively with the IAEA on issues concerning uranium enrichment for nuclear fuel and reprocessing spent nuclear fuel. This approach aimed to alleviate concerns about Iran's nuclear programme while asserting its right to nuclear technology for peaceful purposes. Khatami's nuclear policy aligned with his "Dialogue Among Civilisations" initiative. His nuclear policy emphasised the peaceful development of nuclear technology for civilian purposes, such as energy production and medical applications. This stance was consistent with the principles of the "Dialogue Among Civilisations," which promoted peaceful coexistence and mutual respect among nations. Focusing on the peaceful use of nuclear technology, Khatami aimed to demonstrate Iran's commitment to international norms and cooperation. In line with the "Dialogue Among Civilisations", Khatami advocated transparency and dialogue in Iran's nuclear dealings. His administration engaged in negotiations with the IAEA, the EU, and other international bodies

to ensure that Iran's nuclear programme remained within the bounds of international law. This approach was intended to build trust and reduce tensions, reflecting the initiative's goals of fostering understanding and resolving conflicts through dialogue.

The aim was to portray Iran as a modern state entitled to pursue nuclear technology for peaceful purposes, in accordance with the NPT. This position was part of his efforts to assert Iran's national rights on the international stage. His approach was in line with the narratives of modernity, justice, and national rights, positioning Iran as a modern state entitled to the benefits of nuclear technology, in line with the NPT (Squassoni, 2009). He navigated the NPT framework by maintaining that Iran had the right to develop peaceful nuclear technologies. This position was linked to narratives of sovereignty and independence, placing Iran's nuclear programme within a larger discourse on national autonomy and self-determination. The administration's communication with the IAEA and its participation in international negotiations aimed to demonstrate Iran's peaceful intent in its nuclear programme, reflecting a commitment to transparency and international cooperation (Dupont, 2014). Under Article 8 of Iran's Safeguards Agreement, the nation is mandated to provide the IAEA with detailed information on nuclear materials under the agreement's safeguards and to describe the characteristics of facilities relevant to the safeguarding of such materials. This provision is critical for the effective enactment of safeguards, ensuring that all activities are conducted within the framework of international non-proliferation norms (Board of Governors, 2003). It is important to note that Article 34(c) of the Safeguards Agreement introduces a comprehensive scope of oversight by specifying that nuclear materials in the nuclear fuel cycle fall under the purview of the IAEA's safeguarding procedures, which marked a pivotal expansion of the safeguards and strengthened the non-proliferation regime (Board of Governors, 2003).

By advocating access to peaceful nuclear technology and global disarmament, Khatami's government represented Iran as a proponent of nuclear technology available for peaceful purposes and placed global disarmament as a high collective priority (Hibbs, 2015). Iran's nuclear enrichment programme served as a symbol of modernity. The development and full possession of a nuclear enrichment programme, as well as its social representation among the population, demonstrated how exposure to and education about nuclear technology changed social perceptions and influenced national identity. This educational and media exposure was crucial in enhancing public knowledge and understanding of the issue. The social representation of nuclear technology resulted in the social acceptance of nuclear energy, and enhanced public acceptance by improving knowledge and adjusting perceived risks and benefits. This process shows a broader narrative construction in which social representations of history, collective memories, and social interactions together shape national identity and how societies respond to changes.

Khatami's orientation towards empathy and mutual understanding in international relations aimed to address the international community's concerns through cooperative measures with the IAEA and diplomatic agreements, such as the Tehran Declaration and the Paris Agreement. These efforts underscored Iran's willingness to engage in constructive dialogue and adhere to international norms, thereby marking a significant shift from a purely defensive or confrontational stance. The Tehran Declaration and Paris Agreement were pivotal in establishing confidence-building measures designed to reassure the global community about Iran's peaceful nuclear intentions. These diplomatic initiatives aimed to build trust, reduce tensions, and mitigate Iran's international isolation. They highlight Iran's readiness to resolve disputes through negotiations. This approach sought to alleviate the fear of nuclear proliferation and aimed to integrate Iran more fully into the international community. Khatami's efforts represented a broader vision of international relations grounded in dialogue and mutual respect, reflecting a strategic attempt to balance national interests with global responsibilities (Samii, 2005; Hunter, 2010).



### **5.5.2 Iran domestic context**

This pragmatic approach demonstrated a sense of responsibility and served as the basis for fostering dialogue and cultural exchanges with a commitment to responsible international conduct (Maloney, 2015). From the perspective of the conservative elites, the outcomes of Khatami's diplomatic initiatives were disappointing, leading to temporary suspensions of uranium enrichment. His enhanced diplomatic engagement with the EU was overshadowed by internal and external pressures and deep-seated distrust between Iran and the United States. Despite Iran's efforts to demonstrate transparency and willingness to engage constructively with the EU-3 and the IAEA, the opposition parties in Iran remained sceptical of his diplomatic approach, arguing that Iran should not abandon its enrichment program and that Iran cannot rely on promises of the EU to provide it with enriched uranium. These internal challenges constrained the effectiveness of his policies.

The administration encountered disillusionment among the Iranian public, particularly because of its inability to deliver promises related to domestic freedom and economic reform. Economic challenges, notably high youth unemployment, which reached a staggering 60% among urban citizens in 2004, further exacerbated public dissatisfaction and undermined the administration's aspirations for better economic integration into the global economy (Radio-Free Europe/Radio Liberty, 2005). Opposition parties in Iran leveraged the perceived shortcomings of Khatami's nuclear diplomacy to consolidate their positions. Members of the opposition blamed Khatami for compromising the principles of the revolution, suggesting that his efforts to engage with the West betrayed Iran's national interests and values (Rezaei, 2015; Zibakalam and Zamani, 2017). The opposition party's relentless pressure and economic challenges faced by Khatami's administration underscored the limitations of the reformist approach to improving Iran's international standing and fostering a cooperative environment for nuclear diplomacy.

For instance, hardliners criticised Khatami's engagement with the West, arguing that it yielded no tangible benefits. Additionally, economic difficulties hampered Khatami's success in implementing his promised reform agenda, limiting his ability to deliver promises of a more prosperous future for the Iranian people. His efforts to improve relations with Western nations and open up Iranian society were met with resistance from conservative factions. Furthermore, the hardline Guardian Council blocked many of Khatami's reformist candidates from running in elections, undermining his political support base (Sahimi, 2011). This obstructed his reform agenda by preventing like-minded allies from gaining power. So while Khatami advocated for social and political reforms, he faced strong opposition from hardliners as well as economic constraints that restricted his ability to fully implement the changes he promised during his presidency (The Washington Institute, 2002). Consequently, the latter years of Khatami's presidency witnessed a shift towards a more assertive nuclear posture, reflecting the growing influence of hardliners within the Iranian political landscape. In sum, Khatami's intentions to reform Iran's nuclear policy and international relations, coupled with his administration's efforts at diplomacy, were ultimately circumscribed by a complex interplay of domestic pressures, including opposition from hardliners and economic hardships, as well as international factors.

### **5.5.3 International Context**

The GCC states viewed Iran's nuclear programme with apprehension, fearing that a nuclear-capable Iran would enhance Iran's regional dominance in ways that could exacerbate existing tensions and rivalries among them. This perception was further complicated by sectarian divisions, with GCC states concerned about Iran's potential to project power across the Shia-Sunni divide (Katzman, 2017; Cordesman, and Frederiksen, 2006). Israel's response was markedly acute, seeing Iran's nuclear programme as a direct existential threat, which fuelled calls for preemptive action against Iranian nuclear sites, reflecting the deep-seated animosity between the two states (Jones, 2019). By contrast, Syria viewed Tehran's nuclear advancements in a favourable light, considering them a positive boost to its own regional standing against shared adversaries (Goodarzi, 2006). Turkey's approach was more cautious, seeking to balance concerns over nuclear proliferation while maintaining its economic and diplomatic ties with Iran. Moreover, the regional dynamics during that period were influenced by the presence of

global powers, which could either exacerbate or mitigate tensions through dominance and alliance structures.

The intricate dynamics of regional geopolitics were further highlighted by the media's role in shaping public perceptions, where negative media campaigns among regional rivals led to fear of Iran's nuclear activities in that period. GCC countries and Israel shared a common apprehension stemming from the nuclear activities (Bahgat, 2005). This issue further complicated the GCC's troubled relationship with Iran, characterised by religious, cultural, and ideological differences as well as territorial disputes (Pradhan, 2011). In this context, there were greater fears in the region about potential direct conflicts between Iran, the US, and Israel. President George W. Bush's 2002 State of the Union address, which labelled Iran as part of the "Axis of Evil," exacerbated tensions between the United States and Iran, casting Iran's nuclear programme within a broader context of global security threats and proliferation concerns. This characterisation, coming in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, reflected a shift in U.S. foreign policy towards a more confrontational strategy, prioritising containment and isolation over diplomacy and negotiation (Chubin, 2006). The designation reinforced Tehran's perceived threat of regime-change policy by the United States (Maloney, 2015). The intensified hostility posed a challenge to the diplomatic efforts of the EU-3 and Khatami to overcome the nuclear impasse (Samore, 2015).

President George W. Bush's 2002 State of the Union address, which listed Iran as part of the "Axis of Evil," heightened the atmosphere of hostility. Furthermore, it marginalised moderate factions, complicating international efforts aimed at dialogue and negotiation. This perception promoted by the US political elite was firmly grounded in ideological provocations, with Bush's portrayal of Iran as a supporter of terrorism serving to securitise the nuclear enrichment programme of Iran and isolate it within the international community (Yuting and Yuanyuan, 2023). This securitisation discourse vis-à-vis Iran reversed the progress made during negotiations with Khatami's administration and reinforced the marginalisation of the moderate government in Iran. The efforts of the EU and Iran to engage in dialogue were undermined by the US policy approach, which heightened tensions and distrust, squandering opportunities for peaceful resolution to the nuclear issue. The Bush administration's strategy, marked by its preference for punitive measures over diplomatic engagement, was subjected to criticism for its intention to obstruct peaceful solutions (Litwak, 2007).

The U.S. 's “Axis of Evil” rhetoric polarised EU-US relations and raised Iran's scepticism towards the incentives offered by the West and its request to halt its nuclear enrichment programme (Izadi and Saghaye-Biria, 2007). The EU favoured a diplomatic approach, focusing on engagement and negotiation. It attempted to offer incentives to Iran to encourage the suspension of uranium enrichment activities, reflecting its preference for a non-confrontational resolution to the nuclear issue (Leonard, 2005). These efforts included economic incentives, security guarantees, and technological assistance in exchange for a verifiable suspension of uranium enrichment activities (Seaboyer and Thränert, 2007). However, there was disagreement among the EU, the United States, and Iran regarding the nature and permanence of Iran's suspension of enrichment. Iran viewed the suspension as temporary and voluntary, aimed at building trust and facilitating further negotiations. By contrast, the EU, and the US sought a permanent suspension to eliminate the potential for Iran to develop nuclear weapons.

Iran's insistence on maintaining its right to peaceful nuclear technology, as guaranteed under the NPT, further complicated the negotiations. Iran argued that its nuclear programme was for peaceful purposes, including energy production and medical research, and thus any suspension should be limited and reversible. The EU and the US, wary of Iran's potential for nuclear weapons development, pushed for more stringent and enduring constraints. These conflicting positions resulted in a series of diplomatic challenges and stalled negotiations. The EU's approach, though initially more conciliatory, faced limitations due to its lack of alignment with the US's hardline stance. This disunity weakened the overall effectiveness of the international community's efforts to address Iran's nuclear programme and contributed to the protracted nature of the negotiations. The US employed pressure on the EU-Iran negotiations and demonstrated scepticism with respect to the fruitfulness of negotiations (Perthes, 2005; European Council, 2003). This policy recklessly undermined trust and complicated efforts to establish a mutually acceptable framework for a peaceful settlement of the nuclear dispute.

It seemed that the metaphor, by implying an inherent evilness in the Iranian state from the perspective of the United States, made it challenging to foster a dialogue based on mutual respect, shared values, and understanding. Moreover, the metaphor's impact was not limited to diplomatic circles but extended into the cultural domain, where it influenced perceptions and narratives. For instance, the portrayal of Iran within the “Axis of Evil” contributed to a perception of cultural assault against Iran that paved the way to the anti-Western discourse in the Iranian debates and the revitalisation of the narratives of anti-oppression and sovereignty. The narrative's revitalisation further complicated efforts to engage with Iran on nuclear issues by entrenching stereotypes and prejudices that were difficult to overcome in negotiation settings. The metaphor served as a cognitive breakthrough, strengthened the rhetorical position of conservatives, making it more challenging to pursue reformist approaches to international engagement, including nuclear negotiations. As a consequence, the IAEA faced a constant set of challenges in verifying the exclusively peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear activities (Shea, 2015). These circumstances underscored the complexities of ensuring compliance within the framework of the NPT and highlighted the verification obstacles faced by the IAEA.

## **5.6 Social Constructivism**

The theoretical framework of this case study is grounded in social constructivism, which emphasises the significance of ideational factors—beliefs, identities, and narratives—in shaping the behaviours and interactions of states within the international system. Social constructivism postulates that the material world does not have an inherent meaning outside the interpretations and meanings that human consciousness ascribes to it (Katzenstein, 1996). This perspective is crucial for understanding state behaviour, as it suggests that states' actions are influenced by their intersubjective understanding of their identity within the international community (Wendt, 1999). Wendt's assertion that “anarchy is what states make of it” underscores the idea that the international system's structure is not inherently given but is constructed through states' interactions and identities (Wendt, 1992). This perspective shows that Iran's nuclear policy, under President Khatami, was deeply reflective of ideational shifts towards dialogue and engagement.

The Dialogue Among Civilisations as a counter-narrative to the Clash of Civilisations reflects a constructivist understanding of international relations, where changing discourses and identities can lead to a transformation in state behaviour and perceptions. Khatami's approach to Iran's nuclear programme was influenced by narratives of sovereignty, independence, and scientific progress. These narratives, operationalised through diplomatic engagement and transparency strategies, sought to contextualise Iran's nuclear policy within the discourse of peaceful development and national rights. This period saw Iran's voluntary suspension of uranium enrichment and its enhanced cooperation with the IAEA which aimed at asserting Iran's nuclear policy in a way to show it in line with the NPT. In other words, the aim was to portray Iran as a responsible member of the international community committed to non-proliferation norms while defending its sovereign rights (Soltaninejad, 2016). Social constructivism thus shows the interplay between national identity narratives and nuclear policy and postulates that the foundational elements of Iran's nuclear policy are not natural or static but are constructed through social interactions. Khatami's perception of international relations, the international system's role, and ultimately his interactions defined the meaning and essence of his views and nuclear policy. The narratives of Iran's national identity, as shown, have been both reflective and constitutive of its nuclear policies.

The Khatami administration's emphasis on dialogue among civilisations was an effort to reshape Iran's reputation on the international stage, moving away from confrontation and towards a more constructive engagement. By framing its commitment to the NPT and through cooperation with the IAEA, Iran sought to navigate the multifaceted domain of international norms and expectations while asserting its independence and rights around its nuclear programme. From a social constructivist perspective, Iran's advocacy for denuclearisation in the Middle East can be understood as a reflection of its constructed nuclear policy as well as its compliance with shared international norms. Iran's nuclear policy and its national identity were shaped through social interactions and shared international norms, which postulates that Iran's denuclearisation proposal was an inevitable result of its self-perception and commitment to the NPT. By aligning its policy with the NPT, Iran sought to legitimise its nuclear programme and counter claims that it was pursuing nuclear weapons. This approach reflects a social constructivist understanding of how states internalise and enact international norms, not merely out of strategic calculation but as part of their identity construction and desire for international legitimacy. Iran's nuclear policy during this period was a demonstration of its efforts to align its nuclear policy with ethical imperatives.

The culture of Iranian victimisation and the widespread Iranian perception of Western aggressiveness contributed to fears of external power's malevolence, in line with historical experiences. In addition to being a source of national pride, nuclear technology provided popular credence and helped the government project an image that was in line with the overall post-Islamic Revolution ideals. For Khatami and reformists, the development of nuclear technology was seen as an expression of Iranian national identity, progress, and independence (Torkashvand, 2021). They portrayed it as a source of national pride and a right beyond material interest. Khatami sought to continue Iran's nuclear programme while assuring the West of its peaceful nature, reflecting the identity conception of Iran as a modern, technologically advanced nation deserving of nuclear rights. At the same time, resistance to Western pressure over Iran's nuclear activities became tied to conceptions of independence. Giving in to Western demands was viewed as compromising this identity. Khatami had to balance his reformist engagement agenda with maintaining the nuclear programme as a matter of national identity and rights, making concessions difficult. His approach also showed pragmatic engagement with the West, while still upholding Iran's nuclear rights. His policy aimed to assert Iran's identity while avoiding escalating conflicts over the nuclear issue, reflecting the multifaceted nature of Iran's identity (Torkashvand, 2021).

## **5.7 Conclusion**

This chapter examined President Khatami's tenure and highlights how Iran's national identity narratives influenced its nuclear policy. The narrative of modernity was pivotal to Iran's nuclear policy. Narratives of justice, national rights, and sovereign rights to peaceful nuclear technology also supported ideational justification for Iran's nuclear policy. Sovereignty and independence narratives were vital in asserting Iran's autonomy against global pressures, while the anti-oppression narrative emphasised Iran's resistance to perceived external pressure to abandon its nuclear programme. Khatami's reformist agenda encountered obstacles that were caused by internal opposition politics, economic challenges, and the US policies towards Iran. Despite his reformist discourse aimed at fostering dialogue and international cooperation, the nuclear dispute remained fundamentally unresolved, faced with challenges in negotiations with the EU. Scepticism regarding Iran's clandestine nuclear activities, perceived as NPT violations, constituted constant hurdles.

The Dialogue Among Civilisations was established and used to emphasise Iran's rich historical legacy with a contemporary vision for peaceful nuclear development. This initiative was part of an effort to promote rapprochement between Islamic and Western cultures, aiming to counter the prevailing discourses of inevitable conflict and showcase Iran's commitment to a peaceful engagement with the international community. The initiative aimed to leverage Iran's historical legacies and fundamental principles of its ancient civilisation and to articulate a vision of nuclear development that was aligned with peaceful purposes and international norms. This approach was part of his strategy to engage with global institutions and foster a détente, as evidenced by Iran's engagement with the EU and IAEA. Iran halted its nuclear programme for a two-year period as a confidence-building measure. Khatami was confident that, through negotiations, Iran would sign the additional protocol allowing, among other things, snap inspections to achieve a peaceful settlement of the conflict through negotiations and cooperation with the IAEA.

Khatami and reformists saw developing nuclear technology as an expression of independence and technological progress. They portrayed it as a source of national pride. His policy aimed to assert Iran's identity while avoiding escalating conflict. Khatami faced criticism from hardline factions, who accused him of compromising too much in nuclear negotiations with Europe. This limited his flexibility and required portraying decisions as approved by the highest authorities to placate critics. Hence, a combination of ideological conceptions of national identity and rights, resistance to Western pressure, pragmatic engagement, domestic political pressures, and economic interests shaped Khatami's relatively moderate nuclear policy during his tenure. The next case study examines Ahmadinejad's presidency, aiming to explore the continuities and shifts in national identity narratives and their influence on Iran's nuclear policy. Ahmadinejad's tenure was marked by a more confrontational approach to international relations and a pronounced emphasis on sovereignty and independence narratives. The next case study also considers the international and regional dynamics that influenced Iran's nuclear policy during Ahmadinejad's presidency, including the role of sanctions and international negotiations.



## ***Chapter 6. The Presidency of Ahmadinejad (2005-2013) and Iran's Nuclear Policy***

### **6.1 Introduction**

In the previous chapter, I examined the presidency of Khatami by focusing on how Iran's national identity narratives were incorporated into the fabric of its nuclear policy. By operationalising national identity narratives in informing Iran's nuclear policy, I demonstrated their dynamic influence on national identity and their translation into policy decisions. As illustrated through the lens of social constructivism, under Khatami, Iran's national identity was constructed through dialogue, international cooperation to address nuclear concerns, and a desire for peaceful nuclear technology within the bounds of international norms. Narratives of modernity, justice, national rights, sovereignty, independence, and anti-oppression were dynamically interwoven with Iran's nuclear policy, reflecting Iran's right to nuclear technology for peaceful purposes.

Building on these insights, I now turn to Ahmadinejad's presidency to examine the continuities and shifts in Iran's nuclear policy. Ahmadinejad's nuclear policy had several key components: First, he asserted Iran's sovereign right to run a full nuclear programme, including the enrichment of uranium in Iran, and criticised the NPT as an unfair norm in the interests of Western states and nuclear powers (Rezaei, 2017). He directly opposed the UNSC on nuclear issues and made headline-grabbing speeches (Sulistyorini, 2014). Second, Ahmadinejad used Persian (Iranian) nationalism and emphasised the unity of the Iranian nation, sovereignty, and self-sufficiency to promote a shadow secular nationalist identity (Warnaar, 2013). Third, Ahmadinejad's administration favoured the Look-East Policy, against the backdrop of tensions with the US and crippling sanctions. Ahmadinejad's nuclear policies reflected a stark departure from Khatami's reformist and conciliatory approach, reasserting Iran's right to develop nuclear technology. This period witnessed Iran's firm rejection of the demands for comprehensive inspections of and limitations on its nuclear activities, asserting its right to peaceful nuclear technology as a sovereign nation.

The foreign policy under Ahmadinejad diverged sharply from the reformist approach of dialogue championed by Khatami. Ahmadinejad's administration adopted a confrontational stance towards the West, underpinned by the belief that Iran's Islamic revolution was fundamentally incompatible with international integration, which they saw as a threat to the revolution's purity. This confrontational approach was seen as a permanent state rather than a negotiation tactic, drawing on the collective memory of the Iran-Iraq War to promote a narrative of Iran's destined struggle against a hostile world. However, this perspective was not universally accepted among veterans, many of whom questioned Ahmadinejad's wartime credentials and criticised his aggressive policies. The nuclear policy of his administration diverged from the Khatami administration's nuclear negotiators, accusing them of being overly conciliatory towards the West. The new perception of international relations was rather pessimistic, aided by Western actions such as the U.S. "axis of evil" speech, which painted the West as Iran's enemy. This polarised environment made nuclear negotiations increasingly difficult. The Tehran and Paris Agreements were dismissed by the new fundamentalist-dominated *Majlis* as irresponsible. As Ahmadinejad gained power, his administration obstructed further agreements and undermined the previous efforts of Iran's negotiators, leading to a significant setback in diplomatic progress. Iran's foreign policy shifted from dialogue to a confrontational stance towards the West, significantly impacting its nuclear negotiations and relations with the international community (Ansari, 2007).

## **6.2 Ahmadinejad's Election and Iranian School (*Maktab-e-Irani*)**

Ahmadinejad's rise to power in 2005 was unexpected and signalled a popular disillusionment with the reformist policies of his predecessor, Khatami, ushering in a new generation of politicians shaped by the Iran-Iraq war. This period was also marked by re-engagement with popular authority, reflecting a return to the traditional autocratic power structures within the Islamic Republic (Sayfour et al., 2019). The election of Ahmadinejad was unexpected, as he was elected on a populist and conservative election platform (CBS News, 2006). His victory was partly attributed to his alliance with the Revolutionary Guards and a segment of influential clergy (Alamdari, 2005). The presidency of Khatami did not fulfil its promises to abolish the rigidity of its foreign policy. Iranian society appeared to be trending towards fundamentalism and pragmatism as a result of the growing disillusionment with state-sponsored reforms. Ahmadinejad's victory capitalised on an Islamic-nationalist identity, emphasising Iran's

sovereign right to pursue a nuclear programme, which resonated with voters amid a backdrop of international scrutiny, failed negotiations under Khatami, and the perpetually threatening language of the US administration over Iran's nuclear programme.

Ahmadinejad's presidency aimed to eradicate reformist ideologies and promote a fundamentalist interpretation of Shia Islam, characterised by resistance to oppression and rigidity towards negotiations. He portrayed his electoral victory as divinely ordained to appeal to religious supporters and to obscure electoral fraud. Ahmadinejad's charisma combined religion and nationalism, challenging senior clerics' authority and causing controversy among rationalist Islamic scholars. His strategy involved removing reformist influences and advancing a nationalistic-authoritarian Islamism, framed by a narrative of revolutionary betrayal and his 'divine' victory (Ansari, 2007). Ahmadinejad's presidency was marked by a critical stance towards previous administrations. During the 2005 presidential election, political factions aligned with former presidents Hashemi Rafsanjani and Khatami united against Ahmadinejad but were defeated in the run-off. This defeat was repeated in the 2009 election, despite a more cohesive opposition.

The "*Maktab-e-Irani*" under Ahmadinejad's presidency marked a period in Iran's political and social landscape, characterised by a shift towards hardline policies, both domestically and in foreign affairs. The *Maktab-e-Irani* or Iranian School, a synthesis of elements of Persian nationalism and Shia Islam reflected Ahmadinejad's ideological and educational perspectives (Fozi, 2016). Ahmadinejad started to stir up nationalist sentiments by honouring Iran's pre-Islamic era and narratives of national identity based on Shia Islam (Fozi, 2016). The *Maktab-e-Irani* emphasised the development of a distinct Iranian-Islamic identity among the public. The government's stance on the nuclear issue mirrored a wider attempt to maintain a strong commitment to revolutionary principles, advocating for a return to revolutionary values against perceived infiltration by subversive forces. Ahmadinejad's *Maktab-e-Irani* focused on the ideological re-orientation of Iranians towards a vibrant Iranian-Islamic identity through education and social policies, in which underlying cultural and religious norms played a pivotal role in linking individuals to one another and society at large (Naji, 2007).

Through the development policies in the periphery zones and underdeveloped regions in Iran, he gained massive support from a wider range of Iranian citizens from rural and periphery zones. He established the development of nuclear technology as a national objective to which everyone needed to contribute. *Maktab-e-Irani* provided a framework for shared cultural and religious values that remained central to Iranian society, serving as a medium through which people were linked to one another and society as a whole (Sayfour et al., 2019). Ahmadinejad valued the cultural-civilisational component of national identity as equivalent and complementary to one another, and paid attention to the development of peripheral zones in Iran, which further consolidated his position. He believed:

“[...] Iranian culture and its great civilisation have historical records of humanity and excellence. Defining our identity in accordance with our culture does not mean that we are against others. Iranians never defined their identity as something that was against others. Rather, they defined it together with others and with their help. Iran is a land of different ethnic groups that has been pluralistic in terms of culture and religion. Culture is neither a racial nor a geographical phenomenon. It is one of the engines of development and one of the drivers of human society towards the establishment of human values in the world.” (Ahmadinejad, 2021).

Ahmadinejad's religious-nationalistic perspective posited that Western powers persistently treated underdeveloped and developing countries as if they were still colonies. This stance reflects his *Maktab-e-Irani* and argue that the legacy of colonialism continues to influence the political and economic dynamics between former colonial powers and formerly colonised nations, highlighting the persistent economic and political subjugation faced by developing nations. Ahmadinejad's critique of the centre-periphery relationship challenged the traditional power structures and called for a more equitable global order. This discourse on multilateralism reflected a demand for reform of international institutions that can more fairly represent the interests of all nations, particularly those in the Global South. Ahmadinejad's critique reflected a broader alignment with national identity narratives and, in particular, a struggle against the perceived structural inequalities embedded in the centre-periphery relationship. He stated that:

“The historical rivals of the Iranians, who are unfortunately the most arrogant, consider Iran their alternative in global management because, as they know, Iranians have two characteristics. First, the Iranians have a global culture. This finding implies that religious and human values are universal. Second, the Iranian nation has a history of managing the world and global governance. For 1500 years, they (the Iranian people) used to perform this without means such as security organisations, military power, financial craft, or atomic bombs, but rather through human values, respect, and shared global norms. We are the same ancient Iranians, living in a more complicated world order.” (Ahmadinejad, 2013).

The *Maktab-e Irani* discourse advocates for a return to Iranian-Islamic principles. Ahmadinejad portrayed Iran as a symbol of nations seeking to assert their legitimacy, sovereignty and independence. In the quoted statement, Ahmadinejad underscores the two main characteristics he attributes to the Iranian nation: universal culture and historical capability for global governance. He believed the Iranian approach to leadership and influence was based on “human values, respect, and norms”. These aspects served to reinforce national pride among Iranians, legitimised his administration's confrontational stance towards the West, particularly in nuclear negotiations, and sought to mobilise domestic and international support against what he perceived as unjust global structures.

### **6.3 Analysis of Nuclear Negotiations between Iran and the P5+1**

As discussed in the previous chapter, under Khatami's presidency, the European delegates, forming a 'negotiating troika', focused on the suspension of all enrichment activities in Iran, the disclosure of all past nuclear activities, and the discussion of proposals for a long-term political agreement. However, these negotiations ultimately failed because of disagreements regarding the implementation of these measures and Iran's refusal to make the suspension permanent (Jafarzadeh, 2007). With Ahmadinejad's rise to power, Tehran made it clear that it did not trust others to ensure the supply of nuclear science necessities, emphasising its reluctance to yield to Western pressure (Molana and Mohammadi, 2008). Ahmadinejad's adoption of inflammatory language and anti-Western rhetoric led to decreased sense of confidence in Iran's nuclear programme's intentions, and there were persistent doubts that Iran's nuclear programme was exclusively peaceful (Akbarzadeh, Conduit, 2016, p. 2). Ahmadinejad's leadership maintained a firm stance on its uranium enrichment programme. As a signatory to the NPT, Iran emphasised its entitlement to peaceful nuclear technology (Katzman, 2020).

The nuclear programme, widely supported domestically, generated pressure on Tehran's leadership to uphold Iran's full nuclear enrichment programme (Parsi, 2012). Ahmadinejad's views on Iran's nuclear programme had a profound impact on the country's international relations, characterised by increased tension and isolation. He framed Iran's nuclear programme as a matter of national pride, scientific modernisation, and independence. He portrayed the programme as a symbol of Iran's sovereignty and a means of achieving regional and global influence. This nationalist rhetoric resonated domestically, uniting the Iranian people behind the nuclear programme and diverting attention from internal socioeconomic issues (Zrost, 2011). Ahmadinejad's administration was marked by a refusal to make significant concessions on the nuclear front. He consistently defended Iran's right to enrich uranium, arguing that it was for peaceful purposes and within the country's rights under the NPT, which made it politically untenable for Tehran to agree to international demands to curtail its nuclear activities. At the same time, he criticised the NPT and what he perceived as double standards by nuclear-armed states, particularly the P5. He argued that these states were practising “nuclear apartheid”, which meant denying Iran its legal right under the NPT to a peaceful nuclear fuel cycle while maintaining their own nuclear arsenals (Chubin, 2010).

This criticism further strained relations with Western countries, especially the United States. Ahmadinejad's presidency saw a deepening of the political chasm within Iran regarding its nuclear policy. Hardliners, including Ahmadinejad and Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, used the nuclear issue to marginalise reformists and depict them as willing to compromise Iran's interests. This internal division made it difficult to reach consensus on how to engage with the international community, leading to a diplomatic stalemate (Chubin, 2010). Furthermore, Ahmadinejad's position mirrored wider scepticism about the West's recognition of Iran's NPT rights, further fuelled by a historical distrust between Iran and Western nations, alongside internal dynamics that supported resistance against perceived external oppression. According to Takeyh and Maloney (2011), ceasing the nuclear programme was seen as a threat to the nation's pursuit of modernity, pride, and legitimacy. As both Iran and Western powers exchanged blame for failed negotiations, the nuclear case resurfaced before the IAEA's Board of Governors. In response, the IAEA issued two resolutions in 2005, criticising Iran's persistent enrichment activities and underscoring its authority to verify Iran's nuclear activities (IAEA Board of Governors, GOV/2005/77, 2005).

Concurrently, EU-3 called upon Iran to cease its enrichment programme. They asserted that this action was the sole objective guarantee of Iran's commitment to the peaceful nature of its nuclear programme (European Union Council, 2005, pp. 4-5). Iranian authorities contended that this request violated the terms of the November 2004 Paris Agreement (Mehr News Agency, 2005, p. 1, 15). In August 2005, the EU3 introduced a comprehensive "Framework for a Long-Term Agreement", which encompassed commitments to civil nuclear energy cooperation, security assurances, international fuel guarantees, the establishment of a nuclear fuel reserve in a third country, and assurances for the supply of low-enriched uranium to light-water reactors (Harnisch, 2008). In exchange, EU-3 sought a binding agreement restricting Iran from engaging in fuel cycle operations beyond light-water reactors and ensuring Iran's continued adherence to the NPT, which Iran did not accept (IAEA, 2005).

However, Iran believed that this proposal did not cover the right to maintain a fuel cycle inside Iran. Subsequently, the P5+1 group put forth the "Russian variant" as a compromise initiative in mid-November 2005. This proposal suggested that uranium enrichment could take place in Russia as a collaborative effort and it aimed to address concerns by having Russia handle all nuclear waste after supplying enriched uranium to Iran for power generation, thus preventing the acquisition of materials for nuclear weapons production (Deutscher Bundestag, 2006, p. 11). This proposal envisioned joint ownership of a uranium enrichment facility in Russia. This could ameliorate Iran's concerns regarding external nuclear fuel suppliers (Kerr, 2005). Although Iran's SNSC expressed its willingness to evaluate the proposal, it unequivocally reiterated that it would not substitute for unrestricted uranium enrichment activities in Iran, rendering the compromise ineffective. The proposal also faced vigorous opposition in the Iranian parliament, where concerns were voiced regarding political dependency on Russia if Iran accepted foreign soil uranium enrichment (Kaussler, 2012, p. 60).

In January 2006, Iran announced its disagreement with proposals to conduct uranium enrichment on foreign soil and confirmed its intention to continue nuclear activities, as reported by the IAEA News Centre (IAEA News Centre, 2006). Subsequently, on February 4, 2006, the Board of Governors adopted Resolution GOV/2006/14 concerning Iran's nuclear programme. This resolution invoked Article IV of the NPT, emphasising that the NPT should not hinder the inalienable rights of NPT member states to pursue peaceful nuclear research, production, and utilisation. However, the resolution noted the IAEA's inability to fully clarify critical issues related to Iran's nuclear programme at that time, as well as its inability to confirm the absence of undisclosed nuclear materials or activities in Iran. The resolution GOV/2006/14's invocation of Article IV underscores a fundamental challenge within the NPT framework: the balance between non-proliferation objectives and the right to peaceful nuclear technology. Article IV guarantees the inalienable rights of all signatories to develop, research, produce, and use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes without discrimination (Joyner, 2011). However, this right is conditioned by compliance with Articles I and II, which prohibit the transfer and acquisition of nuclear weapons outside the five recognised nuclear weapon states. The Board's resolution highlights this challenge by reaffirming Iran's rights under Article IV, while expressing concerns over its compliance with non-proliferation commitments.

The NPT recognises the inalienable right of non-nuclear-weapon states to develop nuclear energy for peaceful purposes, provided they comply with non-proliferation commitments (Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons, 1968, Art. IV). This framework was designed to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons while promoting the peaceful use of nuclear technology. The IAEA's inability to confirm the absence of undisclosed nuclear materials or activities in Iran raised concerns about the potential for non-compliance with the treaty's obligations. This subsequently contributed to a broader debate on the efficacy of NPT verification mechanisms and the need for stronger safeguards and compliance mechanisms (Findlay, 2012). Iran's nuclear dossier was referred to the UNSC because of the apprehensions about its nuclear activities and the IAEA's reports of Iran's non-compliance with NPT obligations. These concerns were primarily centred on undeclared nuclear activities and insufficient transparency in Iran's cooperation with IAEA inspections. Referral to the UNSC was an attempt to implement measures to guarantee Iran's adherence to the NPT and full cooperation with the IAEA. Iran, in the meantime, unveiled the latest developments in missile and satellite technology, particularly the Omid satellite launch from the Semnan region (Islamic Republic News Agency, 2009).



The Geneva meeting on 19 July 2008 constituted the highest-level meeting between the United States and Iran and surpassed previous preconditions for direct engagement (Vakil, 2020). The US proposal to Iran offered incentives to suspend its nuclear enrichment programme (Parsi and Rydqvist, 2011). In response, Iran presented its own proposal, emphasising cooperation in nuclear energy, the formation of international consortia for nuclear fuel production, nuclear security, export monitoring, and regional collaboration. Iran did not commit to suspending uranium production (Radio Farda, 2008). The U.S.'s strategic choices, influenced by its perception of the situation, appeared to underscore the importance of flexibility and responsiveness in foreign policy. Hence, the recognition of these complexities, alongside the acknowledgement of the limitations of previous strategies, was crucial in driving the U.S. policy towards direct engagement with Iran, which offered a new avenue to address concerns through diplomacy (Maloney, 2015). Obama's approach was grounded in the belief that direct dialogue could more effectively address nuclear issues and reduce tensions in the Middle East (Parsi, 2012). There were assessments that Iran had halted its nuclear weapons programme in 2003, for instance by the National Intelligence Estimate (NIE) of 2007, which supported a reassessment of the policy towards Iran (Wright, 2010). This, combined with criticisms of the Iraq War and a desire to avoid another conflict in the Middle East, influenced the US decision to pursue diplomacy.

On 21 September 2009 Iran officially notified the IAEA of a second enrichment facility in Fordow (IAEA, 2009). In the same year, Iranian nuclear scientists encountered Stuxnet computer malware at the Natanz Facility. This insidious software manipulated the centrifuge speed, causing self-destruction and facility damage; however, it did not completely eradicate the centrifuges (Barzashka, 2013). In October 2009, the P5+1 countries proposed a deal for Iran to ship out most of its LEU stockpile in return for fuel rods for the Tehran Research Reactor. Iran initially rejected this proposal (Crail, 2010). In May 2010, Brazil and Turkey revived the fuel swap proposal and brokered a deal with Iran. Accordingly, Iran would export 1,200 kg of its low-enriched uranium (about half its stockpile) to Turkey. In return, Iran would receive fuel rods enriched to 20% for the Tehran Research Reactor after one year (Crail, 2010). The deal was signed in a joint declaration by the presidents of Brazil, Turkey, and Iran on 17 May 2010 in Tehran. It affirmed Iran's right to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes under the NPT. The U.S. and allies were sceptical of the deal, citing concerns that it did not address Iran's enrichment activities to 20% levels (Crail, 2010). Iran's nuclear chief stated that they would not stop a 20% enrichment despite the deal. The P5+1 proceeded with passing a new round of

UN sanctions on Iran through Resolution 1929 on 9 June 2010. Brazil and Turkey voted against the resolution, straining relations with the U.S. over their support for the fuel swap deal. (Diehl and Fujii, 2010)

The involvement of Brazil and Turkey in Iranian nuclear diplomacy can be attributed to their vested self-interest in extending their influence on matters of regional security and non-proliferation. Since this initiative did not cover Iran's domestic 20% uranium enrichment programme, Western P5+1 members rejected the Tehran Declaration, reaffirming Iran's NPT allegiance (Borger, 2010). On 23 August 2010 Iran's Ettelaat Newspaper discussed the government's decision to introduce uranium into the Bushehr Power Plant (Ettelaat Newspaper, 2010). However, in 2011, Russian Foreign Minister Lavrov proposed the “step-by-step plan” during a speech in Washington. The plan called for Iran to limit uranium enrichment, adhere to the Additional Protocol, and, in return, suspend UN sanctions (Trenin, 2011). Moscow had a vital interest in maintaining stability in the Middle East, a region geographically close to its southern borders. A diplomatic resolution to the nuclear issue aligned with Moscow's overarching goal of preventing conflict and ensuring a predictable regional security environment (Kozhanov, 2018). Resolution of the nuclear dispute could open avenues for increased Russian-Iranian cooperation in various fields of mutual economic, security, and political interest (Katzman, 2020).

Moscow's aimed to position itself as a mediator capable of navigating complex international issues. Russia's objective was also grounded in its strategic interests to use its relations with Iran to counterbalance US influence. At the same time, Moscow aimed to avoid the formation of a formal alliance that could jeopardise its relationships with several other key regional and global actors, including Israel and the GCC states. This pragmatic approach was further evident in Russia's readiness to engage with Tehran on nuclear matters despite oscillations in resistance to and support for sanctions. Russia's interests encompassed economic and energy security interests, regional stability and security, and Moscow's interests in gaining access to the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean via Iran. This multifaceted strategy was also applicable to China, with the difference that China was particularly interested in boosting its economic relations with Iran, ensuring the flow of energy, and balancing its relations with the GCC. Accordingly, Russia and China underscored their commitment to leverage the Iranian nuclear issue to address a range of national interests, while positioning themselves as constructive actors in global non-proliferation efforts and key mediators.

Formal negotiations between Iran and P5+1 occurred in Istanbul on 14 April 2012 led by Jalili and Catherine Ashton. The Istanbul negotiations, however, did not lead to an agreement, as both parties insisted on their own positions (Arms Control Association, 2020). As Iran continued to enrich uranium, there was growing domestic political pressure on the Obama administration to adopt a hardline strategy towards Iran. However, Obama was reluctant to escalate before the presidential election. There was a consensus across the political spectrum in the United States that Iran's nuclear programme represented a security threat, pressuring the Obama administration to demonstrate a tough strategy against Iran (Slavin, 2013). The pro-Israel lobbying in the United States continuously advocated for a hardline approach to Iran, emphasising their threat perception of Iran to Israel's security. The US administration faced political imperatives to demonstrate its commitment to preventing Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons (Mann, 2012). In response to these pressures, the Obama administration pursued a dual-track policy combining diplomacy with pressure. The administration increased the economic sanctions on Iran by targeting its oil exports and financial transactions. These sanctions were aimed at crippling Iran's economy to bring it to the negotiation table (Nephew, 2015). While emphasising diplomacy, Obama's administration built up its military presence in the Persian Gulf as a deterrent against Iran and reassured its regional allies of its commitment to their security (Ashton, 2012).

A further round of negotiations took place in Baghdad, in which the P5+1 opposed Iran's 20% uranium enrichment (Goldschmidt, 2012). Iran stressed the immediate necessity of sanctions relief at the commencement of negotiations and underscored the importance of respecting Iran's rights under the NPT (Jalili, 2012). Both the P5+1 and the IAEA maintained diplomatic engagements with Iran, outlining specific cooperation requirements (IAEA Board of Governors, 2012). During the subsequent Moscow negotiations in 2012, both Iran and the P5+1 agreed to resume negotiations, but it became apparent that expectations for a mutually acceptable resolution were overly optimistic. The expectations for the achievement of an agreement hinged on P5+1 receiving the IAEA's endorsement of Iran's compliance with resolutions, a precondition deemed necessary for sanctions relief (Radiofarda, 2012). Ahmadinejad's proclamation of Iran's entitlement to enrich uranium by up to 20% underscored the Iranian perspective and a firm dedication to maintaining enrichment within Iranian territory (Frankfurter Allgemeine Zeitung, 2012). Following the initial day of discussions in Moscow, both sides agreed to engage in an "intense and tough exchange of views" (European Parliament, 2012).

Iran's head of the Parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Commission underscored the significance of honouring commitments (Boroujerdi, 2011). Nevertheless, the negotiations concluded with an arrangement to convene an expert meeting and uphold “follow-up communication” (European Parliament, 2012). Ashton acknowledged “major disparities” between the positions of the two sides, emphasising that decision-making now rested with Iran (European Commission, 2012). In contrast, Jalili maintained that the P5+1's recognition of Iran's right to uranium enrichment was the necessary initial step in any forthcoming negotiations (European Parliament, 2012). Thus, the negotiations showed a persistent divergence in resolving Iran's nuclear quandary. Iran's reluctance to accept the 2012 proposals was due to demands for significant limitations on its nuclear programme and a perceived imbalance in the relief offered from sanctions in exchange for these concessions. Iran sought a deal that would recognise its right to enrich uranium under the NPT while simultaneously lifting economic sanctions. However, P5+1's focus on stringent restrictions was seen by Iranian negotiators as undermining their sovereign rights and failing to offer immediate and comprehensive relief from sanctions that severely impacted their economy. The negotiations were complex, reflecting deep-seated distrust and differing expectations on both sides regarding the scope and scale of concessions necessary to reach an agreement. By November 2012, the IAEA's report signified Iran's progress in its nuclear programme, casting shadows on the prospects of diplomatic resolution (Arms Control Association, 2020).

In February 2013, during negotiations in Kazakhstan, the P5+1 offered economic incentives to Iran to limit uranium enrichment and accept increased oversight. However, the negotiations failed to make progress due to Iran's refusal to limit its programme and allow additional IAEA inspections beyond the NPT requirements (Arms Control Association, 2020). Iran viewed the United States as unreliable and dismissed the proposed incentives as insufficient (Parsi, 2012). Disagreements persisted over the interpretation of Article IV of the NPT, with Iran advocating for equal rights to peaceful nuclear technology and enrichment rights, and criticising the West for not prioritising disarmament (Joyner, 2011). During Ahmadinejad's last term, the Obama administration stayed away from further negotiations as it only anticipated minimal progress. These talks underscored existing differences and diplomatic hurdles. The P5+1 insisted on the request to limit Iran's enrichment programme and extensive supervision through the IAEA. Iran categorically rejected any proposal that neglected its right to enrich uranium (Miller, 2006). Iran's stance aimed to address the perceived nuclear monopoly in the region and gain support from other Middle Eastern nations and the Global South, advocating for disarmament and

criticising its perceived international nuclear double standards (Potter, 2017). However, international scepticism about Iran's nuclear intentions and adherence to non-proliferation obligations remained unresolved (Maloney, 2015).

The NPT serves as a cornerstone of the international nuclear order, enshrining the ideals of universal ethical principles of nuclear disarmament and the peaceful use of nuclear energy. Signatories, including Iran, commit to non-proliferation in exchange for the right to access peaceful nuclear technology. The NPT aims to promote the peaceful use of nuclear technology and cooperation among states. The use of sanctions and the withholding of economic benefits as tools to pressure non-compliant states contradict the NPT's framework of cooperation and the peaceful use of nuclear technology. Selective enforcement breeds distrust, making it difficult to achieve cooperation on non-proliferation goals. Sanctions, especially when perceived as selective or unfair, can create a sense of injustice and distrust among states, undermining the cooperative spirit of the NPT. When sanctions are applied selectively, it can lead to accusations of double standards, where some states are punished while others are not, despite similar behaviours. This perception can erode the legitimacy of both the NPT and the IAEA, as states may view these institutions as biased or politically motivated. Moreover, trust is a crucial element in international agreements. If states perceive that sanctions are used unfairly or that economic benefits are withheld selectively, it can hinder their willingness to cooperate on non-proliferation efforts. This lack of cooperation can make it more challenging to achieve the goals of the NPT. Iran's argued that Western powers, some of whom possess nuclear arsenals, prioritise geopolitical interests over the NPT's stated goals. Established nuclear powers often focus their non-proliferation efforts on new entrants to nuclear clubs, such as Iran, while neglecting their own disarmament obligations. This creates a sense of unequal treatment. Iran argued that Western concerns about its nuclear programme are motivated more by a desire to limit Iran's independence and regional influence, than by genuine worries about nuclear proliferation.

## **6.4 Dynamic Analysis of National Identity Narratives**

### **6.4.1 Operationalisation**

Ahmadinejad sought to reiterate sovereignty and independence and emphasised Iran's right to pursue a nuclear programme for peaceful purposes as an independent actor. Ahmadinejad's rhetoric and policies regarding Iran's nuclear programme were rooted in narratives of Iranian national identity, sovereignty, and resistance against perceived external threats and injustices. His emphasis on Iran's right to peaceful nuclear technology and defiance towards international pressure reflected long-standing conceptions of national pride, independence, and distrust of Western powers. This stance resonated with the enduring themes of Iran's historical consciousness and sociopolitical dynamics. He portrayed Iran's nuclear programme as a symbol of national technological advancement, self-sufficiency, and resistance against external powers trying to deny Iran's rights (Mohebbati, 2017).

He insisted that Iran would not back down on its inalienable right to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes, framing it as a matter of national sovereignty and dignity (Mohebbati, 2017). This evoked memories of foreign interventions and a determination to resist outside dictates. Ahmadinejad voiced deep distrust of Western nations' intentions in nuclear talks, accusing them of dishonesty and trying to deny Iran's rights. This suspicion is rooted in Iran's experience with foreign exploitation and perceived double standards. His rhetoric resonated with a hardline revolutionary ideology that framed interactions with the West through the lens of resistance against arrogant powers. The narratives highlight how Iran's nuclear programme became imbued with the symbolism of national identity, technological progress, and defiance of perceived injustice (Mohebbati, 2017). Ahmadinejad's uncompromising nuclear stance derived legitimacy from tapping into narratives deeply embedded in Iran's historical memory, revolutionary ethos, and conceptions of national identity centred on independence and resistance. His rhetoric found resonance among segments of the population imbued with identity conceptions shaped by Iran's unique historical and socio-political contexts.

Thus, intersubjectivity within individuals is involved in the construction of social meaning. Negotiation and interactions within communicative groups shape and change social meanings and knowledge. Social norms are defined as elements of the social framework that result from the behaviours and beliefs of individuals. Norms influence these behaviours and convictions by forming the identity and interests of individuals. Accordingly, emphasising sovereignty, independence, and the right to pursue a nuclear programme was consistent with national identity, in which socio-political and historical contexts and perceptions play a pivotal role in defining and emphasising the shared norms of national identity. Ahmadinejad capitalised on his nationalist perspective, which aimed to strengthen a cohesive national identity inside the country, by highlighting exclusive narratives of national sovereignty and characterising the international community as unreliable in the nuclear discussion. The aim of the Iranian nuclear policy in this period was to maintain the enrichment cycle within Iran, resist pressure to reduce the level of its enrichment, and eliminate sanctions.

The belief that a deal with the US would fail, influenced by experience and deep-seated distrust, informed hesitation in the nuclear negotiation strategy under Ahmadinejad. There remained scepticism about the durability of any potential agreement with P5+1 and their compliance. The transition from a stance of cooperation under Khatami to one of defiance under Ahmadinejad reflects the interplay between Iran's self-perception, assessment of the international environment, and strategic decisions made in response to these factors. Changes in how states engage socially have the ability to radically change the course of events in favour of higher international security. Ahmadinejad's administration leveraged these narratives to rally domestic support and legitimise its nuclear policies, portraying the nuclear programme not only as a right, but also as a symbol of national pride and scientific advancement. Under Ahmadinejad, uranium enrichment became a prominent symbol of defiance against Western pressures and a marker of scientific progress. The legal and moral justifications for Iran's pursuit of nuclear energy for peaceful purposes were articulated within the frameworks of international law and the NPT. Additionally, Ahmadinejad's portrayal of Iran as a victim of unjust Western policies and sanctions reinforced the anti-oppression narrative, resonating with the national sentiments of justice and resistance.

The imposition of sanctions during Ahmadinejad's presidency fostered national solidarity and resilience, and political mobilisation against external pressures facilitated the reconstruction of Iranian identity. The imposition of international sanctions was framed as unjust and hostile by foreign powers. This narrative helped galvanise national solidarity, as Iranians were encouraged to unite against external adversaries. The sanctions, while economically challenging, were used by the government to promote a sense of resilience and self-sufficiency, reinforcing the idea that Iran could withstand and overcome external pressures through unity and determination. Ahmadinejad's administration leveraged the sanctions to politically mobilise the population. The government portrayed sanctions as attacks on Iran's sovereignty and the right to progress, which required a collective response. This mobilisation included efforts to strengthen internal economic practices, reduce reliance on foreign goods, and encourage domestic production, all of which contributed to national pride and empowerment.

The struggle against external pressures became a central theme in the reconstruction of Iranian identity under Ahmadinejad. This identity was characterised by defiance, self-reliance, and a commitment to preserving national sovereignty. The narrative of resistance against foreign domination was deeply embedded in the national consciousness, fostering a strong sense of Iranian nationalism intertwined with Islamic values. The government used sanctions to reinforce the cultural and ideological aspects of Iranian-Islamic identity. Emphasising the need to protect Islamic values and national interests against Western influence, Ahmadinejad's administration promoted cultural programmes and policies that highlighted Iran's historical and religious heritage. This effort aimed to strengthen the nation's internal cohesion and ideological resolution. These sanctions forced Iran to adapt economically by seeking alternative markets, developing local industries, and fostering innovation. This economic adaptation was portrayed as a success story for Iranian ingenuity and resilience, further contributing to the national narrative of self-sufficiency and independence. Hence, domestic political mobilisation and the collective struggle against external pressures facilitated the reconstruction of an Iranian identity that emphasised defiance, self-reliance, and the preservation of national sovereignty and Islamic values. This reconstructed identity was central to Iran's internal and external policies during and after Ahmadinejad's tenures. The preferences for certain historical representations were associated with the fundamentalists' conceptions of the national identity, providing a framework for how individuals integrate experiences into a coherent self-narrative. Iran's new administration thus assimilated the prior experiences and the historical and cultural narratives they encountered into an internalised, dynamic conception



of what it means to be a member of that nation, providing a sense of purpose and coherence. In essence, the national identity is constructed through an ongoing process of assimilating one's experiences and engagement with sociocultural narratives into an evolving, internalised self-perception aligned with a particular understanding of that national identity. This internalised identity narrative then guides how individuals perceive and make sense of subsequent experiences and representations.

#### **6.4.2 Modernity**

The narrative of modernity was tied to technological progress and scientific achievement, with the nuclear programme positioned as the supreme example of Iran's scientific endeavours. This narrative was bolstered by public declarations of nuclear advancements and through the media portraying Iran as a technologically advanced nation. Ahmadinejad's administration leveraged the narrative of modernity to position Iran as a nation at the forefront of regional scientific progress independent of external powers, which became a symbol of national pride. This was evident in Ahmadinejad's speeches on international forums, strategic communication, policy decisions, and public statements. He highlighted Iran's advancements in nuclear technology, space exploration, and other scientific fields as evidence of its modernity and technological prowess through the endeavours of its own scientists and as a result of national self-confidence. Ahmadinejad pointed out:

“Advanced technologies, such as the nuclear programme, were expected to initiate industrial modernity to narrow the gap between Iran and other industrialised nations, and our country, especially the youth, was able to apply this extremely essential and useful technology owing to their trust in God, confidence, and will” (Ahmadinejad, 2006).

Iran's advancements in nuclear technology, particularly uranium enrichment, represented significant progress towards achieving a sophisticated level in nuclear science. Iran has developed and deployed advanced centrifuges, such as the IR-6, which significantly enhance its uranium enrichment capabilities. These centrifuges are more efficient and faster than earlier models, allowing Iran to quickly enrich uranium to higher purity levels (American Nuclear Society, 2022). The use of these advanced centrifuges at facilities raised international concerns owing to their potential to produce weapons-grade uranium. During this period, Iran enriched uranium to 20% purity using advanced IR-6 centrifuges. Over the decades, Iran developed a range of nuclear technologies, including uranium enrichment, warhead design, and delivery systems, which collectively contributed to its advanced nuclear capabilities (American Nuclear Society, 2022). The advancements in uranium enrichment and the accumulation of enriched uranium stockpiles brought Iran closer to the capability to produce nuclear weapons, should it choose to do so. U.S. intelligence assessments indicate that while Iran has the capacity to produce nuclear weapons, it has not yet made the decision to do so (Katzman and Kerr, 2022).

The IAEA continued to monitor Iran's nuclear activities closely. The removal of IAEA monitoring cameras and Iran's non-compliance with the demands of the P5+1 heightened concerns about the transparency and intentions of its nuclear programme (Katzman and Kerr, 2022). Hence, Iran's advancements in nuclear technology, particularly through the development and use of advanced uranium-enrichment centrifuges, represented a significant leap towards achieving a sophisticated level in nuclear science. Ahmadinejad's public declarations of nuclear advancements bolstered national pride, and countered narratives of technological dependency on the West. The emphasis on scientific achievements linked Iran's modernity narrative with tangible progress, evident in Iran's advanced nuclear enrichment programme. Iran's stance on international negotiations were used to assert the right to develop nuclear technology. According to Ahmadinejad (2013), modernisation was the result of resistance vis-à-vis external pressures to compensate for the past centuries of technological backwardness.

### 6.4.3 Justice and National Rights

Ahmadinejad's assertion was deeply intertwined with a broader ideological framework that positioned Iran against what was perceived as Western hegemony, particularly criticising the NPT as a product of such dominance. He asserted Iran's right to peaceful nuclear technology as an independent nation and capitalised on the notion of technological achievement as a manifestation of Iran's development and its rejection of the perceived oppressive global system (Maloney, 2015). Ahmadinejad's rhetoric, emphasising “Nuclear Power is Our Right!” underlined this stance as a matter of justice and national rights. He said:

“No one can prevent us from using nuclear energy for peaceful purposes. Iranians stand with full strength in defending their rights. Today, possessing the technology for peaceful nuclear energy and nuclear fuel production is both a legal and legitimate demand. It is acknowledged that the peaceful use of nuclear energy is a right of all 70 million Iranians, and no one can oppose the will of this nation.” (IRNA, 2006).

Iran's technological endeavours, particularly in nuclear technology, were perceived nationally as a cornerstone of scientific and technical might, imbuing a sense of pride. The assertiveness of Iran's nuclear policy was a deliberate affirmation of its rights under the NPT. Under Ahmadinejad's presidency, Iran's nuclear policy was characterised by a strong emphasis on national sovereignty and resistance to perceived global dominance. Ahmadinejad's administration framed Iran's advancements in nuclear technology, particularly in the nuclear fuel cycle, as a matter of national pride and an inalienable right. This stance was deeply intertwined with broader narratives of justice and national rights, reflecting Iran's historical, cultural, and social context. His rhetoric consistently highlighted Iran's “inalienable right” to develop nuclear technology for peaceful purposes. This was evident in his speeches, such as his address to the UN General Assembly in September 2005, where he asserted Iran's right to access a nuclear fuel cycle and criticised the international community's attempts to restrict this right (Blackstock and Milkoreit, 2007).

The Iranian decision to restart uranium conversion activities at the Esfahan Nuclear Technology Centre in August 2005 marked a shift towards a more confrontational stance, reflecting a new formulation of the Iranian nuclear equation that prioritised national rights, sovereignty, and defiance against international pressure. Ahmadinejad's administration tied Iran's nuclear advancements to broader narratives of national pride and technological self-sufficiency. This was part of a strategy to garner domestic support by appealing to the public's sense of "Persian pride" and the desire for respect on the international stage. Public opinion data from Iran showed strong support for the continuation of Iran's nuclear activities, with many Iranians viewing proficiency in nuclear technologies as a mechanism for achieving national respect and independence (Blackstock and Milkoreit 2007). Ahmadinejad's foreign policy was formulated around resistance to US pressures and what he perceived as attempts by hegemonic powers to maintain a monopoly on scientific and technological progress. He portrayed Iran's nuclear programme as a challenge to this monopoly and a stand against global injustice. The policy decisions, such as the expansion of centrifuge cascades in Natanz, were seen as defiant responses to international sanctions and pressures, reinforcing the narrative of resistance and self-reliance (Ahmadinejad, 2005).

Ahmadinejad's speeches often framed Iran's nuclear pursuits within the context of broader struggles for justice and equality. He criticised the discriminatory approaches of the NPT, which focused on the obligations of state parties while disregarding their rights, calling for a more just and equitable international order (Ahmadinejad, 2005). This narrative resonated with historical experiences of foreign intervention and exploitation, as discussed in Chapter 4, reinforcing the Iranian stance that Iran must assert its rights and resist external domination to achieve true independence and justice. Hence, Iran's insistence on its nuclear rights was not merely a technical or scientific issue but was deeply embedded in broader narratives of national identity, justice, and resistance to global dominance. By positioning its technological achievements, such as advancements in the nuclear fuel cycle, within these narratives, Iran sought to assert its sovereignty and challenge what it perceived as an unjust international order. This approach resonated with the Iranian public's sense of national pride and historical experience, making the nuclear programme a symbol of national rights and resistance. Iran's advancements in nuclear technology, particularly in terms of enrichment capabilities, were framed as demonstrations of scientific progress and autonomy. This reinforces the narrative of resisting external pressures and asserting Iran's rightful place on the global stage. Despite international concerns and sanctions, the development and use of advanced centrifuges

underscored Iran's commitment to maintaining its sovereignty and achieving technological self-sufficiency. This defiance against perceived injustices by the international community strengthens national pride and supports the broader narrative of resistance and independence.

The indigenisation of modern science and technology in Iran was often portrayed as a legitimate reaction to what was perceived as international arrogance (in Persian, *estekbar*). This stance is deeply rooted in historical precedents, notably the nationalisation of Iran's oil industry under Prime Minister Mosaddegh, an event that continues to resonate as a foundational analogy for Iran's contemporary insistence on maintaining a complete nuclear enrichment cycle within its borders (Golshani & Jadidi, 2014). During Ahmadinejad's presidency, national diligence and giftedness were praised and promoted, highlighting the importance of technological and scientific autonomy. Ahmadinejad's depiction of the Iranian populace emphasised a national ethos of perseverance and exceptionalism, which is crucial for understanding the fervour with which technological advancement was pursued. This narrative was aimed at galvanising support both domestically and among like-minded states within the NAM, promoting a global system that respects all nations' rights to peaceful nuclear technology, and advocating for global nuclear disarmament (Maloney, 2015).

#### **6.4.4 Sovereignty and Independence**

The nuclear programme itself was portrayed as a symbol of Iran's independence and technological self-sufficiency. Any claims of the Iranian nuclear weapons programme were rejected as hostile, and Iran refused to give in to the US demands for curtailment of its nuclear activities (Davenport, 2014). Iran argued that its right to enrich uranium for peaceful purposes was enshrined under Article IV of the NPT, which grants non-nuclear weapons states the right to pursue nuclear energy for peaceful purposes under IAEA safeguards (Joyner, 2011). This administration framed its nuclear programme within this legal right, challenging the legitimacy of the P5+1's demands (Bowen and Brewer, 2011). These narratives not only define its foreign policy but also manifest strongly in its nuclear stance, encapsulated in the slogan "Nuclear Power is Our Right!". This slogan serves as a policy assertion and declaration of Iran's sovereign rights to determine its developmental path. The nuclear programme was portrayed as a rightful assertion of national sovereignty, framed against the backdrop of perceived oppression and external pressure.

The IAEA's authority to verify the correctness and completeness of state declarations under comprehensive safeguard agreements is fundamental to its mission, allowing it to access information and locations beyond those declared by states (Ferguson and Norman, 2010). Ahamdinejad's nuclear policy included a contestation of the IAEA's scope of assessment of Iranian compliance, which Iran maintained had evolved beyond the original scope of the Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement. Iran challenged the interpretation of non-compliance, suggesting that the procedures applied by the IAEA in assessing compliance had broadened beyond the bounds of the agreements between Iran and the IAEA (Akhtar, 2020). Furthermore, Iran was of the opinion that the IAEA's assessments and reports did not remain objective because of the pressure of Western governments. Without an Additional Protocol to its Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement (CSA), the IAEA may lack the authority to verify the completeness of its nuclear declarations (Ford, 2012; Squassoni, 2009). Iran's official argument in this case was presented by Ambassador and Permanent Representative Soltanieh:

“I must emphasise that the primary purpose of the agency is to foster the peaceful application of nuclear energy worldwide. The essence of agency safeguards is that they are voluntary. The agency's protection measures are implemented either to support bilateral agreements or as a result of voluntary participation in treaties, such as the NPT. Instances involving Iraq, North Korea, and, more recently, Iran's nuclear programme demonstrate how some permanent members of the Governing Council have skewed the decision-making process and imposed obligations on the safeguards department that contrasted with the agency's charter. A particularly troubling development is the transformation of voluntary initiatives, such as additional protocols, into mandatory legal commitments. The UN Security Council's involvement in agency matters has introduced political and security considerations, hindering the agency's ability to proceed with its mandate.” (Soltanieh, 2011).

The IAEA operates under a comprehensive and objective regime aimed at preventing nuclear proliferation grounded in solid legal and procedural frameworks. Iran contended that the IAEA's authority to inspect its nuclear programme hinges on the specific permissions it grants under the Comprehensive Nuclear Agreement. It is essential to recognise that the IAEA's oversight is bolstered by the legal conditions imposed by the UNSC under its Chapter VII powers. These conditions required Iran to cooperate fully with the IAEA, adhere to the IAEA Board's directives, and comply with the Additional Protocol, which notably expands the IAEA's investigative authority beyond the basic provisions of the Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement. Moreover, the UNSC mandated Iran to observe these directives and protocols, to ensure that Iran, like any member state under scrutiny, meets the internationally ratified

standards designed to curb nuclear proliferation. However, the perception among some nations, particularly Iran, was that such measures overly encroached on sovereignty.

#### **6.4.5 Anti-Oppression**

The narrative of anti-oppression was intertwined with Ahmadinejad's portrayal of Iran as a victim of perceived Western oppression and injustice, which gained significance as international sanctions tightened. He attempted to portray Iran as an actor who stood up against global powers that were attempting to oppress and deny its rights. He declared:

“All Iranians, no matter where they are, stand as defenders of their progress and development, as well as their nuclear rights. I urge them to continue advocating for these rights worldwide. All its citizens, who persistently strive to safeguard their inalienable rights, responded with a resounding chant: Nuclear energy is our inalienable right.” (Mehr News Agency, 2006).

Thus, by invoking themes of solidarity and common struggle, Ahmadinejad aimed to mobilise support from non-Western countries, positioning Iran as a pivotal player in the fight against global injustice (Slavin, 2009; Maleki and Tirman, 2014). This strategy was evident in Ahmadinejad's speeches at international forums such as the UN, where he condemned Western policies and called for a more equitable international order (United Nations, 2010). Ahmadinejad's anti-oppression narrative challenged the legitimacy of sanctions and the perceived double standards in the international nuclear regime, arguing that Iran was unjustly targeted, while other nations' nuclear capabilities remained unscrutinised (Joyner, 2011). This narrative resonated with the Iranian public's sense of historical injustice and contemporary challenges, reinforcing the government's position in the nuclear dispute (Parsi, 2012). By capitalising on historical grievances, such as the CIA-backed coup of 1953, which overthrew Prime Minister Mosaddegh, or the economic sanctions, Iran built a compelling case for its nuclear programme as a symbol of resistance and self-sufficiency. This portrayal was instrumental in mobilising domestic support and solidifying national unity, framing the development of nuclear technology not merely as a matter of national security but also as an existential struggle for respect and autonomy on the world stage.

The narrative of anti-oppression and the pursuit of nuclear technology reflected a policy of defiance against perceived global injustices and a strategic positioning intended to leverage historical and current grievances to reinforce sovereignty. Iran viewed itself as a champion for oppressed nations worldwide, with technological and nuclear developments playing a pivotal role in this self-assigned leadership position. The Axis of Resistance and advancements in civilian nuclear technology were highlighted as the central elements of Iran's strategy to counter Western influence. The sanctions imposed by Western countries were perceived within Iran as manifestations of Western attempts to dominate and control Iran, reinforcing the narrative of Iran as a victim. This perception was substantiated by the substantial impact these sanctions had on various sectors of the Iranian economy and society, from healthcare to technology, thereby intensifying nationalistic sentiments and resistance against perceived injustices.

Ahmadinejad repeatedly asserted Iran's "inalienable right" to develop nuclear technology for peaceful purposes, framing it as a matter of national sovereignty and independence (Blackstock and Milkoreit, 2007). This nationalist rhetoric aimed to garner domestic support by appealing to the public's desire for respect on the international stage. He portrayed Iran's nuclear programme as a challenge to the monopoly of hegemonic Western powers over scientific progress and highlighted it as resistance against unjust pressures and double standards from countries such as the U.S. trying to deny Iran its rights. This narrative allowed Ahmadinejad to mobilise his hardline base by tapping into their anti-Western ideology. He could present Iran as resisting global arrogance and injustice. Ahmadinejad's confrontational stance helped unite hardline fundamentalists and sideline critics (Serrano, 2016).



## **6.5 Causal Analysis**

### **6.5.1 Iran's Nuclear Policy and National Identity**

The pursuit of nuclear technology was framed as an integral aspect of Iran's modernisation objectives, aligning with the broader goal of achieving technological and scientific self-sufficiency (Abulof, 2014). Iran refused to compromise on key aspects of its nuclear programme, such as an enrichment programme with its full capacities, and insisted on its right to develop and maintain nuclear capabilities under the NPT as a sovereign nation (Barzegar, 2009). The narratives of sovereignty and independence were particularly prominent, portraying any international opposition to the Iranian nuclear programme as infringements on Iran's independence, modernity, and sovereignty. Through its portrayal of sanctions as evidence of Western hostility and efforts to undermine Iran's sovereignty, Ahmadinejad's administration sought to exploit historical resentment against Western influence on Iran (Akbarzadeh and Barry, 2016).

The nuclear policy resulted in an uncooperative approach to international negotiations and was centred on Iran's right to develop a nuclear programme (Rezaei, 2017). Iran stopped the agreements under Khatami and accelerated its enrichment programme, making progress in mastering the full fuel cycle and enabling it to enrich uranium to a higher level (Tabatabaei and Toupchi, 2015, p. 120). Ahmadinejad's tenure saw the unveiling of the Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant, a facility buried deep underground (Albright and Walrond, 2012). Consequently, this period marked a notable increase in the pace and capacity of uranium enrichment (Kerr, 2012). Iran's nuclear hedging aimed to consolidate its negotiating position on the international stage, reflecting a broader determination to assert its sovereignty and influence. Without altering its propensity to reduce enrichment, Iran leveraged its nuclear technical capability to enhance its position in negotiations with P5+1. Ahmadinejad's nuclear policy targeted a stronger contestation of the IAEA's scope of assessment of Iranian compliance, suggesting that the standards applied by the IAEA to assess compliance broadened beyond the bounds of the original agreement (Akhtar, 2020).

Ahmadinejad stated that:

“The NPT has the mission to prevent the nuclear arms race and proliferation and ensure the inalienable right of the member states to use peaceful nuclear energy. However, thus far, the most difficult conditions have been put into the mechanisms and regulations for non-nuclear NPT member states seeking to benefit from the peaceful use of nuclear energy. In practice, however, no effective mechanism has been applied to address the actual threat of nuclear weapons, which must be the most important mission of the IAEA. The IAEA has been putting pressure on Iran under the pretext of proliferation risks, while those having nuclear bombs de facto continue to enjoy full immunity and exclusive rights” (Ahmadinejad, 2010).

Joyner (2013) argues that a good deal of the international community's arguments may not be as firmly grounded in international law as presumed. Mulligan (2017) points out that determining Iran's compliance or non-compliance is not exclusively a matter of assessing technical adherence to agreements, but also of interpreting the legal obligations entailed by those agreements. Iran, as a signatory to the NPT, is obligated to adhere to its provisions, especially Articles II and III, which prohibit the pursuit of nuclear weapons and require compliance with IAEA safeguards to verify the peaceful use of nuclear technology. Nevertheless, Joyner (2011) noted that the NPT and IAEA safeguards encompass legal norms that are subject to interpretation, which can lead to differing views on compliance. According to Bunn (2019), political considerations jeopardise the impartiality of assessments, underscoring the importance of maintaining the objectivity of international institutions such as the IAEA. Ahmadinejad's nuclear policy led to international isolation and economic sanctions, which Farhi (2009) argues were undermining Iran's economic stability and its international relations.

Economic sanctions were viewed not only as challenges, but also as opportunities to advance self-reliance and indigenous technological capabilities. Ahmadinejad's administration continued to assert that the long-term benefits of the nuclear programme would outweigh the immediate costs. Ahmadinejad's nuclear policy during his presidency was characterised by a strong emphasis on Iran's sovereign right to develop nuclear technology, a defiant stance against international pressure, and the use of the nuclear programme as a tool for domestic political consolidation. He consistently framed Iran's nuclear programme as an "inalienable right" under the NPT, emphasising that Iran had the right to develop nuclear technology for peaceful purposes, including the entire nuclear fuel cycle. He believed that developing nuclear technology was essential for Iran to maintain its autonomy and resist foreign domination (Bar, 2008). The nuclear programme was tied to broader narratives of national pride and technological self-sufficiency. Ahmadinejad emphasised that Iran's advancements in nuclear technology were a source of national pride and a demonstration of Iran's scientific and technological capabilities. The promotion of the nuclear programme helped consolidate power within the conservatives, which included hardliners and members of the IRGC who supported a confrontational stance. The nuclear issue also helped unite different factions by appealing to shared values of national pride and resistance against foreign pressure (Gerami and Khalaji, 2014).

### 6.5.2 Resolutions and Implications

The UNSC's resolutions against Iran's nuclear programme demonstrate the international community's position towards Iran's nuclear programme. It has passed several resolutions concerning Iran's nuclear programme, reflecting the international community's position and concerns regarding Iran's nuclear activities. These resolutions aimed to address the proliferation risks posed by Iran's nuclear programme and to ensure that Iran's nuclear activities remained peaceful.



*Figure 2: Timeline of the UNSC Resolutions on Nuclear Proliferation (2006-2010). Source: Created by the author.*

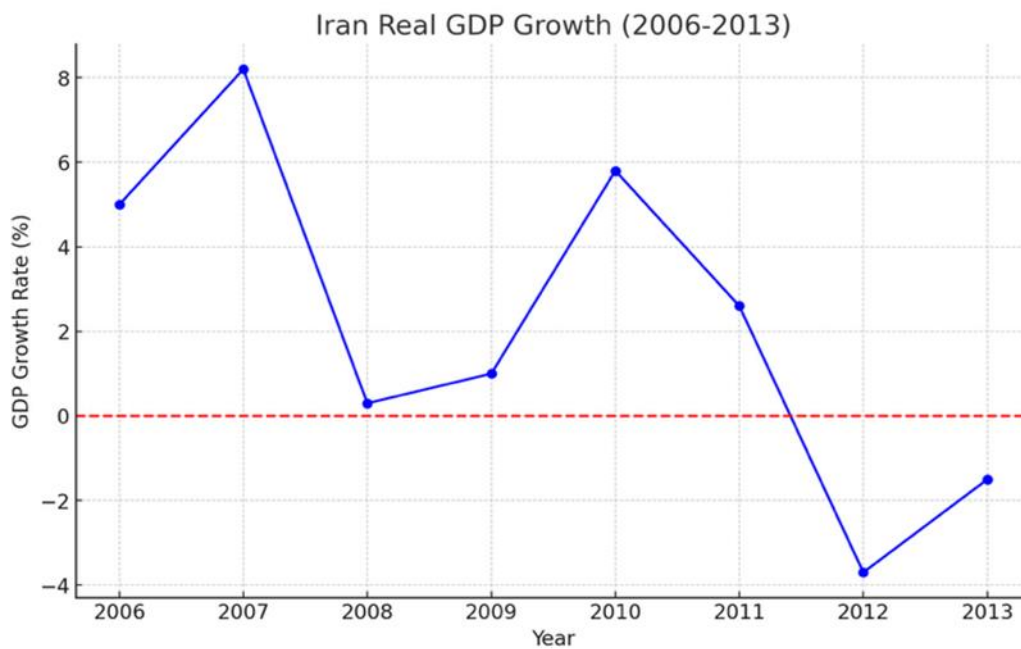
As illustrated in Figure 2 above, the United Nations Security Council adopted a series of resolutions between 2006 and 2010 aimed at curbing nuclear proliferation. These resolutions progressively imposed sanctions and demanded compliance from the concerned states. The sanctions began with Resolution 1696 in 2006, which demanded that Iran suspend all enrichment-related activities and fully cooperate with the IAEA (Security Council Resolution 1696, 2006).

The resolution's passage underscored the international community's apprehension about Iran's nuclear programme and set the stage for a series of actions aimed at curtailing Iran's nuclear programme. Following Iranian defiance, the UNSC adopted Resolution 1737 later that same year, imposing sanctions on Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile programmes (United Nations Security Council, Resolution 1737, 2006). This resolution called for the suspension of Iran's uranium enrichment activities and introduced sanctions targeting individuals and entities associated with these programmes. It imposed sanctions banning the supply of nuclear-related materials and technology to Iran, froze the assets of key individuals and companies related to Iran's nuclear and missile programmes. Moreover, it established a committee to monitor sanctions implementation (Security Council report, 2023; Tarock, 2006). The situation escalated with the adoption of Resolution 1747 in 2007, which expanded sanctions to include arms export bans and financial restrictions. This resolution reflected a concerted effort by the international community to apply economic pressure to curb Iran's nuclear development plans (Security Council Report, 2023). In 2008, Resolution 1803 was introduced with comprehensive measures, such as a travel ban, expanded sanctions on individuals and entities, and an extended embargo on proliferation-sensitive goods (Security Council report, 2023). Resolution 1835, adopted in September 2008, demanded Iran's full and swift compliance with its nuclear commitments, emphasising the need for Iran to suspend all enrichment-related activities and cooperate fully with the IAEA. It said that the UNSC:

“Reaffirms the Statement of its President, S/PRST/2006/15, of 29 March 2006, and its resolution 1696 (2006) of 31 July 2006, its resolution 1737 (2006) of 23 December 2006, its resolution 1747 (2007) of 24 March 2007, and its resolution 1803 (2008) of 3 March 2008; Calls upon Iran to comply fully and without delay with its obligations under the above-mentioned resolutions of the Security Council, and to meet the requirements of the IAEA Board of Governors;” (United Nations Security Council, 2008).

This resolution laid the groundwork for further sanctions, indicating that the international community's determination to take more stringent measures should Iran fail to meet its obligations (Kaussler, 2012). The culmination of these efforts was Resolution 1929 in 2010, often cited as the most stringent set of sanctions imposed on Iran. It targeted various aspects of Iran's nuclear and ballistic missile activities, as well as its financial and military sectors, reaffirming the demand for Iran to suspend all enrichment-related and reprocessing activities and comply fully with its IAEA obligations (United Nations Security Council, 2010). The imposition of sanctions was designed with two objectives. First, these sanctions were intended to exert significant economic pressure on Iran, compelling it to adhere to the NPT and come to agreements regarding its nuclear programme.

The rationale behind this approach was to create a tangible incentive for Iran to engage in negotiations and to agree with the limitations that would meet P5+1's demands. Second, sanctions served as a preventive mechanism aimed at curtailing the potential spread of nuclear weapons. Simply put, by restricting Iran's access to the materials, technology, and financial resources necessary for nuclear development, sanctions sought to mitigate the risk of nuclear proliferation. Sanctions are strategically employed to influence the behaviour of a state within the international system, with the aim of achieving compliance with international norms and safeguarding global security interests against the proliferation of nuclear weapons. The effectiveness and ethical implications of such sanctions remain subjects of debate, highlighting the challenges inherent in balancing economic pressure with diplomatic engagement in the realm of international nuclear diplomacy. Economically, the sanctions severely disrupted Iran's oil exports, a critical revenue source, leading to a halving of exports and a substantial loss in income.



*Figure 3: Source: International Monetary Fund (IMF) data; The data was processed and visualised with the assistance of ChatGPT.*

This downturn was evidenced by a decline in oil exports, from approximately 2.5 million barrels per day to approximately 1.1 million barrels per day by 2012, effectively reducing the country's oil revenue by half (U.S. Energy Information Administration, 2013). The economic trajectory of Iran from 2006 to 2013, as visualised through real GDP growth rates, offers a compelling perspective on the interplay between Iran's nuclear policy under President Ahmadinejad and subsequent economic ramifications. This period, marked by fluctuations in economic performance, shows the implications of Iran's nuclear policy for economic stability, and domestic politics. In the initial phase of Ahmadinejad's presidency, Iran experienced notable economic growth, with its GDP growth peaking at 8.2% in 2007. This prosperity was largely driven by a surge in global oil prices. Concurrently, Ahmadinejad's nuclear policy asserted Iran's right to develop nuclear technology, which laid the groundwork for international tensions and led to the imposition of sanctions in response to Iran's failure to halt uranium enrichment activities (UNSC, 2006).

Sanctions began to undermine Iran's economic growth and stability. The growth rate declined to 0.3% in 2008, followed by a marginal recovery to 1.0% in 2009, reflecting the initial economic repercussions of sanctions targeting Iran's nuclear policy defiance (IMF, 2010). The period from 2010 to 2013 was characterised by the intensification of international sanctions, notably by the United States and the EU, which severely restricted Iran's oil exports and access to the international financial system. The sanctions had a devastating impact on Iran's economy, leading to significant contractions in GDP growth, with the economy shrinking by 3.7% in 2012 and 1.5% in 2013. The economic downturn was marked by high inflation, currency devaluation, and increasing unemployment, exacerbating domestic discontent and putting pressure on Iran's political leadership to reassess its nuclear strategy in the long term (Katzman, 2013). Consequently, these sanctions had a deleterious effect on Iran's economy, worsening its existing economic challenges (Colleau, 2016). In response to these economic pressures, Iran's administration employed sanction-busting tactics to circumvent financial restrictions and sustain its economy amid growing international isolation (Maloney, 2010). Imposed sanctions, however, proved ineffective in deterring the advancement of Iran's nuclear programme. In fact, some argue that these measures may have inadvertently bolstered Iran's resolve to pursue its development (Perthes, 2010; Chubin, 2010). The nuclear programme, coupled with Ahmadinejad's populism, fostered a reinforced sense of national identity amidst severe economic hardship (Haji-Yousefi, 2010).

During Ahmadinejad's presidency, these sanctions led to high inflation, devalued currency, and overall economic hardship. However, the overall effectiveness of these measures remains a subject of ongoing debate, underscoring the challenges faced by the international community in ensuring compliance with non-proliferation agreements (Peksen, 2019). This economic strain has resulted in a paradoxical domestic response. On the one hand, there was a surge in nationalistic support for the government, driven by a perception of unjust international pressure and a desire to uphold national sovereignty. Many Iranians rallied behind Ahmadinejad's defiant stance against Western powers, viewing sanctions as attempts to undermine Iran's autonomy and self-determination (Niknami, 2020). On the other hand, economic difficulties led to increased opposition to and criticism of Ahmadinejad's administration. Critics argued that his policies, particularly those related to economic management and international diplomacy, exacerbated the country's economic sufferings. The mismanagement of the economy, coupled with stringent sanctions, created fertile ground for public discontent and political unrest (Toumaj, 2014; Habibi, 2008).



This dual response underscores the complex interplay between external pressure and domestic policy. While the narrative of resistance and resilience against perceived international injustice strengthened Ahmadinejad's support among certain segments of the population, the tangible economic hardships fuelled by sanctions intensified internal opposition. Thus, the period highlights how economic conditions and international relations are deeply intertwined with domestic political dynamics, shaping both support for and criticism of the government. The efficacy of resolutions hinges on their ability to reconcile these diverse perspectives and interests. Essentially, sanctions, while deployed with the intention of compelling Iran to alter its nuclear policy behaviour or align with international norms, yielded complex and unintended outcomes. The imposition of sanctions fostered a strong sense of nationalism, and a collective determination to uphold what was perceived as a sovereign right to nuclear technology. This “rally around the flag” effect bolstered public support for the nuclear programme and allowed the Iranian government to frame it as an emblem of national resistance against perceived unjust international pressures. Iran adopted a nuclear hedging strategy. This strategy allows Iran to develop nuclear technology up to the brink of weaponisation, thereby maintaining the potential for nuclear weapons development without actually producing nuclear weapons. This strategic ambiguity could deter potential threats while adhering to the NPT.

Iran's nuclear hedging signalled technological advancements and the administration's determination to continue the enrichment programme without violating international agreements, serving as a perceived safeguard against external threats while fostering national pride. However, the nuclear hedging strategy exacerbated regional tensions and increased international pressure. Iran's experiences led to increased scepticism towards international agreements, as previous engagements did not forestall the imposition of further restrictive measures. Sanctions undermined the credibility of diplomatic avenues, cementing a belief in the futility of engagement. This drive towards technological self-sufficiency enhanced Iran's capabilities and invigorated its resolve to maintain and expand its nuclear programme, independent of external influences and constraints. At the domestic level, the sanctions strengthened hardline elements, who exploited the ongoing sanctions to validate their scepticism of the West, arguing that steadfastness and further development of nuclear capabilities were the only viable responses to what they framed as relentless Western hostility. Collectively, these factors underscore the dual-edged nature of sanctions: they can not only coerce compliance but also provoke resistance, complicating the trajectory of long-term

diplomatic resolutions and highlighting the intricate challenges of global governance in the nuclear age.

The nuclear hedging strategy pursued during Ahmadinejad's presidency exacerbated regional tension and increased international pressure on Iran. It heightened fears in Israel and among the GCC countries. Israel, in particular, viewed Iran's nuclear advancements as an existential threat, fearing that a nuclear-armed Iran would embolden its proxies, including Hezbollah and Hamas, to attack Israel. The nuclear programme also strained relations with Saudi Arabia and other GCC states, which were concerned about Iran's growing regional influence and potential nuclear capability. Israel considered preemptive strikes against Iran's nuclear facilities but hesitated due to uncertainties about Iran's nuclear intentions, retaliation attacks by Iran, and the potential for significant regional escalation (Huang, 2015).

The UNSC responded to Iran's nuclear advancements through a series of resolutions imposing sanctions to pressure Iran to comply with international demands to halt its enrichment activities and cooperate fully with the IAEA. Ahmadinejad's defiant stance and the continuation of the nuclear programme despite sanctions led to increased diplomatic isolation for Iran. The international community, led by the United States and the EU, maintained a unified front demanding that Iran comply with its non-proliferation obligations (Borszik, 2014). Thus, Ahmadinejad's nuclear hedging strategy exacerbated regional tensions and increased international pressure on Iran, leading to a more volatile security environment. The main objectives of the UNSC resolutions were to increase the pressure on Iran to suspend its nuclear enrichment and reprocessing activities. Imposing stricter sanctions raised the cost of Iran's non-compliance by establishing a comprehensive arms embargo, financial sanctions targeting Iranian banks, companies linked to the Revolutionary Guards, and Iran's shipping sector, and banning the supply of major weapons systems and related materials to Iran. The resolutions were an expression of the fact that the international community wanted to maintain diplomacy. In other words, while increased pressure on the Iranian economy raised the costs of non-compliance, they reaffirmed the willingness of the P5+1 to enhance diplomatic efforts and resume dialogue with Iran to solve the nuclear dispute without preconditions.

### 6.5.3 Iran's domestic Context

Economic difficulties resulting from international sanctions, combined with inflation and high unemployment rates, fostered significant domestic discontent. These internal pressures influenced Iran's approach to international negotiations during Ahmadinejad's presidency, as the government sought to alleviate domestic dissatisfaction through its foreign policy strategies. Internal political unrest, such as widespread protests following the disputed 2009 presidential election, profoundly impacted Iran's international posture. The election, which saw Ahmadinejad declare the winner amid allegations of fraud, led to significant internal dissent and public demonstrations (Keshavarzian, 2010). In response to these internal crises, the Iranian government adopted stronger negotiation stances to display internal cohesion and sovereignty. One clear manifestation of this approach was in Iran's nuclear negotiations. Following the 2009 unrest, Iran's negotiation tactics became rigid and uncompromising.

This hardening of stance was partly a strategic move towards project strength and unity domestically. By taking a firmer position in international forums, the Iranian leadership aimed to rally nationalist sentiments and distract itself from internal divisions (Sadjadpour, 2010). This approach also sought to assert Iran's sovereignty against perceived external meddling, thus reinforcing national cohesion. Moreover, the reciprocal influence of international pressure and external geopolitical factors on Iran's domestic policies cannot be overlooked. As international scrutiny and sanctions intensified, Iran's leadership utilised external threats to consolidate internal power and suppress dissent. The portrayal of a unified front against foreign adversaries served to legitimise the government's actions and policies internally (Katzman, 2011). This dynamic underscores the intricate relationship between domestic politics and international diplomacy that shapes Iran's foreign policy. Iran's foreign policy was intricately linked to its domestic environment, with each aspect of its socio-political context—from public opinion to economic health—playing a crucial role in shaping its interactions on a global stage. As mentioned, this period was marked by the emergence of the Green Movement, which referred to the massive protests that took place in Iran after the presidential election in 2009. Since the Islamic revolution in 1979, Iran has not witnessed a demonstration over the “stealing” of the elections. There were reports that demonstrators were yelling “Death to the tyrant.” (The Guardian, 2009).

Initially, the movement was rooted in a broader reformist movement that sought pluralism and reforms in Iran. The immediate catalyst for the Green Movement was the controversial presidential election of June 2009, where allegations of electoral fraud following Ahmadinejad's declared victory sparked widespread outrage. This sentiment was encapsulated in the protesters' rallying cry, "Where is my vote?" indicating a profound sense of disenfranchisement (Herrington, 2011). The movement's growing popularity was driven by the creative use of political communication strategies, including alternative discursive strategies and civil disobedience campaigns, which broadened the scope of political resistance (Sohrabi-Haghighat and Mansouri, 2010). Supporters of opposition candidates continued to express concerns about perceived fraud in Ahmadinejad's re-election (Herrington, 2011). This demonstrated a deep-seated desire for change (Dabashi, 2010; Harris, 2012). Thus, Ahmadinejad's administration faced challenges from multiple fronts, including economic sanctions, factional infighting, and a legitimacy crisis precipitated by the controversial 2009 elections.

One of the consequences of the events that transpired in Tehran and other cities following the 2009 Iranian presidential election was the creation or reemergence of social divisions. In the wake of the violent crackdown of 2009, the losing faction sought to keep the flames of "anger," "resentment," and "revenge" alive among its supporters through various symbols. One of the most potent symbols was the issue of house arrest, and the slogan "Lift the House Arrests" instilled renewed hope among their ranks. In the immediate aftermath of the 2009 election, the country plunged into a political crisis, and the government's international standing was somewhat weakened. Simultaneously, as the crisis subsided, internal divisions within the government and between the government and its political supporters began to emerge. After 2010, sanctions against Iran intensified, and in addition to political tensions, economic fluctuations also began. Fluctuations in the exchange rate became a symbol of instability and economic crisis, and this crisis persisted until the 2013 presidential election. Hence, during Ahmadinejad's second term in office, Iran experienced significant internal divisions at its highest political level. Ahmadinejad's power struggle with the supreme leader led to divisions within the Iranian government and between Ahmadinejad and the fundamentalists. Ahmadinejad removed cabinet ministers recommended or appointed by Iran's Supreme Leader Khamenei (Sanandaji, 2009).

The dismissal of Foreign Minister Mottaki and later Intelligence Minister Moslehi by Ahmadinejad was seen as a challenge to the authority of the Supreme Leader, further straining internal political relations. Concurrently, amidst economic hardship and turmoil, reformists criticised Ahmadinejad's look-east policy and its reliance on Russia and China. They argued that this dependency inflicted damage to its independence and Iran's economy (Esfandiary and Tabatabai, 2015; Adebahr, 2017). The reformist-hardliner dichotomy accentuated the challenges Iran faced in balancing the demands for both flexibility and rigidity amidst calls for domestic reform and nuclear negotiations (Akbarzadeh and Conduit, 2016). Reformists advocated for political openness, social freedom, and diplomatic engagement with the West, emphasising the need for economic and political reforms. In contrast, Ahmadinejad's administration and fundamentalists prioritised stronger relations with Russia and China to mitigate the impact of sanctions, maintaining the nationalistic-Islamic revolutionary ideals. The transition from Ahmadinejad to Rouhani demonstrated the impact of domestic pressure and the electorate's desire for change. Rouhani's pragmatic approach to international relations and nuclear negotiations marked a departure from Ahmadinejad's confrontational policy.

#### **6.5.4 Regional Context and Iran's Look East Policy**

As mentioned earlier in the previous sections, Iran's nuclear policy affected regional dynamics, particularly straining its relations with the GCC states and escalating tensions with Israel. During Ahmadinejad's presidency, Iran's relations with the GCC states were significantly shaped by several factors, particularly in the context of Iran's nuclear policy. Ahmadinejad's confrontational rhetoric and posture towards the United States, along with divergent stances on Israel and mutual threat perceptions, greatly influenced these relations. Iran's increasing regional influence following 2001 and territorial disputes over the three Iranian islands in the Persian Gulf further strained ties. Despite these political tensions, economic and trade relations between Iran and the GCC states showed resilience, highlighting the complexity of their interactions. The ongoing conflict between Iran and the U.S. had a negative impact on Iran-GCC relations, emphasising the need for confidence-building measures and policies from all parties involved, both within the region and externally, to alleviate tensions (Hafezian, 2011).

This apprehension drove them to seek enhanced security assurances from the United States (Russell, 2005). The United States played a crucial role as a security guarantor for the GCC, a position reinforced amid growing concern over Iran's nuclear capabilities. Iran's strategic alliances, notably with Syria and Hezbollah, were perceived as an effort to extend its influence and counterbalance regional adversaries, particularly Saudi Arabia and Israel (Djalili and Kellner, 2014). Unlike the GCC's cautious stance, Turkey sought to mediate the nuclear dispute by leveraging its energy ties with Iran. Turkey's mediation efforts underscored its commitment to regional stability and diplomatic resolution of disputes, illustrating its unique position of balancing NATO commitments with regional aspirations (Hinnebusch and Ehteshami, 2014; Adebahr, 2014; Park, 2012). Conversely, Israel viewed Iran's nuclear programme as an existential threat, which led to a multifaceted strategy aimed at countering Tehran. This strategy included international advocacy for sanctions, sophisticated cyber operations to disrupt Iran's nuclear development, and covert actions targeting key figures in Iran's nuclear sector (Kaye and Wehrey, 2023). Ahmadinejad's controversial statements about the Holocaust and calls for Israel's dissolution intensified Israeli fears, propelling both nations towards an increasingly adversarial stance (Takeyh, 2009; Maloney, 2015).

Iran's advanced nuclear programme was a key factor that facilitated Israel-GCC relations, as both shared a similar sense of security and ideological threat perceptions towards Iran. The evolving geopolitical landscape in the Middle East, particularly with a détente between Arab countries and Israel, underscored a strategic pivot away from the traditional Arab-Israeli enmity towards an alignment against a common perceived threat. Ahmadinejad's nuclear policy elicited a spectrum of reactions from neighbouring countries, highlighting the complexities of the relationship between Iran's nuclear policy and Middle Eastern geopolitics. Ahmadinejad became known for his vocal and often contentious positions on international issues. A central element of his foreign policy change was moving away from European ties towards greater cooperation with China and Russia, termed the "Look East Policy." Additionally, he sought to strengthen relations with Muslim-majority countries, African nations, and leftist Latin American states. The most formidable challenge to his foreign policy was the unresolved dispute over Iran's nuclear programme during his tenure (Hafezian, 2011).

Facing isolation due to Western sanctions, Iran sought support from alternative countries to counterbalance Western efforts to curb its nuclear programme (Garver, 2006; Juneau, 2015). The objective was to reinforce its position in global geopolitics and economics despite sanctions. The Look East policy represented a strategic pivot towards enhancing relationships with Russia and China, and integrating into frameworks such as the SCO. This shift in the context of the Look East Policy marked a departure from the Islamic Republic's foundational principle of “Neither East nor West, Islamic Republic”, which advocated for political and economic independence and non-alignment with major power blocs. This principle, which is grounded in the ethos of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, seeks to avoid aligning with major power blocs and pursue a course of independence (Akbarzadeh and Conduit, 2016).

This policy aimed to mitigate the impact of the sanctions and it facilitated cooperation and political leverage, and influenced Iran's standing in nuclear negotiations and its ability to counterbalance Western pressure. Russia and China are pivotal partners in Iran's nuclear development. Russia, in particular, has been directly involved in constructing Iran's nuclear facilities, such as the Bushehr nuclear power plant. Both countries advocated Iran's right to peaceful nuclear energy and opposed sanctions, providing Iran with crucial technological support and expertise. These relationships offered Iran a strategic counterbalance to Western efforts aimed at international isolation, enhancing its negotiating position on the global stage. The Look East policy reflects Iran's adaptability in response to international pressures and its strategic efforts to reshape its geopolitical environment to be more favourable and supportive of its objectives. By forging stronger alliances with the SCO, Iran aimed to diversify its international partnerships and reduce its dependence on Western markets. By strengthening ties with nations that support its stance on multiple issues such as nuclear programme, multilateralism, and energy security, Iran pursued to enhance its regional influence and safeguard its strategic interests. This strategic realignment highlights Iran's efforts to balance its foreign relations and foster a multipolar world order in which it can exercise greater autonomy and influence (Maloney, 2015; Akbarzadeh and Conduit, 2016; Mehdi and Jahangir, 2021).

China and Russia's involvement in Iran's energy sector and nuclear energy development, respectively, was pivotal, reflecting the strategic importance of these partnerships (Katzman, 2017; Dorraj and Currier, 2008; Sadjadpour, 2013; Kozhanov, 2018). Economically, Iran leveraged its significant hydrocarbon resources to engage with energy-hungry East Asian economies, becoming a key supplier and bolstering its economy despite sanctions. This economic engagement involved investments in Iran's oil and gas sectors, highlighting mutual benefits in the face of Western economic pressure (US Energy Information Administration, 2022; Ghafouri, 2009; Ehteshami, 2014).

Iran's Look East Policy under President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005–2013) was marked by a strategic pivot towards Eastern countries, particularly China and Russia, to mitigate Western pressures, especially those resulting from sanctions. This approach was multi-faceted, encompassing military, economic, and ideological dimensions. Iran's Look East Policy was thus multi-faceted, encompassing military, economic, and ideological dimensions. Ahmadinejad's administration focused on strengthening ties with China and Russia to circumvent Western sanctions and bolster Iran's defence capabilities. This shift was part of a broader strategy to ensure national security and economic stability amid increasing isolation from the West (Razani and Idris, 2014; Barzegar, 2010). Despite Western opposition, Iran enhanced its military and technological capabilities through collaborations with Russia and China. Additionally, it sought economic alliances with Southeast Asian countries to mitigate the impact of sanctions, though these relations were influenced by external pressures, particularly from the U.S. (Razani and Idris, 2014; Soltaninejad, 2017). Ahmadinejad's foreign policy was characterised by assertive rhetoric against the U.S. and Israel, reinforcing Iran's ideological stance and consolidating domestic political support. This ideological posture, combined with pragmatic alliances, defined his Look East policy (Kazemzadeh, 2007; Askari and Zarei, 2020). The policy aimed to reduce economic dependence on the West by fostering trade and investment relations with Eastern countries. Significant deals, such as the Iran-China agreement, underscored Iran's strategic pivot to Eastern markets (Rashid and Ghouri, 2021). This policy laid the groundwork for ongoing Eastward engagements in subsequent Iranian administrations.



However, Iran's Look East policy faced obstacles and limitations. Critics underscored deep-seated scepticism towards both Russia and China (Madadi, 2022). Reformists voiced concerns over the reliability of these powers, highlighting instances where Russia and China had supported UN Security Council resolutions against Iran, and questioned the depth and fidelity of their support. This scepticism was rooted in the historical consciousness of Iran's struggles for sovereignty, as exemplified by the Constitutional Revolution, the Oil Nationalisation, and the Islamic Revolution. Furthermore, the strategic cultures of Russia and China presented inherent contradictions with Iran's foreign policy ethos. Russia's assertive military doctrine and its historical tendencies towards cultural promotion and territorial expansion reflected a nationalist discourse that did not align with Iran's principles of resistance and independence. The rise of China as a power has led to regional and geopolitical shifts in power and competition with the USA, indicating that China is on its path towards becoming a new great power. China's foreign policy, premised on belief in its central role in international relations, diverges from Iran's perception of international relations, for instance Iran's emphasis on rejecting dominance and striving for a reformed UN structure and self-sufficiency (Schmidt, 2018; Madadi, 2022). Russia and China's interests were tied to Iran's estrangement with the West. Simply put, any revitalisation of Iran's relations with Western powers might not align with Moscow's and Beijing's strategic interests, potentially undermining the long-term viability of the Look East policy (Garver, 2011; Katzman, 2021).

The relationship between Russia and Iran, while marked by strategic cooperation, faced significant limitations stemming from historical distrust, geopolitical tensions, economic misalignments, and strategic divergences. The legacy of historical conflict and distrust between Russia and Iran continues to overshadow their bilateral relations. Despite pragmatic cooperation in areas such as military and nuclear technology, long-standing grievances prevent a deeper strategic partnership (Koolaei, Mousavi, and Abedi, 2020; Jalali, 2001). Competing interests in regions such as the Caucasus and Central Asia exacerbate tensions between Russia and Iran, as both nations seek to expand their influence. These rivalries often undermine efforts to forge a more comprehensive alliance (Dunaeva, 2013). The economic structures of Russia and Iran, both heavily reliant on energy exports, did not complement each other well. This lack of economic synergy limited the potential for significant bilateral trade and economic cooperation (Filin, Ravandi-Fadai, and Burova, 2016).

Moreover, both countries faced extensive international sanctions, which restricted their economic interactions and technological exchanges, and ultimately limited the scope and effectiveness of their economic engagements (Beznosova and Likhachev, 2023). From an ideological perspective, while Russia and Iran collaborated to counterbalance U.S. influence, their strategic objectives diverged significantly. Russia's global ambitions conflict with Iran's regional goals, resulting in a relationship that seemed to be more tactical and opportunistic than genuinely strategic (Parmeter, 2020; Therme, 2018). Importantly, Russia remained cautious about Iran developing nuclear weapons. This cautious stance led to a complex and often strained partnership in the nuclear domain (Katz, 2008).

## **6.6 Social Constructivism**

A social constructivist approach sheds new light on Iran's pursuit of nuclear capabilities during President Ahmadinejad's tenure by emphasising the role of socially constructed narratives in shaping Iran's nuclear policy. Within a social constructivist lens, Iran's nuclear programme becomes intricately linked to the construction and articulation of its national identity. Central to this national identity are narratives emphasising sovereignty, resistance to perceived Western imperialism, and the right to scientific and technological advancement. These narratives, central to Iran's national identity, are not preordained facts, but rather products of social interaction and historical experiences, as emphasised by social constructivism. The imposition of UNSC sanctions serves as a critical juncture. Through a social constructivist lens, these sanctions are not simply external pressures but are interpreted within Iran through the prism of historical grievances and a collective memory of foreign domination. President Ahmadinejad demonstrably capitalised on these socially constructed narratives. Through a social constructivist lens, Ahmadinejad's framing of the sanctions as unjust and a blatant violation of Iran's sovereign rights resonated deeply with existing narratives of victimhood and resistance, consequently garnering significant domestic support and justifying the continuation of the nuclear programme. By effectively appealing to these shared narratives, Ahmadinejad was able to mobilise public opinion in favour of his policies.

The act of enrichment was not just a technical advancement, but a potent symbol that resonated with these deeply held narratives. Iran, under Ahmadinejad's presidency, by defying international pressure to halt enrichment, projected an image of national resilience and its determination to control its own destiny and maintain the nuclear enrichment programme. Furthermore, social constructivism sheds light on the role of domestic audiences in shaping nuclear policies. Ahmadinejad strategically leveraged these narratives to garner public support for his policies. By framing the international community's concerns over enrichment as an attack on Iran's national sovereignty, Ahmadinejad mobilised public opinion in favour of continuing the programme. Social constructivism helps us understand how these narratives can be strategically used to cultivate a sense of national unity and purpose, potentially influencing the direction of the nuclear programme. The social constructivist approach sheds light on the crucial role of historical consciousness and collective memory in shaping current policy.

The national identity emphasised technological capability, independence, and national resilience. Central to this narrative construction was the portrayal of the nuclear programme as a symbol of justice, legitimacy, modernity, and resistance. Ahmadinejad's framing explicitly linked Iran's right to enrich uranium under the NPT to these broader narratives. Social constructivism sheds further light on how Ahmadinejad positioned Iran's nuclear programme within a larger global normative context. He strategically framed Iranian scientific advancements as contributions to a globally constructed narrative of resistance to an unjust international system. This framing resonated deeply with the existing narratives of resistance and empowerment held by oppressed nations worldwide. Through a social constructivist lens, we can understand how Ahmadinejad's strategic use of these narratives garnered domestic support for the programme. Social constructivism highlights how domestic audiences, shaped by a deeply ingrained national identity and revolutionary norms, view nuclear capability as a symbol of national pride and sovereignty. This domestic normative environment provided fertile ground for Ahmadinejad's defiant approach towards the West. Iran's leadership, leveraging historical grievances and nationalistic sentiments, portrayed the nuclear dispute as a manifestation of ongoing western aggression. This portrayal resonated strongly with the Iranian public and various political factions within the country that sought to consolidate domestic support for the government's nuclear agenda. The administration's approach to nuclear development, characterised by both defiance and a deep-seated narrative of independence and resistance, highlights the significant influence of ideational factors in shaping state behaviour.

## 6.7 Conclusion

This chapter explained the shift in Iran's nuclear strategy from the cooperative policy of the previous administration to a more assertive stance under President Ahmadinejad. Ahmadinejad's tenure was marked by a confrontational stance, underscored by Iran's refusal to allow the IAEA extensive inspections. His administration also sought to strengthen ties with Russia and China, emphasising nuclear, technological, and military cooperation, which played a crucial role in the context of the U.S. and international opposition to Iran's nuclear programme. Ahmadinejad publicly celebrated the advancement of uranium enrichment as a hallmark of Iran's scientific progress, aligning this achievement with the narrative of modernisation and framing it as essential for the nation's self-sufficiency in energy. During his UN General Assembly speeches, Ahmadinejad underscored Iran's sovereign right to develop nuclear technology, challenging international criticism and sanctions as breaches of international law and Iranian sovereignty. The mutual distrust and animosity between Iran and the West, exacerbated by historical grievances and ideological differences, hindered diplomatic progress, making it difficult to alter Iran's nuclear course through external pressure alone.

Iran chose a nuclear hedging approach, keeping the option of a weapons programme. The imposition of sanctions by the UNSC was framed as unjust and an infringement on Iran's sovereign rights. This portrayal not only reinforced Iran's victimisation narrative but also rallied domestic support for the nuclear programme. However, the legacy of Ahmadinejad was more complex than the straightforward demonisation prevalent during the electoral campaign. Ahmadinejad proved to be a formidable political figure. In his two terms, he aimed to expand the presidential sphere of influence, assertively marking his stance on significant policy issues. Ahmadinejad combined nationalism with his religious ideology, blending Iranian identity with Islam, portraying Iranians as a 'chosen people'. His campaign slogan, 'It's possible, and we can do it', encapsulated this fervent nationalism, suggesting limitless potential for Iranians. Resistance to foreign oppression is a key part of Iranian nationalist mythology and has widespread appeal, enabling Ahmadinejad to present an inclusive image.

Despite his rhetoric, criticism of his aggressive approach persisted within the political elite. Some argued that provoking the U.S. was unnecessary, as an American withdrawal from Iraq seemed inevitable. Moreover, a hasty American exit could lead to greater regional instability, with Iran and neighbouring countries left to address the aftermath. His successor, Rouhani, focused on his campaign for change. Rouhani's presidency, characterised by a shift towards engagement and negotiation that led to the JCPOA, aimed to alleviate economic sanctions in exchange for limitations on Iran's nuclear programme. Rouhani's approach to negotiations was shaped by the need to counterbalance the intensified international isolation during Ahmadinejad's presidency, aiming to restore economic stability through diplomatic engagement. The evolution of Iran's nuclear policy under Rouhani, set against the backdrop of national identity narratives and global politics, is examined in the subsequent chapter, highlighting the ongoing interplay between national identity, nuclear diplomacy, and international relations.

## ***Chapter 7. The Presidency of Rouhani (2013-2021) and Iran's Nuclear Policy***

### **7.1 Introduction**

As discussed in the previous chapter, under Ahmadinejad, Iran expanded its nuclear programme. Ahmadinejad vehemently asserted Iran's right to a full nuclear fuel cycle, including uranium enrichment, framing it as a matter of national pride and independence (Blackstock and Milkoreit, 2007; Soltaninejad, 2023). He adopted a confrontational stance towards the West, rejecting demands to suspend uranium enrichment and escalating tensions with provocative rhetoric (Soltaninejad, 2023). Under Ahmadinejad, Iran restarted its uranium conversion facility in Isfahan in 2005 and expanded its enrichment activities, leading to referral to the UNSC and the imposition of sanctions (Blackstock and Milkoreit, 2007; Soltaninejad, 2023). His hardline approach was driven by a belief that defiance would strengthen domestic legitimacy and rally public support behind the nuclear programme (Blackstock and Milkoreit, 2007; Soltaninejad, 2023). He used the nuclear issue as an instrument of partisan politics, depicting reformists as defeatists willing to negotiate away Iran's interests (Soltaninejad, 2023). His presidency deepened divisions within Iran's political elite over the direction of the nuclear programme and relations with the international community (Blackstock and Milkoreit, 2007; Soltaninejad, 2023). Ahmadinejad's uncompromising stance on the nuclear issue contributed to Iran's increasing isolation and economic hardship due to sanctions (Blackstock and Milkoreit, 2007; Soltaninejad, 2023).

This chapter examines the shifts in Iran's nuclear policy and its international stance under the presidency of Rouhani. Through the analysis of Iran's evolving national identity, this chapter examines how Rouhani's presidency marked a strategic shift towards engagement and diplomacy. Beginning with the promise of moderation, Rouhani sought to re-engage with the international community. This approach culminated in the JCPOA, which sought to curb Iran's nuclear activities in exchange for lifting economic sanctions. This agreement was not just a diplomatic breakthrough but also a strategic repositioning of Iran's image as a rational actor. Rouhani declared, "This victory is a victory for wisdom, moderation, and maturity over extremism" (BBC, 2013). Western powers and the P5+1 states hoped that Rouhani's presidency would usher in a new era of cooperation and dialogue, addressing long-standing concerns over Iran's nuclear programme. The international community looked to Iran to take concrete steps towards building trust and improving human rights conditions within the country. However,

economic struggles, a powerful conservative faction, and renewed tensions with the United States, particularly after Trump's withdrawal from the JCPOA, hindered his diplomatic efforts. Scepticism persisted because of concerns about Iran's regional activities and missile programme, even as the JCPOA sought to normalise its nuclear programme and acknowledged Iran's right to enrich uranium under the NPT (Zaccara and Haghirian, 2020).

## **7.2 Rouhani's election and His Moderation Discourse**

The election of Rouhani marked a pivotal moment, set against the backdrop of Ahmadinejad's confrontational policies and the heavy toll of international sanctions (Menashri, 2013, p. 9). The electorate's choice reflected a collective aspiration for a change towards diplomatic engagement with the world. Rouhani, with his background as a former nuclear negotiator, aimed to navigate the complex terrain of international diplomacy to alleviate sanctions that crippled Iran's economy (Shahshahani, 2014). During his inaugural speech at the UN General Assembly, Rouhani articulated his vision as follows:

“With global cooperation against violence and extremism, I have no doubt that the future is bright. Future world conditions will improve through moderation. The UN agenda should include a programme called The World Against Violence and Extremism, and all nations, international organisations, and civil society organisations should organise new initiatives to advance the principles of moderation globally. I have suggested the word 'moderation' to my people to draw their attention to the necessity of forging a new course and to inspire hope in their society. Moderation is the better way to go.” (ISNA, 2013).

Before Rouhani's election in 2013, Iran faced severe economic challenges due to international sanctions related to its nuclear programme. These sanctions caused significant currency depreciation, high inflation, and widespread unemployment, leading to public discontent. Iran was highly polarised, with hardliners such as Tehran Mayor Ghalibaf holding significant sway, while reformists were marginalised, but still advocated for greater openness and global engagement. The disqualification of Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani by the Guardian Council was a notable blow to the reformists, who then supported Aref. In this contentious atmosphere, Rouhani emerged as a candidate for moderation and pragmatism, symbolised by purple colours and a key.

His campaign promised economic recovery and international engagement, and secured the support of reformists and moderates. The 2013 presidential debates, especially between Rouhani and Ghalibaf, highlight intense factional competition. Rouhani's statement, "I am not a colonel. I am a jurist," distanced him from opponents, and his pledge that "Both the centrifuge and the wheels of the economy and people's lives must turn" resonated with the public. With the withdrawal of Aref, Rouhani consolidated the reformist vote, securing approximately 51% of the vote and becoming the seventh president of Iran. His administration, "Government of Prudence and Hope," aimed to address economic and diplomatic challenges (Iranian Students' News Agency, 2020). Rouhani's presidency was marked by a historic phone call with US President Barack Obama during his 2013 visit to the United Nations General Assembly. This fifteen-minute conversation was the first direct communication between Iranian and American leaders since the 1979 embassy crisis, facilitating the subsequent nuclear negotiations with the P5+1 and leading to the JCPOA. Rouhani later noted that this engagement was crucial in expediting the negotiation process (Iranian Students' News Agency, 2020).

Rouhani's policy shift indicated a broader consensus within Iran and the need for strategic recalibration to break out of isolation and embark on a path towards economic recovery and the normalisation of relations with the international community (Menashri, 2013; Bastani, 2014). Rouhani's promises of "prudence and hope" resonated with the eagerness of modernity, the restoration of friendly relations with the world, and a resolution to the nuclear impasse. Rouhani said that the administration's approach to international relations is characterised by a 'discourse of moderation,' which is not synonymous with capitulation, concession, or indifference (Rouhani, 2014). He pointed out "Although the sanctions did not achieve their ultimate goal, they significantly impacted the lives of our people. The nuclear programme was subjected to numerous sanctions under Chapter VII of the United Nations Charter by the UNSC." (Rouhani, 2014).



Supreme Leader Khamenei endorsed Rouhani's nuclear policy. Rouhani's administration pursued a top priority to mitigate the severe economic hardship caused by international sanctions, and embarked on efforts to improve relations with Western nations, but the results were met with mixed reactions, both domestically and internationally (Gaietta, 2015). The pro-reform and moderate groups that supported Rouhani in 2013 were almost all united in their support for the administration's foreign policy, despite criticising the slow pace of domestic change. At the societal level, the breadth of public support for Rouhani's key priority—mitigating the economic crisis stemming from sanctions—was greater than the public support afforded to Khatami's administration for its focus on political development (Bastani, 2014). Rouhani, a longstanding figure within the Islamic Revolution, was intricately tied to the existing theocratic system and the *Velayat-e Faqih*. In practice, despite expressing hope to improve relations with the United States, Rouhani distanced himself from direct negotiations, likely because of the considerable domestic political risks involved. The historical animosity between the U.S. and Iran, exemplified by the hostage crisis of 1979–81 and the subsequent portrayal of the U.S. embassy in Tehran as a museum of the 'Great Satan,' continues to underscore the deep-seated tensions that any Iranian president would need to navigate.

In his analysis of political dynamics following the Islamic Revolution, Rouhani frequently referred to two currents: “radical” and “moderate.” He traced his moderation and the roots of these tendencies to pre-revolutionary times, affirming his lifelong commitment to moderation. Rouhani stated, “I have always disliked extremism since the beginning of my political career, considering it harmful to the country, national interests, the Islamic *Ummah*, and global security” (Centre for Strategic Research, 2021). Upon winning the 2013 elections, Rouhani sought to re-articulate the discourse of moderation in his speeches. He succinctly described moderation as “creating a balance between ideals and reality, guiding reality towards ideals” (Centre for Strategic Research, 2021). The discourse of moderation, while rejecting extremism, does not negate idealism. Instead, it promotes what Rouhani terms “realistic idealism” (Centre for Strategic Research, 2021). This approach emphasises the pragmatic pursuit of ideals, balancing aspirations with the practicalities of governance. Foreign Minister Zarif was a key figure in this political discourse, and foreign policy was Rouhani's primary focus and source of hope.

In his speech at the ceremony marking the handover of the Foreign Ministry portfolio, President Rouhani identified foreign policy as the “key” to solving problems:

“Foreign policy is highly sensitive, and if I may say so, the key to solving our problems at this juncture lies in foreign policy and those who must bear the burden of foreign policy. One of the clear messages of the people is a message regarding the style and approach of the country's foreign policy, both in terms of policy formulation, decision-making, and implementation.” (Rouhani, 2013).

Mr. Rouhani also highlighted the importance of foreign policy in his address to the *Majlis*, stating: “In a word, effective and constructive engagement with others is the main axis of the government's overall planning in the field of foreign policy.” (Rouhani, 2013). Rouhani's main foreign policy aim was to negotiate with the United States. This programme was crucial to Rouhani and his political allies in that many political and social demands were postponed. The reformists deprioritised political development to fully support the government in negotiations with the United States. This strategic alignment aimed to secure the nuclear deal, reflecting the importance placed on the programme as a means to assert national sovereignty and provide economic relief through the removal of sanctions.

### **7.3 Analysis of the JCPOA and UNSC Resolution 2231**

When Rouhani took office, Iran's uranium enrichment centrifuges increased from 300 in 2005 to over 19,000 at the time, with an enrichment level of 20 percent intended for conversion into nuclear fuel for a civilian research reactor in Tehran (International Crisis Group, 2013). In 2013, the United States extended its olive branch by offering to negotiate Iran's nuclear issues unconditionally (Geranmayeh, 2017). Salehi, who was in charge of the Iranian Atomic Energy Agency during that period, played an influential role in securing Khamenei's authorisation for direct negotiations between Iran and the US (Parsi, 2017). It is important to note that an initial backchannel diplomacy between Iran and the USA, characterised by confidential and informal communication between the representatives of the two countries, played a crucial role in reaching the nuclear agreement in 2013. Backchannel diplomacy provided a platform for Iran and the USA to explore the possibilities of a nuclear agreement away from the public eye and the pressures of domestic politics. This approach allowed for more flexibility in negotiations, enabling both sides to discuss sensitive issues and test for potential compromises (Burns, 2019).

During these negotiations and backchannel meetings facilitated by Oman, both parties could articulate their core concerns away from the prying eyes of international media and the public (Smith, 2014). These informal channels were valuable in taking steps towards trust after decades of entrenched distrust, a residue of historical confrontations such as the 1979 U.S. embassy hostage crisis and the subsequent designation of Iran as part of an “Axis of Evil” by the United States in 2001. Represented by Secretary of State John Kerry, the United States had generally signalled a readiness to accept Iran's nuclear enrichment without preconditions. However, the US initially kept the sanctions alive, which aimed to make Tehran change its nuclear policy and compel the Iranian leadership to implement P5+1's demands to reduce the enrichment level and take confidence-building measures (Meier, 2013, pp. 9–10). The new round of negotiations culminated in the adoption of the JPOA in Geneva in 2013. This preliminary agreement aimed to temporarily suspend Iran's nuclear enrichment programme in exchange for the easing of economic sanctions by the United States and the EU. It set the stage for protracted negotiations aimed at long-term resolution (US Department of Treasury, 2020). The JPOA aimed to suspend parts of Iran's nuclear enrichment programme in exchange for the easing of some economic sanctions, providing a foundation for the JCPOA in 2015 (US Department of Treasury, 2020).

The objective of these negotiations was to achieve a comprehensive and long-term agreement ensuring that Iran's nuclear programme remained exclusively peaceful. This comprehensive agreement included a mutually defined enrichment programme with practical limitations and transparency measures to confirm the peaceful nature of the programme. The process was designed to be reciprocal and step-by-step, leading to the comprehensive lifting of all UNSC sanctions as well as related multilateral and national sanctions associated with Iran's nuclear programme (Radio Farda, 2013). Iran will not enrich uranium beyond 5% for six months. No new uranium enrichment facilities could be established. Iran could continue its research and development programme under IAEA supervision, and agreed to provide specific information to the IAEA, including details on nuclear facility designs, descriptions of each building at nuclear sites, operational levels of each facility, information on uranium mines and mills, and primary source data within three months of commencing these measures (Khabar Online, 2013).

Although the reformist government celebrated the JPOA as a diplomatic victory, the extent of Iran's enrichment programme and the lifting of sanctions were major stumbling blocks to the agreement. As a result, the negotiations that began in February 2014 encountered hurdles (Einhorn, 2015). The talks were extended into the first quarter of 2015, reflecting Iran's compliance with key commitments that were significant to the objectives of the negotiations. The limitations placed on uranium stockpiles aimed to discreetly cap Iran's potential to produce nuclear weapons by restricting the quantity of uranium enriched to a level close to weapons-grade. These technical concessions were integral to the broader goals of ensuring the peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear programme through enhanced transparency and stringent monitoring mechanisms. Rouhani showed a policy shift towards engagement with Western powers, marking a departure from Ahmadinejad's confrontational approach. This was reflective of a strategic recalibration aimed at alleviating economic sanctions to bolster Iran's economy. Iran and the P5+1 finally agreed on the JCPOA in July 2015, a comprehensive agreement aimed at ensuring the peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear programme (European Union External Action, 2015; BBC News, 2015).

The JCPOA was endorsed by the UNSC Resolution 2231, "supporting the essential and independent role of the IAEA in verifying compliance with safeguard agreements, including the non-diversion of declared nuclear material to undeclared purposes and the absence of undeclared nuclear material and undeclared nuclear activities, and, in this context, to ensure the exclusively peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear programme" (United Nations Security Council, 2015, p. 2/104). The UNSC Resolution 2231's endorsement of the JCPOA provided it with binding international legal status. Resolution 2231 was passed with an overwhelming majority under Article 25 of the United Nations Charter, obligating member states to comply with its stipulations. Iran was called upon to cooperate fully with the IAEA. One of the key features of Resolution 2231 is the provision for a "snap back" mechanism, which allows for the automatic reinstatement of UN sanctions if Iran is found to be non-compliant with the JCPOA. This resolution departs from the six prior Council resolutions under Article 41 of Chapter VII of the Charter.

This was an important step in the approach towards reinforcing non-proliferation while acknowledging Iran's rights under the NPT. For the first time, the UNSC recognised the rights of a non-nuclear weapons state under the NPT to maintain a full nuclear fuel cycle, including enrichment, contingent upon NPT obligations. There was a convergence of political, economic, and security interests in solving the dispute. Prior resolutions, notably the stringent measures under Resolution 1929, Article 41, which imposed severe economic sanctions on Iran and reflected serious concerns regarding Iran's nuclear activities, were cancelled. Drawing on the 1929 resolution, I argue that it included comprehensive sanctions lists and incorporated possibilities regarding the use of or threat of force. Five years after resolution 1929, the UNSC decided to lift certain restrictions after a decade, contingent on the successful implementation of the JCPOA. While Resolution 2231 explicitly states that its provisions should not set a precedent for other states, their application in legal interpretations and future nuclear negotiations remains a potential reference point for states aspiring to complete their nuclear fuel cycles. It draws attention to the intricate balance between non-proliferation and the state's right to peaceful nuclear energy. Thus, this resolution effectively set aside six prior resolutions—1696, 1737, 1747, 1803, 1835, and 1929—that imposed the most stringent sanctions on Iran.

The Rouhani administration and its reformers celebrated this as a tremendous diplomatic achievement for the government. Rouhani's administration sold this momentum as a considerable endeavour to keep the promise from the 2012 election campaign, namely removing Iran from the UNSC's agenda. In retrospect, the adoption of UNSC Resolution 2231 represents a seminal moment in the history of international relations, marking the first time that the Council rescinded its own resolutions. The annulment of the sanctions reflects a substantial shift in the international community's approach towards Iran, transitioning from punitive measures to engagement and negotiation. This shift sharply contrasts with the tenure of President Ahmadinejad, under whom Iran's nuclear case escalated to the UNSC, leading to increased scrutiny and sanctions. This resolution reaffirms Iran's right to develop nuclear energy for peaceful purposes in alignment with the NPT, marking a fundamental shift from previous punitive measures to acknowledging Iran's rights within the framework of international nuclear law. Explicitly, this resolution emphasises the right of member states, in accordance with Articles 1 and 2 of that treaty, to develop and use nuclear energy for peaceful purposes without discrimination.

The complete removal of these sanctions was contingent upon further international verifications and approvals, including crucial forthcoming decisions by the U.S. Congress, which determined the conditions and timing of the formal repeal of sanctions, contingent upon Iran's compliance with the JCPOA commitments. The JCPOA established a limitation period, with various restrictions set to expire over time, ranging from 10 to 25 years, depending on the provision (Mardani and Hooshmand, 2016, p. 70). The JCPOA introduced a procurement channel, overseen by the IAEA and the UN, regulating Iran's import of dual-used materials and technology to ensure they were not diverted to a weapons programme. This verification mechanism was deemed crucial for building international confidence in Iran's nuclear programme. The JCPOA outlined a timeline and obligation for all parties to lift sanctions. The implementation phase began on January 16, 2016, contingent on the IAEA's verification of Iran's adherence to the agreement.

The JCPOA was heralded as a diplomatic milestone by the UN Secretary-General, enhancing global non-proliferation norms and ending one of the Security Council's most stringent sanctions. This agreement not only mitigated a significant international security concern but also opened avenues for Iran's increased engagement with the global community, underscoring the potential of diplomacy in resolving complex international disputes (The Security Council, 2016). The IAEA's reports to its Board of Governors and the UNSC were critical in providing the international community with an objective assessment of Iran's compliance with the JCPOA. The Rouhani administration represented a transformative period in Iran's relationship with the IAEA, embraced transparency, and facilitated progress in the verification of Iran's nuclear programme. By granting the IAEA increased access to nuclear sites and providing detailed reports, Iran not only advanced its own agenda of sanctions relief but also contributed to global nuclear non-proliferation efforts (Fitzpatrick, 2017, pp. 19–60). The IAEA supported the specific goals of the agreement and contributed to the global nuclear safety and non-proliferation objectives (Kerr, 2017, pp. 261-273).

The JCPOA limited Iran's nuclear capabilities, ensuring that any attempt to develop nuclear weapons would be delayed, thereby enhancing global security (Robinson, 2022; Pedraza, 2015). This imposed stringent restrictions on the uranium enrichment capacity and centrifuge development in Iran. Under the agreement, Iran agreed to limit its uranium enrichment to a 3.67% purity level, which is sufficient for civil nuclear power generation, but far below the 90% required for a nuclear weapon. Additionally, Iran was required to reduce its stockpile of enriched uranium from approximately 10,000 to 300 kg. The agreement also restricted the number and type of centrifuges that Iran could use. The JCPOA declares: "Iran will keep its level of uranium enrichment at up to 3.67 percent for 15 years." (See Part F: ENRICHMENT CAPACITY, p. 9, No. 28.) In addition, it declares the following:

"For 15 years, Iran will install gas centrifuge machines or enrichment-related infrastructure, whether suitable for uranium enrichment, research, and development, or stable isotope enrichment, exclusively at the locations and for the activities specified under this JCPOA." (See Part F. ENRICHMENT CAPACITY, p. 9, No. 31.) Regarding the Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant, the text declares: "Iran will not conduct any uranium enrichment or any uranium enrichment-related R&D and will have no nuclear material at the Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant (FFEP) for 15 years." (See Part H. Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant, p. 12. No. 45.) Regarding transparency related to enrichment, the JCPOA says: "For 15 years, the Natanz enrichment site will be the sole location for all of Iran's uranium enrichment-related activities, including safeguarded R&D." (See Part P, Transparency Related to Enrichment, p. 22, No. 72.).

A key aspect of the JCPOA is the stipulation that limits Iran's uranium enrichment to no more than 3.67 percent over 15 years. This threshold, which is suitable for civilian energy production and below the 90 percent required for weapons-grade uranium, serves as a fundamental barrier against the proliferation of nuclear weapons (Fitzpatrick, 2017). Additionally, the JCPOA imposes strict limitations on the installation of gas centrifuges and the development of enrichment-related infrastructure, restricting these activities to designated sites. This measure not only prevents the diversion of technology for potentially non-peaceful purposes but also enhances the IAEA's capacity for effective monitoring and verification (Kerr, 2017). To further solidify the non-proliferation intent of the agreement, the JCPOA mandates that no uranium enrichment or related R&D take place at the Fordow Fuel Enrichment Plant for 15 years (Albright and Stricker, 2015). Moreover, by centralising all uranium enrichment activities, including safeguarded R&D, at the Natanz site, the agreement simplifies oversight and ensures transparency.

This centralisation is critical for the IAEA's streamlined verification processes, reinforcing the agreement's framework to guarantee that Iran's nuclear activities remain strictly peaceful (Khazaie et al., 2022). By implementing a uranium enrichment cap well below weapon grade levels, regulating centrifuge technology, and centralising nuclear activities at monitored sites, the JCPOA addressed critical non-proliferation challenges. These provisions were designed to ensure the transparency of Iran's nuclear programme and restrict its purposes to peaceful endeavours, aligning with the international community's broader non-proliferation goals and contributing to regional stability. Moreover, the successful implementation of these measures, supported by continuous and comprehensive IAEA verification mechanisms, was crucial for building and maintaining international trust. This trust was fundamental to the ongoing cooperation required to sustain agreements and enhance global security. However, the effectiveness of the JCPOA continues to be a subject of scrutiny and debate, as the US withdrew from the nuclear agreement.

Wheeler (2009) discusses the concept of a "leap of trust" in the context of US-Iranian nuclear relations, highlighting the deep-seated distrust that both countries had towards each other due to historical grievances and conflicting interests. He argues that the distrust was exacerbated by Iran's nuclear activities and the US's foreign policy stance, including the labelling of Iran as part of the "Axis of Evil" (Wheeler, 2007, p. 6-13). Wheeler (2013) explored the mechanisms through which diplomatic transformations occur, suggesting that trust-building is a critical component of this process. Under Rouhani, Iran embarked on a diplomatic offensive aimed at demonstrating its willingness to engage transparently with the P5+1. This effort was epitomised by the election of Zarif as Foreign Minister, whose constructive engagement with Western diplomats was pivotal in moderating international discourse around Iran's nuclear programme (Wheeler, 2013, p. 477–496). The negotiation of the JCPOA can be seen as an exercise in trust-building, where Iran and the P5+1 countries had to navigate a complex web of suspicions and verify each other's commitments. Wheeler (2009) argues that the greatest challenge in nuclear abolition is establishing trust (Wheeler, 2009). This is particularly relevant to the JCPOA, which includes rigorous inspection mechanisms and was designed to incrementally build trust among the parties involved. This demonstrated that more trust could lead to a more secure world, contrary to the realist assumption that trust is naive in international politics (Wheeler, 2010, pp. 258–276). Trust played a crucial role in facilitating the Iranian agreement with P5+1 and challenged the prevailing realist paradigms. The JCPOA expanded the scope and nature of international safeguards and verification and demonstrated that trust can lead to successful



multilateral diplomacy and cooperation, contradicting realist arguments that states only act based on conflicting national interests.

The role of Iran's Foreign Minister during the JCPOA negotiations highlights the importance of interpersonal relationships in building trust in diplomatic processes. Individuals such as Zarif have the capacity to shape the trajectory of negotiations through their personal engagement and ability to foster trust with their counterparts. This emphasises the critical impact of skilled diplomacy and personal rapport on achieving diplomatic outcomes (Wheeler, 2013). Secretary Kerry and Zarif's diplomatic style, coupled with a deep understanding of both the technical aspects of nuclear negotiations and the political landscapes of the countries involved, made them key figures in reducing historical distrust between Iran and the West. This was particularly evident in the JCPOA negotiations, where Kerry and Zarif's efforts were not solely focused on the technicalities of Iran's nuclear programme but also on persuading the P5+1 countries of their intentions and genuine commitment to the NPT and international cooperation. This work suggests that a foundational level of trust was essential for both sides to move beyond the entrenched hostility and scepticism that had characterised their relations for decades. Zarif's role was crucial in this process; his diplomatic efforts, combined with his personal interactions with counterparts such as then-US Secretary of State John Kerry, helped humanise the negotiation process. These personal interactions were vital in building the trust necessary for the agreement's success.

I contend that, in the realm of international politics, trust is fundamentally about having confidence that an opponent will not take advantage of weaknesses to further their own agenda, particularly in efforts aimed at achieving peace. Trust involves an awareness of the positive intentions of the other side. It means that the other party will act in good faith without seeking to exploit situations for unilateral gain. This perspective underscores the importance of genuine intentions and mutual respect in international relations, beyond the guarantees offered by formal agreements and verification protocols. However, achieving lasting trust requires addressing the fundamental issues that have fuelled tensions for decades, including past grievances, differing ideological perspectives, and ongoing regional conflicts.

## **7.4 Dynamic Analysis of National Identity Narratives**

### **7.4.1 Operationalisation**

Iran's nuclear policy and diplomatic strategy reflected a conscious effort to redefine its nuclear policy, its approaches to domestic policies, and its policies in the world more generally. This shift aligns with the principles of social constructivism, which suggest that a state's identity and interests are shaped through social interactions and discursive practices. Iran's engagement with the international community, particularly through the negotiations of the JCPOA, was a strategic move aimed at alleviating the pressure of sanctions and an attempt to shift the perception surrounding Iran from that of a rogue state to that of a rational actor that could balance its right to technological advancement with the international norms of non-proliferation. By publicly advocating Iran's nuclear rights while committing to international agreements, Rouhani reinforced a narrative of national rights and legitimacy. His administration consistently argued that Iran's nuclear programme was for peaceful purposes and within the rights afforded by international treaties, countering the narrative of irrationality and danger previously ascribed to Iran.

Rouhani's policies illustrate the dynamic interplay between Iran's constructed national identity and its foreign policy decisions, underscoring the important role of social interactions and international engagement in shaping state behaviour. By prioritising diplomatic engagement over confrontation, Rouhani sought to break the cycle of isolation and hostility and secure a more favourable position in the international system. Rouhani's administration approached the nuclear programme not as a security concern but as a symbol of Iran's national pride, identifying it as an area ripe for cooperation with the international community. His diplomatic strategies, reminiscent of those employed by Presidents Hashemi and Khatami, emphasised peaceful nuclear development while giving strong preference for cooperation with the international community, particularly the West. Rouhani's nuclear policy can be viewed through the lens of Iran's national identity and its quest for legitimacy and prestige on the international stage. As a self-proclaimed moderate, he sought to resolve the nuclear issue through diplomacy and engagement with the international community (Ditto, 2013).

His approach was driven by the belief that Iran's nuclear programme was a matter of national pride and a symbol of its scientific and technological advancement (Ditto, 2013). This resonated with Iran's self-perception as a regional power and its desire for international recognition and respect. At the same time, Rouhani aimed to strike a balance between asserting Iran's nuclear rights and avoiding further isolation through pragmatic diplomacy (Zaccara and Haghiri, 2020). Rouhani faced domestic opposition from hardliners who saw the nuclear programme as a matter of ideological resistance against Western pressure and were concerned that the JCPOA could undermine their conservative agenda and open Iran to greater Western influence. Rouhani's nuclear policy aimed to balance Iran's national identity aspirations, regional ambitions, and the pragmatic need to resolve the nuclear issue through diplomacy, reflecting the complex interplay between identity, legitimacy, and foreign policy in Iran's decision-making (Zaccara and Haghiri, 2020).

#### **7.4.2 Modernity**

Iran's national identity narrative evolved to reflect a shift towards modernity, characterised by greater diplomatic engagement. Iran pursued economic revitalisation, notably through substantial investments in its industrial infrastructure. Central to this narrative of modernity was also Iran's commitment to the NPT and active cooperation with the IAEA. This commitment was underscored by Iran's willingness to engage in comprehensive international cooperation across various scientific and economic sectors to reshape its international image and foster collaborative relationships. By redefining Iran's nuclear policy as part of a peaceful and scientific agenda, Rouhani sought to shift Iran's image from that of a pariah state to that of a responsible member of the international community. In practice, this approach involved a series of diplomatic engagements and public statements that emphasised Iran's dedication to peaceful scientific progress. Emphasising transparency and negotiation, Rouhani aimed to dismantle the prevailing global apprehension associated with Iran while also addressing the harsh economic sanctions that had been exacerbated during Ahmadinejad's tenure. The reformers attributed the severe economic sanctions to mismanagement and a misguided approach to the international engagement of the conservatives, and sought public support to rejuvenate Iran's modernity in all segments, particularly the economy.

The Rouhani administration's narrative of modernity in Iran, particularly in relation to its nuclear policy, was multifaceted and aimed to balance national pride, economic development, and international diplomacy. He campaigned on a platform of economic growth, which he argued could only be achieved by ending Iran's international isolation and lifting its economic sanctions. This required the resolution of the nuclear crisis through diplomatic means. Rouhani's government aimed to modernise Iran's economy by expanding trade relations, preferably with the West, and strengthening the private sector. Moreover, to create a business-friendly environment and incentivise international corporations to enter the Iranian market, Rouhani's administration emphasised the need for higher transparency and legal reliability in business transactions. Under Rouhani, the Iranian leadership framed the acceptance of the JCPOA as an act of "heroic flexibility," which was endorsed by the supreme leader of Iran, demonstrating that Iran could be a pragmatic state willing to engage constructively with the international community. Rouhani's administration recognised the need for pragmatic diplomacy to achieve economic and political goals. This approach was intended to show that Iran could assert its rights while also being a responsible international actor (Jalilvand and Vogt, 2021).

#### **7.4.3 Justice and National Rights**

Rouhani shifted towards a diplomatic and engagement-oriented approach. His policy was to underpin adherence to the NPT, which was the fundamental legal basis for Iran's nuclear policy. He endorsed Iran's right to peaceful nuclear technology within the confines of the NPT, underscoring negotiation and dialogue as preferred ways to resolve disputes. This policy shift sought to contest Iran's international perceptions as a defiant, instead stressing its commitment to justice and adherence to international law. This shift contemplated a wider strategic realignment of Iran's foreign policy, with the intention of repositioning Iran within the international community as a trustworthy and cooperative state and to present Iran as committed to the principles of justice and international law. Rouhani's emphasis on legal and diplomatic engagement facilitated Iran's re-engagement with the international community, opening avenues for economic cooperation and contributed to altering international perceptions of Iran from a defiant state to one willing to engage constructively on the basis of mutual respect and legal principles.

In Rouhani, the West seemed to see someone who was thoughtful and less rigid. Rouhani understood that the Islamic Republic needed reform, that it needed a much better relationship with the West, and that it had no economic revitalisation unless it dropped its anti-Western attitude. At the United Nations General Assembly in New York, Rouhani declared, “Provided that the rights of the Iranian nation are preserved, we are prepared to reach an agreement.” (Rouhani, 2014). The development of an indigenous nuclear fuel cycle was portrayed as a symbol of Iran’s national identity. This narrative emphasised Iran's right to technological advancement and self-sufficiency, which were seen as essential components of national pride and dignity. The narrative of justice was deeply rooted in Iran's historical experiences, particularly its encounters with colonialism and foreign intervention. This historical context fostered a strong sense of national rights and resistance against the perceived injustices imposed by external powers. The nuclear programme was thus seen as a means to assert Iran's sovereignty and resist foreign domination (Mohebbati, 2017). Rouhani recognised that economic growth and modernisation were crucial for Iran's development. The severe economic sanctions imposed on Iran crippled its economy, and resolving the nuclear issue through diplomacy was seen as a way to lift these sanctions and integrate the country into the global economy. This pragmatic approach was framed within the broader narrative of achieving justice for the Iranian people by improving their economic conditions (Shanahan, 2015).

#### **7.4.4 Sovereignty and Independence**

Rouhani’s strategic choice to engage in negotiations with the P5+1 and to relocate Iran's nuclear dossier away from the UNSC constituted a deliberate effort to fortify sovereignty and independence through diplomatic channels (Wastnidge, 2016). This decision underscores the Rouhani administration's steadfast commitment to prioritising diplomatic engagement as a fundamental element of Iran's foreign policy framework, exemplified notably by the JCPOA. By opting for diplomacy, Rouhani’s administration departed from previous confrontational strategies to assuage international concerns regarding Iran's nuclear enrichment programme while fostering greater integration into the global community, all while safeguarding Iran's national interests. Furthermore, the decision to transfer the nuclear dossier away from the UNSC was a strategic move to reclaim control over Iran's nuclear policy, asserting the nation's sovereignty in managing its affairs without external interference.

This adjustment aligned with Iran's broader purpose of asserting its independence and autonomy in international relations, signalling a departure from past reliance on coercive measures and unilateral dictates. This commitment was expressed through the prioritisation of dialogue and negotiation as core principles of Iran's foreign policy approach. The narrative of Iran's sovereignty and independence was re-articulated through proactive diplomatic engagement rather than confrontational tactics. This strategic pivot was not merely rhetorical, but was actively pursued through a series of international negotiations and agreements that aimed to reintegrate Iran into the global community. In an interview with Fareed Zakaria regarding Iran's nuclear technology, when asked if he believed it would be possible to bridge the gap by allowing Iran to maintain a limited enrichment capacity while largely foregoing enrichment, Rouhani responded:

“Iran will not accept this. Peaceful nuclear technology, including enrichment, is part of the inalienable rights of states. We are only willing to move forward in the legal context. If somebody wants to talk with us outside these legal contexts, it tells us that they do not want to have an agreement. With regard to nuclear technology, the Iranians are very sensitive. It is a part of our national pride, and nuclear technology has become indigenous.” (Rouhani, 2014).

#### **7.4.5 Anti-Oppression**

Rouhani's tenure marked a significant strategic re-orientation to illustrate its readiness and potential for diplomatic engagement. For instance, Rouhani's administration actively participated in numerous UN assemblies and formed new bilateral and multilateral relationships, which were crucial in mitigating anti-Western sentiments and confrontational discourse that traditionally characterised Iran's foreign policy. These interactions were critical in re-establishing trust and, in turn, affected Iran's cooperation with several Western countries. Additionally, the central role of Zarif, particularly in negotiations with the U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry was crucial in advancing negotiations that culminated in the JCPOA. Zarif's diplomatic role was instrumental in breaking down several long-standing barriers between Iran and Western nations, particularly through his leadership in conducting nuclear negotiations.

Rouhani's departure from the anti-oppression narrative played a role in facilitating a temporary easing of tensions and fostered dialogue. Rouhani moved away from the confrontational, ideological rhetoric that characterised Ahmadinejad's presidency, which had exacerbated tensions with the West. Instead, Rouhani adopted a more pragmatic and moderate approach, emphasising Iran's desire for engagement and reintegration into the global economy. He framed the nuclear issue as a matter of national rights and technological advancement, rather than an ideological struggle against oppression. This strategic approach resonated with Iran's quest for international recognition and respect, while avoiding the provocative anti-Western rhetoric of the past. Rouhani and Zarif's concerted efforts were emblematic of Iran's strategic pivot to manage its international relations, moving from antagonism to a diplomacy-first approach that emphasised negotiation and cooperation.

Rouhani's administration demonstrated that Iran's nuclear programme was within the framework of international cooperation and legal norms. I contend that Rouhani's nuclear policy had to ensure that it was not going to cross the Islamic Republic's core interests or so-called red lines. This stance was predicated on the belief that Iran's right to develop nuclear technology, including uranium enrichment, was non-negotiable and that any agreement freezing out Iran's capability for indigenous enrichment would not be acceptable to Iranian leaders or the public. In retrospect, the narrative of anti-oppression under Rouhani diverged from the previous administration by focusing on diplomatic engagement, particularly with the West. This approach impacted the construction of Iran's nuclear policy by emphasising Iran's aspirations for technological advancement within the framework of international cooperation. By portraying nuclear technology as a symbol of scientific progress, Rouhani aimed to counterbalance perceptions of oppression with a narrative of dignified and constructive engagement.

## **7.5 Causal Analysis**

### **7.5.1 Iran's Nuclear Policy and National Identity**

Domestic Iranian public dissatisfaction with the socio-economic situation, resulting particularly from the impacts of crippling sanctions on Iran's economy, provided a domestic backdrop conducive to Rouhani's policy discourse on moderation and his policy agenda for international engagement. This reflected a collective domestic desire to improve relations with the world (Jafari et al., 2018; Haji Yousefi, 2018). Rouhani considered economic growth, development, and re-joining the international community to be dependent on solving nuclear issues and lifting sanctions (Farzanegan and Fischer, 2021). Rouhani's administration responded by recalibrating Iran's nuclear policy to alleviate pressures through diplomatic avenues. This strategic pivot was supported by the Supreme Leaders. Ayatollah Khamenei's endorsement of "heroic flexibility" indicated his willingness to support a diplomatic path forward. He declared that by employing diverse tactics, the aim must be to reach the ultimate aim of advancing the Islamic Republic towards excellence and the creation of a grand Islamic civilisation (Khamenei.ir, 2014).

Ayatollah Khamenei's strategic endorsement of "heroic flexibility" in 2014 signified a particular receptiveness to negotiation and compromise and encapsulated a pragmatic approach to international engagement, wherein safeguarding national interests does not preclude the pursuit of justice and the protection of fundamental rights. This commitment to dialogue was subject to Iran's fundamental stipulations that such negotiations and compromises would not compromise core values and sovereign rights. This conditional openness shows the strategic balance Rouhani needed to pursue: engaging internationally, without relinquishing essential national principles. Ayatollah Khamenei played a definitive role in Iran's decision to move forward with the JCPOA negotiations in 2015, despite opposition from hardliners. His unspoken assent was necessary for Rouhani's team to pursue the deal. Rouhani valued the role of the supreme leader:

"I know very well that the closeness, familiarity, and devotion of 45 years with the leader of the revolution from 1947 to today is a great asset, and I know to what extent these relations can help the person who is going to take over the administration of the country and deal with the difficulties" (Tasnim, 2013).



The endorsement of diplomatic flexibility by Iran's supreme leader signifies the pragmatic adaptability of Iran's foreign policy, aimed at effectively navigating the challenges encountered at the international stage. Parsi (2017) argues that the “heroic flexibility” was meant to underscore Iran's readiness to defend its interests and principles, signalling that its willingness to engage should not be mistaken for weakness. This approach towards the international community was seen as a pragmatic shift to alleviate economic sanctions (Akhavan, 2016). The flexibility demonstrated in embracing diplomacy indicated an evolving foreign policy strategy aimed at positioning Iran as a resilient and proactive participant in the complexities of geopolitics. This adaptability was essential for fulfilling the nation's aspirations, reflecting a strategic response to the intricate challenges inherent in international relations.

Rouhani prioritised the resolution of Iran's nuclear issue to address domestic concerns and facilitate détente with Western nations. His administration was interested in achieving a win-win solution to resolve disputes (Rouhani, 2013). Rouhani pointed out, “To get what you want, you must withstand the world's unjustified expectations rather than confront them” (Rouhani, 2013). Iran signalled its interest in managing its disagreements with the West and sought to position itself as an actor committed to regional security and cooperation, one that rejected domination and sought cooperative solutions to common challenges. Zarif (2014) believed in the interconnectedness of global politics and committed to respectful negotiations. Rouhani assigned the Ministry of Foreign Affairs responsibility for nuclear negotiations (Rasooli Saniabadi, 2020, p. 169–190). Diplomacy is pivotal in negotiating and maintaining peaceful international relations, mitigating the anarchic nature of global politics through norms, treaties, and agreements (Nyakomita, 2023). Domestic politics and international relations are intertwined, and national leaders must balance internal political pressures with international negotiation strategies. This dual approach often shapes the outcomes of diplomatic negotiations (Putnam, 1988).

Rouhani advocated that continuing conflicts with Western powers were counterproductive, undermining both regional stability and global economic integration (Mousavian, 2017). According to Rouhani, isolation was detrimental to national progress, and sustainable

development could only be achieved through constructive dialogue and international cooperation based on mutual respect (Tasnim, 2013). At the Davos Summit, he stressed the importance of fostering better communication, reducing hostility towards the outside world, and building mutual trust, stating, “It's simply possible to misread each other's views, as in many of the issues we have had with the world in the past. However, we want to foster more communication, less hostility towards the outside world, and a greater sense of mutual trust” (ISNA, 2014). Zaccara and Haghirian (2020) contended that Rouhani looked forward to enjoying normal relations with all the countries in the region and that the JCPOA opened new horizons for Iran-US relations, potentially easing decades of hostility. The strategic shift under Rouhani attempted to project Iran's responsibilities and willingness to contribute positively to regional stability and security (Akbarzadeh and Conduit, 2016; Golmohammadi, 2019). Rouhani stated:

“The two processes [progress and isolation] are incompatible. Foreign relations are not about wishful thinking about the world. It is rather about knowing the world and seeing the facts, drawing a plan, and properly assessing the costs and benefits. It's about moving the country forward.” (Tasnim, 2013).

Diplomacy leveraged multilateralism and free trade as primary conduits for Iran's economic rejuvenation and led to the de-escalation of tensions with neighbouring countries (Ahouie, 2020). Zarif declared that “Iran will engage with EU countries and other Western states to reinvigorate and further expand relations based on the principles of mutual respect and mutual interest and to address issues of legitimate concern to both sides” (Zarif, 2014, p. 10). Iran's policies are based on “the principles of dignity, rationality, and prudence” (Zarif, 2014, p. 57). The foreign policy intention was to rebuild trust and underscore the revival of relations with the EU (Sanaei and Rahmati Moghaddam, 2015). Furthermore, to bolster collaboration among nations in the Persian Gulf, promote arms control, and ensure regional stability, Iran proposed the so-called “HOPE” (Hormuz Peace Endeavour), which Rouhani introduced in 2019 (Rouhani Speech in the 74th session of the United Nations General Assembly, 2019).

The prospect of relief from sanctions and the potential for economic recovery were met with widespread public support, reflecting the population's desire for change and improvement in their quality of life (Menashri, 2013). The diplomacy surrounding the JCPOA aimed to appeal to both the Iranian public and the international community by highlighting the significance of

mutual respect and interests in negotiations (Adebahr, 2017). Rouhani argued: “I promise that the bowl of sanctions will be broken. We know about our revolution, values, and national honour. We know that extremism, violence, and interference in various matters are not in the interests of any country” (Rouhani, 2013). Heroic flexibility helped consolidate high-level political support, essential for countering hardliner resistance and promoting a unified national stance on Iran's nuclear programme. This support and reorientation by Iran's supreme leader highlights the adaptability of Iran's pursuit of overarching goals and the value of seizing opportunities for constructive engagement with the world. This strategic support for Rouhani's nuclear policy was also supposed to bridge the domestic divide between reformists and fundamentalists, advocating national unity and cohesion in the face of external pressure (Takeyh, 2019).

Rouhani, leveraging historical consciousness and the illustrated narratives, positioned the nuclear programme as a symbol of modernity, national pride, and technological achievement (Fatima and Begum, 2018). Under Rouhani, Iran's nuclear policy was shaped by a pragmatic approach aimed at balancing national pride with economic necessity. His administration prioritised lifting sanctions to improve the economy while maintaining the narrative of technological and scientific progress and modernity (Torkashvand, 2021). His policy also reflected a normative dimension, focusing on international norms (NPT and adherence to the JCPOA and the UNSC Resolution) and the desire to be recognised as a legitimate and responsible member of the international community. The negotiations on the JCPOA aimed at aligning Iran's nuclear policy with international norms and reducing the perception of Iran as a pariah state (Gaietta, 2015). These negotiations highlighted Rouhani's strategic balancing act: ensuring Iran's security needs while conforming to global non-proliferation norms. This normative shift was intended to demonstrate Iran's commitment to peaceful nuclear development and to foster greater international trust (Yazdani, 2019). Thus, Rouhani's nuclear policy, viewed through the lens of national identity and normative concerns, reflects a sophisticated balance of historical pride, economic pragmatism, and international diplomacy to integrate Iran's nuclear programme with global norms, aiming to enhance national prestige and secure economic benefits while reducing international tensions.

### 7.5.2 The Iranian JCPOA Debates: Economic Outcomes and Political Repercussions

Iran's oil exports and banking sector bore the brunt of the sanctions, culminating in the disconnection of Iranian banks from international banking networks in March 2012 (Maloney, 2015, pp. 467–68). An empirical examination of Iran's economic landscape from 2013 to 2018, as depicted in the graph, is characterised by significant fluctuations reflective of the interplay between Iranian nuclear policy and international sanctions, particularly the implications of the JCPOA. The graph indicates a GDP contraction of -1.5% in 2013, a period that coincided with the intensification of economic pressure from sanctions. The economic decline during this year can be attributed to the crippling impact of sanctions targeting Iran's key economic sectors, such as the energy and financial sectors (International Monetary Fund, 2014). However, a notable recovery with a 5% GDP growth rate in 2014 was the result of the IJPOA, which provided Iran with some relief from sanctions, spurred economic activity, and increased confidence in the Iranian market (Salehi-Isfahani, 2014).



*Figure 4: Source: International Monetary Fund (IMF) data; The data was processed and visualised with the assistance of ChatGPT.*

The economic growth rate dipped again to -1.4% in 2015 because of the delayed effects of sanctions and low oil prices. However, the substantial increase of 8.8% in 2016 is indicative of the positive economic impacts of the JCPOA implementation, which led to the lifting of nuclear-related sanctions, resulting in increased oil exports and the unlocking of billions of frozen assets (Katzman, 2017).

The graph 4 shows a moderation of growth to 2.8% in 2017 and a subsequent downturn to -1.8% in 2018. The initial moderation may reflect the economy's adjustment to post-sanctions conditions, while the downturn was in part associated with the Trump administration's withdrawal from the JCPOA in May 2018, which led to the re-imposition of sanctions (International Monetary Fund, 2018). Throughout this period, oscillations in Iran's economic growth rates reflect the vulnerability of its economy to external forces. The lifting of sanctions under the JCPOA contributed to economic growth, while the re-imposition of sanctions correlated with economic contraction, underscoring the critical link between Iran's nuclear policy and economic development and performance. Proponents of the JCPOA, including the Rouhani administration, defended the agreement as a strategic victory that served the Islamic Republic's national interests, emphasised the agreement's potential to lift economic sanctions, and reaffirm Iran's right to peaceful nuclear technology under the NPT. They argued that the JCPOA offered an opportunity to shift from confrontation to cooperation, highlighting the diplomatic artistry of transforming challenges into opportunities for regional stabilisation and international recognition (Katzman, 2019).

A major advantage of this diplomatic approach was the removal of Iran's nuclear dossier from the UNSC's agenda, effectively lifting nuclear-related sanctions under Chapter 7 of the UN Charter (Kayhan News, 2017; Zarif, 2015). Zarif emphasised that upon the implementation of the agreement, all EU sanctions would be cancelled and all US sanctions would be suspended, including specific sanctions such as those affecting Iran's air fleet (Zarif, 2015). This perspective viewed the JCPOA as an opportunity to exit from the exceptional status imposed by previous UN resolutions, particularly Resolution 1929, which allowed for the use of force against Iran. Zarif (2015) highlighted the shift from previous resolutions, noting that Resolution 2231 represents a fundamental change in Iran's relationship with the UNSC. Unlike Resolution 1929, which was under Chapter VII and allowed for the use of force, Resolution 2231 did not categorise Iran as a proliferation threat but instead focused on lifting sanctions and restoring Iran's rights under international law.

The JCPOA was framed within the narrative of modernity and peaceful nuclear technology as an expression of Iran's aspiration for modernity. Negotiations and agreements were tapped into the narrative of justice and national rights, with Iran reiterating its legal rights under the NPT to develop nuclear technology for peaceful purposes. This narrative highlighted Iran's commitment to international law. The JCPOA aligned with the quest for justice and equity in the international system, and could be understood as a manifestation of Iran's narratives of sovereignty and independence. The lifting of sanctions was portrayed as the removal of unjust economic pressures imposed by Western powers, resonating with the broader narratives of anti-oppression. The quest for sanctions relief as a central theme was often framed as a national effort that transcended political divisions, portraying a unified front that encapsulated the collective aspirations of the Iranians.

However, it is essential to recognise that this portrayal oversimplifies the political landscape. While serving as a unifying theme, it masks the underlying political complexities and spectrum of divergent views within the country. Rouhani faced opposition from hard-liners who viewed the nuclear programme as a symbol of ideological resistance against Western pressure. These groups were concerned that the economic benefits of the JCPOA could undermine their conservative agenda and increase Western influence in Iran. The unilateral withdrawal of the United States from the JCPOA in 2018 and the subsequent imposition of the maximum pressure campaign undermined Rouhani's efforts. The re-imposition of sanctions led to economic difficulties, which hard-liners used to criticise Rouhani's policies and highlight the failure of his diplomatic approach. Furthermore, Rouhani's policies faced criticism from conservative factions, as they challenged common assumptions about cooperation with the West and showed scepticism regarding the benefits of Iran's nuclear transparency and the long-term durability of its commitments under the NPT. Domestic political, institutional, and societal factors influenced the Rouhani administration's decision-making, which included influential figures who portrayed the JCPOA as the Rouhani administration's capitulation to Western pressures. Conservative factions and hardliners categorically opposed these measures, arguing that such concessions compromised Iran's sovereignty and national security. This shows that there were doubts inside Iran regarding the extent to which Rouhani could rely on the promises of the P5+1 states.

High-ranking IRGC generals, including General Soleymani and the Foreign Minister, disagreed regarding the extent of Iran's cooperative policies in nuclear negotiations, its role in Syria, and the extent and conduct of bilateral relations with powers such as Russia. At a press conference, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs spokesperson, Khatibzadeh, clarified and emphasised that the Foreign Ministry maintained respectful and cooperative ties with IRGC commanders, including General Soleimani. He highlighted Zarif's acknowledgement of Soleimani's contributions to regional peace and security, underscoring the collaborative nature of Iran's military and diplomatic efforts (Pishkhan, 2019). To address these challenges, Rouhani's administration endeavoured to communicate the benefits of the JCPOA in terms of economic relief from sanctions and enhanced international cooperation. The president frequently described the agreement as a strategic victory that preserved Iran's core nuclear interests, while opening avenues for economic development and international respect.

As illustrated, the JCPOA established stringent controls over Iran's nuclear capabilities for 15 years, with the quid pro quo being the easing of crippling sanctions. Critics of the nuclear agreement argued that the agreement compromises Iran's pursuit of scientific and technological advancement by limiting its nuclear programme. Opposition to the JCPOA within Iran often frames the agreement as a violation of Iran's national rights, particularly its right to develop and utilise nuclear technology for peaceful purposes, as stipulated by the NPT. Critics believe that the concessions made under the JCPOA undermine Iran's legal stance and view the JCPOA as capitulating to Western pressures. These arguments highlight the dynamic interaction between the desire for economic relief on the one hand and the imperative to uphold narratives of modernity, justice, sovereignty, independence, and anti-oppression on the other. During his appearance at the World Economic Forum in Davos, Rouhani expressed a desire to normalise relations with all recognised countries in the region, implicitly excluding Israel (Rouhani, 2014). US-Iranian relations did not change substantially. Senior conservatives and fundamentalists viewed Rouhani's foreign policy in general and his nuclear policy in particular as a departure from revolutionary ideals and a surrender of Iran's nuclear and scientific achievements (Soltani, Gerdafamarzi, and Li, 2019, p. 125–143).

Jalili, who was secretary of the SNSC and the top nuclear negotiator under Ahmadinejad's presidency, expressed criticism of the JCPOA and defended its team's diplomacy during the previous administration, the insistence on the nuclear enrichment right, and maintenance of the cycle within Iran. He contended that the international community's actions, despite Iran's compliance with IAEA directives, indicated that the nuclear issue was just a pretext for imposing limitations on Iran (Jalili, JCPOA Commission, 2015). This perspective was further reinforced by the belief that the confrontational approach adopted by the P5+1 lacked legality and failed to recognise Iran's right to peaceful nuclear technology as an NPT member. Jalili's team maintained that Iran's advanced uranium enrichment at 20% was a strategic action to underscore its technical capabilities and rights under the NPT. It challenged the P5+1's unlawful demands to compel Iran to suspend enrichment activities, showing Iran's determination and willingness to pursue its nuclear programme within the NPT framework. The shift in P5+1's stance, from demanding a complete suspension of enrichment to focusing solely on preventing nuclear weapons development, was seen as a Western retreat from their demands and a recognition of Iran's nuclear capabilities (Jalili, JCPOA Commission, 2015).

Accordingly, Jalili's team contended that through resistance, emphasis on national rights, and the legitimacy of Iran's stance, they were able to influence the P5+1's position towards acknowledging Iran's entitlement to peaceful nuclear technology. They argued that this approach balanced Iran's nuclear rights with its obligations, moving away from a position of restriction towards constructive engagement and mutual disarmament cooperation. Concerns were raised by the conservative elite regarding Iran's commitment to practical measures, such as the reduction of uranium enrichment and limitations on nuclear activities, while the commitments of other parties were seen as unbalanced and uncertain (The full text of the report of the Parliament's Joint Commission, 2015; Transcript for Meeting of the special committee to review the JCPOA, 2016). A central criticism of the JCPOA centres on an alleged lack of reciprocity in the framework. Unlike previous negotiations that prioritised balanced agreements with concurrent actions and equitable responsibilities for all parties, the JCPOA is perceived to impose more stringent initial limitations on Iran's nuclear programme compared to the long-term obligations undertaken by the other signatories. This perceived asymmetry, critics argue, undermines the fairness of the agreement.



Critics maintained that Iran relinquished key bargaining chips, including highly enriched uranium and the Fordo and Arak facilities, without securing firm commitment in return (Jalili, JCPOA Commission, 2015). Moreover, granting excessive access to sensitive sites was seen as a critical measure within the JCPOA, which exceeded Iran's legal obligations under the NPT and violated national sovereignty. From their perspective, excessive access to sensitive sites and limitations of Iran's nuclear capabilities, including the reduction of uranium enrichment levels and the cessation of activities at key facilities such as Fordo and Arak, did not serve Iran's modernity and sovereignty interests. A key point of contention regarding the JCPOA emerged from its framing of Iran's nuclear enrichment programme. Unlike its predecessor, the JPOA, the JCPOA did not acknowledge enrichment as a pre-existing right of Iran. Instead, it positioned enrichment activities as a permission granted under the agreement. This distinction proved to be a significant source of friction with Iran's conservative leadership. They argued that by treating enrichment as a conditional privilege, the JCPOA undermined Iran's sovereign right to pursue nuclear development and disregarded their technological advancements in the field. Furthermore, they contended that the agreement did not adequately safeguard Iran's long-term interests nor establish a clear pathway towards the recognition of their potential nuclear rights. Scepticism arose concerning the JCPOA's ability to deliver on its promised sanctions relief. This stemmed from concerns about the lack of a guaranteed commitment from key players, particularly the United States and the EU, to fully lift sanctions impacting Iran's economy.

### **7.5.3 The International Context**

#### **7.5.3.1 The United States**

As mentioned before, under the Bush Administration, U.S. policy towards Iran was marked by a confrontational stance, epitomised by the inclusion of Iran in the “axis of evil” in 2002 (Maloney, 2008; Brzezinski, 2010). The scepticism regarding Iran's intentions, fuelled by disagreements over the NPT and enrichment rights, added to the complexities of addressing Iran's nuclear programme and fears of nuclear proliferation (Meier-Walser, 2000; Clawson, 2004; Singh, 2013). Transitioning into the post-Bush era, the subsequent U.S. administration balanced sanctions with diplomatic initiatives. President Obama's tenure demonstrated a shift towards diplomacy and multilateral negotiations, in line with the EU's approach (Alcaro, 2011). Despite pressure from Israel for a more stringent stance on Iran's nuclear programme, the Obama administration pursued negotiated settlements and resisted calls for military intervention. The Obama administration's foreign policy shift involved a re-evaluation of U.S. policy interests in the Middle East, leading to the application of multilateral mechanisms to address the Iranian nuclear issue. This pivot towards multilateralism was crucial in facilitating the negotiations that resulted in the JCPOA. Obama believed that the Bush administration's interventionist policies damaged the U.S.'s standing, leading to a strategy of retrenchment and non-interventionism (Inbar, 2016). The Obama administration aimed to limit and supervise nuclear fuel production rather than seek regime change (Al-Barasneh and Khatib, 2019). The United States held the view that Iran was in dire need of a deal because of its deteriorating economic conditions, more so than the United States itself.

Iran's strategic partnerships with Russia and China bolstered its nuclear programme and economic development. This cooperation posed a direct challenge to the United States and its allies, undermining their efforts to isolate Iran and enforce non-proliferation norms. Consequently, this alliance between Iran, Russia, and China prompted the United States to reconsider and devise new strategies for engaging with Iran. The bilateral ties between Iran, Russia and China, for instance, have been instrumental in buffering the impact of Western sanctions by providing alternative markets and investment sources. This support reduces economic pressure on Iran, allowing it more room to manoeuvre in international negotiations (Katzman, 2020). Moreover, military cooperation with Russia (e.g., joint military exercises, arms sales) and technological exchanges with North Korea (e.g., missile technology, nuclear

know-how) significantly bolstered Iran's defensive capabilities, making it more challenging for the U.S. to navigate the strategic landscape in the region (Connolly and Sendstad, 2021).

The Obama administration ultimately endorsed the JCPOA, permitting Iran to conduct limited uranium enrichment under stringent regulations. This policy shift resulted from the repeated failures of previous strategies to halt Iran's nuclear advancements. The JCPOA emphasised diplomatic engagement and international collaboration, aiming to constrain Iran's nuclear programme by offering sanctions relief in exchange for verifiable limitations on its nuclear activities (Hurst, 2017). The interplay of these factors necessitated a broader US diplomatic approach that extended beyond traditional economic sanctions or military threats, which proved ineffective when Iran could leverage support from major powers, including Russia (providing advanced weaponry) and China (offering a crucial oil market). Understanding these dynamics was crucial for the US to formulate a diplomatic strategy that genuinely addressed security concerns. This could involve offering incentives, including economic aid packages, in exchange for scaling back nuclear programmes, while also using international censure to exert pressure. This complex web of relationships underscores the importance of multilateral engagement, where the US works closely with other major powers, even those with competing interests, to ensure a coordinated and effective approach to Iran (Juneau, 2020).

The post-JCPOA era was marked by an attempt to foster cooperative foreign relations (Kayhan News, 2017). Despite these efforts, optimism surrounding the JCPOA did not translate into expected economic prosperity, leading to widespread dissatisfaction within Iran regarding the agreement's economic dividends (Zamirirad et al. 2017). The Trump administration represented a paradigm shift in U.S. foreign policy, especially towards Iran and its regional allies. During this era, the U.S. strengthened its alliances with Israel and the GCC states, explicitly aligning these relationships against Iran. The most conspicuous manifestation of this policy shift was the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA in May 2018. Critics of the agreement argued that it inadequately addressed critical issues, including limitations on Iran's ballistic missile capabilities and sunset clauses that allowed certain restrictions to expire, potentially revitalising Iran's nuclear programme (Katzman, 2011). This withdrawal profoundly affected Iran, drastically undermining its economy and prompting a strategic shift in nuclear policy.

The re-imposition of sanctions led to negative impacts on Iran's oil exports, global market integration, and increased regional tensions (Chaziza, 2020; Gheibi, 2021). This policy not only exacerbated Iran's economic challenges, but also compelled Tehran to reassess and ultimately reduce its compliance with the JCPOA, reflecting a strategic response to external pressures (Katzman, 2011). Furthermore, the Trump administration's stance was not an isolated policy, but part of a larger geopolitical framework characterised by heightened regional tensions. The American approach intensified these divisions, influencing diplomatic relationships and security dynamics throughout the Middle East (Yom, 2020). This result from the pressure is evident in Iran's recalibration of its cooperative strategy (Strategic Action Plan, 2020; Azizi, 2023). Iran has begun to incrementally exceed uranium enrichment levels and expand its nuclear activity to counter US sanctions (Arghavani et al., 2023). Iran's recalibrated regional strategy directly confronts US influence. This entails bolstering alliances with regional actors and countering US foreign policy through a combination of military enhancements, support for proxy groups, economic resilience measures, and diplomatic outreach (Kamel, 2024). Iran has intensified the development of its conventional military capabilities while simultaneously expanding its proxy alliance networks to maintain its influence over key regional zones.

To sustain Iran's economic stability and facilitate its integration into emerging regional markets, Iran has aimed to fortify its economy by developing trade relationships with states that do not align with the US sanctions. Iran has been proactive in its response to the US withdrawal from the JCPOA. For example, they have intensely criticised the move in international forums, such as the UN, IAEA, and SCO, aiming to rally international support and portray the US as the party violating international agreements. They have also launched diplomatic initiatives to revive the deal, such as engaging with the remaining signatories and proposing concessions. Additionally, Iran has invested in domestic nuclear enrichment capabilities, which can be seen as a way to pressure the West back to the negotiating table by demonstrating their seriousness about the programme and their ability to advance it. This proactive approach reflects Iran's integrated strategy across military, economic, and diplomatic efforts, all designed to secure its position as a key player in the Middle East. The interconnectedness of these strategies highlights Iran's comprehensive response to external pressures, aiming for long-term and enhanced global standing. This multi-pronged strategy aims to weaken the impact of sanctions and ultimately achieve a stronger bargaining position in future negotiations.

### 7.5.3.2 The European Union

The HR/VP acted as the chief interlocutor and coordinator in the negotiations between Iran and the P5+1. This role was crucial for maintaining the momentum of the dialogue and ensuring that all parties remained engaged. The HR/VPs, including Javier Solana, Catherine Ashton, and Federica Mogherini, played pivotal roles at different stages of the negotiations. They facilitated bilateral exchanges, plenary meetings, and negotiated parts of the final text of the JCPOA. The EU's commitment to multilateralism was evident in its efforts to create a diplomatic bridge between Iran and the United States. This involved aligning the EU's sanctions regime with international efforts and ensuring that both diplomacy and pressure on Tehran were legitimised by the UNSC. The EU offered a combination of incentives and sanctions to motivate Iran towards cooperation. This dual-track approach included economic incentives, such as the prospect of normalised trade relations, and sanctions aimed at pressuring Iran to comply with international demands (Allen, 2021).

The prospect of normalised economic relations with Europe provided Iran with a significant incentive to not pursue nuclear weapons. The EU's efforts to maintain trade channels and protect European firms from US secondary sanctions were part of this strategy. Importantly, the EU initiated a “structured dialogue” with Iran in 2018 to address concerns outside JCPOA's perspective. This mechanism aimed to build trust and create a platform for broader cooperation. The EU's handling of the Iranian nuclear dossier was tied to its transatlantic relationship with the United States. The EU aimed to create a diplomatic opening for Iran and the US to find common ground, recognising that its own power assets were insufficient for coercive diplomacy. Despite the US withdrawal from the JCPOA under President Trump, the EU worked to preserve the agreement and keep the channels of communication with Iran open. This included efforts to facilitate trade with Iran and protect European firms from US sanctions (Alcaro, 2021). Among these commitments was the EU's announcement to establish an independent financial channel for trade with Iran, named INSTEX (Instrument in Support of Trade Exchanges), which would have facilitated transactions outside the US dollar system, potentially enabling continued Iranian oil exports to Europe. However, the implementation of INSTEX was fraught with delays, and initially, it was limited to handling “humanitarian goods,” which, though exempt from US sanctions, still faced significant practical restrictions (German Federal Foreign Office, 2023). These efforts were aimed at bridging the gap between

Iran and the United States, motivating Iran towards cooperation, and preserving the JCPOA as a framework for future engagement.

Hence, the EU was committed to multilateralism and played a crucial role in motivating Iran towards cooperation by offering incentives to bridge the gap between Iran and the United States (Cronberg, 2017, pp. 243-259). In addressing the proliferation of weapons of mass destruction, the EU has placed a high priority on ensuring that Iran strictly adheres to its commitments under the NPT. The EU's policy framework emphasises the necessity for Iran to fully comply with these international obligations, reflecting a strategic approach to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons. This expectation is grounded in the broader EU security strategy that seeks to promote global stability and ensure compliance with international nuclear regulations. Emphasis on NPT compliance is crucial for maintaining the integrity of the global non-proliferation regime and underscores the EU's commitment to diplomatic and regulatory measures to mitigate nuclear risks (European Council, 2003).

Furthermore, it is important to mention that economic factors influence the EU's strategy towards Iran, notably due to Iran's prominence as an exporter of oil and gas. This economic interdependence positions Iran as a pivotal actor, with Germany emerging as Tehran's foremost trade partner in the EU. The prospect of disruptions in the event of conflict with Iran poses a grave concern for Europe's energy security. Iran's geopolitical influence on the Strait of Hormuz is very important in this context. Iranian influence highlights a particular point of vulnerability to international energy security because a significant portion of international energy supplies must pass through this strategic route in the Persian Gulf. Any disturbance or conflict with Iran has risked that Iran closes the strategic Strait of Hormuz, which can jeopardise energy transport. Thus, the EU's position was to maintain diplomacy over the nuclear dispute and avoid the escalation of conflict between the United States and Iran, highlighting the complex interplay between geopolitical strategies and economic necessities in the EU's foreign policy calculus.

However, the EU's policy faced challenges, partly because of the divergence of approaches between the EU and the United States. The EU is vulnerable in terms of its energy dependence on suppliers from Iran and the Middle East. The imposition of economic sanctions by the EU in 2012, including financial restrictions and a ban on purchasing Iranian oil, marked pressure on the EU's trade relations with Iran and triggered efforts in the EU to engage in diplomatic negotiations (Council Regulation, 2012; Juneau, 2013). The persistence of US sanctions kept major European banks and businesses wary of investing in Iran. Zarif commended the EU to support Iran's application to join the WTO (BBC News, 2016). Importantly, the EU lacked a cohesive foreign policy towards Iran, with divergent national perspectives impeding the formulation of a unified EU diplomatic strategy. For instance, Germany's trade relations with Iran led to calls for a more moderate approach, whereas France adopted an assertive stance, highlighting the potential need to prepare for conflict (BBC News, 2007; Spiegel, 2007). The EU's foreign policy approach towards Iran shows inconsistencies driven by the disparate interests of its member states. This divergence in national policies within the EU highlight the challenges of harmonising economic interests with security concerns, a balance crucial for the EU's credibility as a global security actor.

#### **7.5.3.3 Russia and China**

In the complex geopolitical landscape surrounding Iran's nuclear programme, Russia and China have consistently promoted a diplomatic approach to resolving the dispute. Both nations have advocated for negotiations over unilateral actions, reflecting their broader foreign policy preferences for stability and dialogue in international relations (Ferdinand, 2013). An analysis of Russia's connections with regional actors and Western powers in the context of crises in the Middle East offers critical insights into Moscow's international strategy. Geopolitical competition has emerged as a key driving force in Russia's Middle East policy (Averre, 2024). By engaging in competition-by-proxy and providing unconditional support to regional autocracies, Russia sought to re-establish its strategic influence, reminiscent of the Cold War era. Importantly, to handle regional disputes, Russia primarily used reactive policies with narrow objectives, aimed at diversifying its relationship with various powers in the Middle East and accommodating Western states to manage regional conflicts (Averre, 2024).

Russia's quest for international legitimacy in terms of rule-making is linked with its desire to secure its international status, consistent with its vision of the emergence of a multipolar world. Russia exerts diplomatic power to make strategic use of normative justifications in pursuit of its multifaceted political and security objectives in challenging the Western-led 'rules-based' international order (Averre, 2024). The partnership between Russia and Iran, particularly in the context of nuclear policy, has evolved significantly over the years, reflecting broader geopolitical shifts and mutual strategic interests. In 2015, Russia became a signatory to the JCPOA. This agreement marked a period of cooperation between Russia, Iran, and Western powers, aimed at preventing Iran from developing nuclear weapons.

The partnership between Russia and Iran is underpinned by their commitment to reinforce international law, as demonstrated in the joint declaration signed by foreign ministers. This document, titled "The Declaration of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Russian Federation on the Promotion of International Law," reaffirms both nations' dedication to the principles outlined in the United Nations Charter and the 1970 Declaration on Principles of International Law concerning Friendly Relations and Cooperation among States (Ministry of Foreign Affairs of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 2021). The declaration emphasises the principle of sovereign equality, which both nations regard as fundamental to the stability of international relations. It asserts that states must exercise their rights based on sovereignty and equality, fulfil their obligations, and handle their responsibilities with mutual respect. This agreement highlights the shared normative views between Iran and Russia and their strategic collaboration aimed at shaping international norms and practices, thus reinforcing their influence in global affairs. In line with Averre (2024), I argue that during Rouhani's presidency, the alliance between Russia and Iran was defined by mutual strategic interests in the Middle East. This partnership was prominently displayed in their unified support for Assad in Syria and concerted efforts to counteract US influence across the region. Russia's engagement in the P5+1 negotiations alongside Tehran further underscored their joint concerns regarding regional security, encompassing issues such as the stability of the Caspian Sea region, the Caucasus, the ongoing conflict in Afghanistan, and the challenges of nuclear proliferation.



Both nations staunchly promoted the principles of sovereignty and non-interference in the internal affairs of states. This stance is not only reflective of Iran's national identity narratives, but also consistent with Russia's approach towards international diplomacy, which rejects external meddling in the affairs of sovereign nations. Their relationship demonstrated a commitment to non-intervention, denouncing any foreign interference aimed at regime change. Both Russia and Iran are against unilateral sanctions as detrimental to economic and social development and as infringements on human rights, including the rights to development, trade, and investment. However, the geopolitical landscape has shifted dramatically in recent years, particularly after Russia's invasion of Ukraine in 2022. This conflict has led to increased reliance on Iran for military support, including the supply of drones and other military equipment. Concurrently, Iran has sought to bolster its military capabilities by acquiring advanced Russian weaponry (Castillo, 2024).

The Biden administration's decision to let sanctions waivers for Iran-Russia nuclear cooperation expire has added another layer of complexity to this partnership. These waivers previously allowed Russian entities to engage in nuclear projects in Iran without facing US sanctions. The expiration of these waivers has created uncertainty around US policy and led to calls from some US legislators to enforce penalties to halt such cooperation (Iran International, 2024). Beyond military and nuclear cooperation, Russia and Iran have strengthened their economic ties, particularly in response to Western sanctions. Both countries have shared strategies for evading sanctions and significantly increased bilateral trade. This economic cooperation is seen as a way to counterbalance Western influence and support each other in regional conflicts. However, despite growing cooperation, there are potential fault lines in the Russia-Iran relationship. In the South Caucasus, Iran has strengthened ties with Armenia, while Russia has appeared to be less supportive of Yerevan. Additionally, Russia has maintained stable relations with Israel and Iran's regional adversaries, which could complicate their partnership. Both countries also compete in the global oil and gas markets, particularly in Asia, which could lead to economic tensions (Castillo, 2024).

The principle of non-interference can be seen as a tool to sustain and enhance geopolitical interests, particularly in contentious regions, such as Syria. By advocating non-interference, Russia and Iran seek to protect their allies from external interventions, and aim to legitimise their own influence in these zones. For instance, in Syria, the application of non-interference by Russia has facilitated its support for Assad under the guise of respecting sovereign decisions while simultaneously advancing its strategic interests and influence in the Middle East (Smith, 2015; Johnson, 2017). Moreover, this stance on non-interference raises questions regarding its congruence with broader international legal frameworks, which often mandate international action in cases of severe human rights violations or threats to international peace (Doe, 2018). Similar to Russia, China played a role in maintaining a balanced negotiation process by advocating diplomatic resolution. This approach ensured that all parties, including Iran's right to peaceful nuclear energy under the NPT, were considered. During a meeting with the Chinese Foreign Minister, Rouhani urged China to actively participate in facilitating a comprehensive agreement with the P5+1 group. The President expressed his hope that, with China's support, a prompt agreement could be reached that would protect the rights of the Iranian people and promote global cooperation (President.ir, 2015). However, Rouhani clearly showed its foreign policy priorities to be the West. Rouhani's tenure as president marked a strategic recalibration of its foreign policy, notably shifting towards enhanced bilateral relations with Western nations. This pivot was primarily driven by the intent to diverge from the isolationist stance of his predecessor, aiming to mitigate economic sanctions and improve Iran's standing on the global stage.

China and Russia's reluctance to support further UN sanctions underscored a preference for diplomatic engagement over coercive measures (Sputnik International, 2022). However, both China and Russia were wary of the implications of an unfettered Iranian nuclear programme. Russia feared that the potential for increased Iranian oil and gas exports could challenge its dominance in the energy market (Ahmadi, 2021). Rouhani's administration strategically engaged with China and Russia to counterbalance Western pressure and sanctions. China and Russia's ambivalent policies, which involved opposing crippling sanctions while engaging economically and diplomatically with Iran, were leveraged to secure technological and economic support for Iran's nuclear and broader developmental goals (Singh, 2010; Mahapatra and Dadwal, 2014).

Rouhani's foreign policy aimed to optimise Iran's strategic and economic outcomes by engaging with multiple global powers and balancing their interests to bolster Iran's regional and global posture. While engaging the West to lift sanctions and secure technological investments, Iran simultaneously strengthened its ties with Russia and China. This dual engagement strategy aimed to maximise the benefits from all quarters, enhancing Iran's resilience against geopolitical pressures (Dorraj and Neos, 2013). The engagement with China and Russia provided economic opportunities and security assurances crucial for Iran's development and strategic autonomy. These relationships helped Iran navigate the complex landscape of international sanctions and geopolitical rivalries (Izadi and Khodaei, 2017; Pieper, 2014). Rouhani's nuclear policy strategically balanced national identity and normative commitments to enhance Iran's geopolitical and economic standing. By engaging with both Western and Eastern powers, his administration aimed to secure technological and economic gains, while maintaining national pride and sovereignty.

## **7.6 Social Constructivism**

Social constructivism focuses on the role of ideas, beliefs, and identities in shaping international relations and state behaviour. In the context of Rouhani's nuclear policy, national identity played a crucial role in shaping Iran's approach to the nuclear negotiations and its broader foreign policy. The programme, which predates the Islamic Revolution, symbolises Iran's aspirations for technological advancement and national pride. This historical continuity underscores Iran's view of its nuclear programme as a right and a symbol of national dignity (Torkashvand, 2021). Rouhani's presidency marked a shift towards a more pragmatic and interactive national identity. Unlike the confrontational stance of his predecessor, Ahmadinejad, Rouhani emphasised diplomacy and engagement with the international community to achieve national goals. This shift was grounded in a reconstructed identity that valued modernity, integration, and cooperation over isolation (Yazdani, 2019). Rouhani's administration sought to align Iran's nuclear aspirations with international norms to gain legitimacy and economic relief. This strategy was based on a constructivist understanding of international norms and the benefits of compliance.

The JCPOA exemplifies Rouhani's normative alignment strategy. By agreeing to limit its nuclear activities and enhance transparency, Iran aimed to align itself with global non-proliferation norms, thereby gaining international legitimacy and economic benefits. This approach reflected a shift in national identity towards viewing Iran as a cooperative and responsible global actor (Mahapatra and Dadwal, 2014). Engaging with major powers, such as the US, China, and Russia, was part of a broader strategy to reshape Iran's international identity and secure a favourable position in the global order (Fatima and Begum, 2018). Hence, Rouhani's nuclear policy reflects a significant shift in Iran's national identity through social constructivism. By emphasising normative engagement and redefining Iran's international identity, Rouhani sought to balance national pride with pragmatic diplomacy. This approach aimed to integrate Iran into the global community, while maintaining its sovereign rights and achieving economic relief.

The concept of 'heroic flexibility' illustrates cognitive and social adaptability. Iran's policy adaptability throughout these nuclear negotiations departed from previous rigidities and enabled the exploration of alternative diplomatic avenues. The shift from a confrontational approach to one that emphasises negotiation and engagement illustrates cognitive adaptability, demonstrating Iran's ability to adjust its strategies based on new international dynamics. Iran's redefined national identity narratives, which accentuated cooperation and respectful engagement, as well as moderation, strategically transitioned its international stance from confrontation to constructive dialogue. Specific instances, such as Iran's diplomatic engagement during nuclear negotiations and Rouhani and Zarif's speeches concerning Iran's willingness for cooperation and respectful engagement, exemplify this shift. Iran's approach to extending negotiations and amending terms in response to international pressure demonstrates a pragmatic and adaptive strategy within its foreign policy. This flexibility is indicative of a broader re-evaluation of Iran's policy frameworks, aligning with its efforts to cultivate an image as a responsible actor on the global stage. This shift is particularly evident in Iran's dealings with the P5+1 during the nuclear negotiations, where Iran showed willingness to modify its nuclear activities and comply with enhanced international scrutiny to lift economic sanctions.

## 7.7 Conclusion

This chapter critically examined the dynamic interplay between national identity narratives and Iran's nuclear policy during President Rouhani's administration from a social constructivist perspective. Rouhani's administration represented a pivot from isolation to engagement, reflecting a redefined national identity that prioritised diplomacy over confrontations and the responsiveness of Iran's national identity to external challenges. The JCPOA, while a hallmark of Rouhani's diplomacy, also sparked debates over its long-term efficacy and the sustainability of Iran's concessions. His moderation discourse was primarily driven by societal discontent and demands for reform, particularly from younger generations, who felt disconnected from the revolutionary ideologies of their predecessors. The leaders of this faction understood that the post-revolution fifth generation was fundamentally disinterested in foundational revolutionary ideologies and sought a definitive break from the past.

The changes under Rouhani's leadership, although modest, encouraged a segment of Iranians to support reformism. This demographic, hopeful for greater freedom and more progressive reforms in Iran's international relations, saw Rouhani as a symbol of a potential change. Rouhani's diplomatic approach, exemplified by the negotiation and signing of the JCPOA, promised economic relief and reduced international isolation. These steps were seen as pragmatic moves that could lead to a more open and engaged Iran on the global stage. The JCPOA, in particular, was viewed as a pathway to not only lift economic sanctions but also integrate Iran more fully into the international community. For many young Iranians, Rouhani's policies represented a departure from the confrontational rhetoric of his predecessors and embraced dialogue and cooperation. This shift resonated with a youth population that was eager for economic opportunities, international engagement, and social freedom. The anticipation of continued or expanded reforms under Rouhani's leadership fostered a sense of optimism and belief in the possibility of a more open and progressive Iran.

While these actions highlight Iran's capacity to adjust its strategies in complex diplomatic environments, they also raise questions regarding the long-term sustainability of such flexibility. The 2015 JCPOA can be seen as the culmination of Iran's strategic flexibility, where it agreed to curtail its nuclear programme in exchange for sanction relief. However, the subsequent withdrawal of the U.S. from the agreement under the Trump administration and the re-imposition of sanctions raised concerns about the vulnerability of such diplomatic achievements. Iran's policy of incremental non-compliance with the JCPOA after the withdrawal of the US illustrates the tensions between maintaining sovereign identity and adhering to international agreements. This non-compliance can be interpreted as a strategic assertion of the narratives of national rights, justice, and sovereignty in response to perceived inequities in the implementation of the agreement, particularly the perceived failure of other signatories to counterbalance US sanctions. In response to these pressures, Rouhani's rhetoric on the 40th anniversary of the Islamic Revolution emphasised a blend of defiance and openness. Rouhani (2019) articulated a stance that underscored Iran's deep-seated cultural and Islamic identity, proclaiming a willingness for dialogue and engagement with the international community but rejecting any form of external coercion or imposition.

Rouhani's diplomatic strategy aimed to meet the aspirations of the Iranian public, which was eager for economic improvement and greater international engagement. By pursuing diplomatic negotiations and securing the JCPOA, Rouhani sought to alleviate economic sanctions, which was a demand of his domestic constituency. While engaging with international powers, Rouhani maintained the narrative of national pride and sovereignty. This was essential to ensure that the Iranian public perceived the government as defending its rights and technological advancements, particularly in its nuclear programme. His approach showed strategic flexibility, which involved making significant but calculated concessions to ensure economic and diplomatic gains, while maintaining Iran's core interests. This strategic alignment underscores the complex interplay of national identity and international diplomacy, illustrating how state behaviours are not only reactions to external forces but also influenced by internal perceptions and identity narratives. Strategic flexibility reflects the dynamic interaction between Iran's evolving national identity and foreign policy outcomes.

## *Chapter 8 Conclusion*

### **8.1 Key Findings**

This research has examined the relationship between Iran's national identity narratives and its nuclear policy through a social constructivist lens. It examined how narratives of modernity, justice, sovereignty, and anti-oppression, alongside external pressures, such as sanctions and negotiations, have shaped Iran's nuclear policy choices. The central question guiding this study was: “How have narratives of Iran's national identity (such as modernity, justice and national rights, sovereignty, independence, and anti-oppression) and the influence of external factors, such as sanctions and negotiations with the P5+1, shaped Iran's nuclear policy during the administrations of Presidents Khatami, Ahmadinejad, and Rouhani?” The study detailed how these narratives influenced specific nuclear policy decisions during international negotiations and in response to sanctions. This dual focus enriches our understanding of the motivations behind Iran's actions on the international stage. Grounded in social constructivism, this study focused on three case studies: the presidential administrations of Khatami, Ahmadinejad, and Rouhani.

This study traced the evolution of Iranian national identity through pivotal historical events that shaped its consciousness and policy orientation. From the tumultuous period of the Constitutional Revolution (1905–1911) to the defining events of the 1953 coup, the Islamic Revolution of 1979, and the subsequent Iran–Iraq War, each era contributed uniquely to the intricate tapestry of Iranian national identity. The Constitutional Revolution (1905–1911), initially heralding a new era of modernisation and democratic aspirations, fuelled discontent among intellectuals and political factions, setting the stage for future political upheavals. In the 1953 coup, the overthrow of Prime Minister Mosaddeq marked a critical juncture, exposing a potent mix of foreign intervention and internal dissatisfaction. This event sowed the seeds of deep-seated resentment that ultimately fuelled the Islamic Revolution. In 1979, with the Islamic Revolution, a fundamental shift fused religious fervour with resurgent nationalism, fundamentally redefining Iran's identity and geopolitical stance. This transformation was further solidified during the Iran-Iraq War, which cemented the Islamic Republic's ideological and political doctrines.

The study of Iran's post-revolutionary national identity reveals a dynamic and evolving concept shaped by both internal transformation and external pressure. This evolution incorporated elements of the Pahlavi dynasty's nationalist discourse within the framework of Islamic ideology, reflecting a complex interplay between traditional societal structures and modern political demands. The Islamic Republic has integrated aspects of the Pahlavi era's nationalist discourse, such as the emphasis on Iranian cultural heritage and historical continuity, within an Islamic framework. This synthesis aims to create a cohesive national identity that resonates with both pre-Islamic and Islamic elements of Iran's history. The bazaaris (merchants), intellectuals, and clergy have historically played a significant role in shaping Iran's societal and political landscape.

The demands of a modernising political landscape have shifted the locus of influence from traditional power structures to modern civil society frameworks. This shift is evident in the increasing role of women and intellectuals in advocating for reform and democratic governance. The post-revolutionary period has seen a growing vocalisation of societal demands for greater political participation, human rights, and social justice, reflecting a dynamic and evolving national identity. Women and intellectuals have become increasingly prominent in the post-revolutionary era, challenging traditional norms and advocating for progressive changes. In particular, the role of women has been significant in pushing for legal and social reforms, as seen in their active participation in various social movements and political discourse. Intellectuals have played a crucial role in shaping courses at the national level, public opinion, and policy through their engagement in academic and cultural debates. Thus, Iran's national identity is not static, but rather a dynamic concept that evolves in response to internal transformations and external pressures. The interplay between traditional societal structures and modern civil society frameworks highlights the shifting locus of influence on Iran's political landscape.



Each Iranian president, from 1997 to 2021, had a distinct approach to foreign policy, which was shaped by their interpretation of Iran's national identity narratives. Khatami (1997–2005) took a more reformist, constructivist approach, emphasising dialogue and international cooperation. His nuclear policies reflected the conceptions of Iran's identity around independence, technological progress, and pragmatic engagement with the West while upholding Iran's nuclear rights. He sought to portray Iran as a modern, technologically advanced nation deserving of nuclear rights, balancing this identity with resistance to perceived Western infringement. Ahmadinejad (2005–2013) adopted a more confrontational stance in foreign policy, emphasising resistance and asserting Iranian sovereignty. His controversial statements reflect the hardline interpretations of revolutionary identity narratives. Ahmadinejad took more radical positions on the nuclear issue, resisting Western pressure, which was seen as compromising Iran's anti-imperialist revolutionary identity. Rouhani (2013–2021) marked a strategic shift towards diplomacy and engagement with the international community. This was aimed at reintegrating Iran, while still upholding its rights and interests, culminating in the JCPOA. His approach reflected a more moderate interpretation of Iran's identity as seeking reintegration while still asserting independence and sovereignty. Hence, each president's foreign policy orientation was influenced by their perceptions of Iranian national identity narratives around independence, technological progress, resistance to Western pressure, and reconciling the revolutionary and modern aspects of Iran's identity, shaped by historical, cultural, and social factors, as emphasised by constructivism.

The evolution of Iran's nuclear policy under the presidencies of Khatami, Ahmadinejad, and Rouhani reflects a recalibration of national identity and a redefinition of Iran's international perceptions and image. This shift demonstrates that Iran's nuclear policy was not merely a response to strategic pressure, but was constructed through social interaction and each president's characteristic discourse. Khatami's approach was characterised by a commitment to dialogue and international cooperation, reflecting a constructivist approach that emphasised communication and mutual understanding. Khatami viewed the development of nuclear technology as an expression of Iranian national identity, independence, and technological progress. He portrayed it as a source of national pride and the right Iran deserved to exercise, while assuring the West of its peaceful nature, reflecting the identity conception of Iran as a modern, technologically advanced nation deserving of nuclear rights. Ahmadinejad's era emphasised resistance and sovereignty.

Ahmadinejad adopted a confrontational foreign policy stance, emphasising resistance and asserting Iranian sovereignty. His policies were driven by a strong sense of nationalism and anti-Westernism, resisting Western pressure and sanctions. This approach was marked by defiance against international norms and a commitment to advancing Iran's nuclear programme, which was framed as a symbol of national pride and resilience. Ahmadinejad's stance aimed to reinforce Iran's independence and strengthen its position on the global stage. His foreign policy provided an opportunity for the United States to rally the EU, China, and Russia to pass unprecedented sanctions against Iran in the UNSC. Rouhani's presidency marked a strategic shift back to diplomacy and engagement, aimed at reintegrating Iran into the international community. Rouhani's approach reflects a more moderate interpretation of Iran's identity, seeking reintegration into the international community while still asserting independence and sovereignty. He used the experience of previous governments to moderate Iran's path, leading to a comprehensive nuclear deal. This policy led Iran to rethink its strategies, making it possible to reach an agreement. The shifts in Iran's nuclear policy under Khatami, Ahmadinejad, and Rouhani highlight how each leader's perception of national identity influences their approach to nuclear negotiations and international relations. This demonstrates that Iran's nuclear policy was constructed through social interaction and underscores the importance of cultural, historical, and social factors in shaping Iran's foreign policy and nuclear strategy.

This study showed that Iran's history is replete with episodes of foreign domination and intervention. This has fostered a persistent national scepticism towards external influence, reinforcing its unwavering commitment to self-determination. This historical context is crucial for comprehending Iran's perception of its nuclear and missile programmes. They are viewed not only as strategic imperatives for national security, but also as vital components of modernity, independence, and autonomy from the perspective of Iran's national identity. In essence, nuclear capability is seen as a cornerstone of self-reliance and a bulwark against external pressure. The study shows that Iran's pursuit of nuclear capabilities is deeply embedded in the nation's self-image, intertwined with national pride and legitimacy.

The modernity within Iran's political and cultural spheres led to a selective and ambivalent approach. Technological progress, exemplified by nuclear capability, finds resonance to be a symbol of modernity and national advancement. However, this is juxtaposed with a cautious stance towards broader Western liberal values, which are often viewed with reservations. Iran's engagement in nuclear activities embodies a form of symbolic resistance against what is perceived as international overreach, particularly from the West. This approach serves as a reaffirmation of Iran's sovereignty and a potent response to historical grievances associated with perceived oppression and intervention, signifying its resilience, legitimacy, and independence at the global stage. This study emphasised the social constructions of reality, suggesting that our understanding of Iranian nuclear policy is shaped through social interpretations and meanings rather than objective realities alone. The application of social constructivism to nuclear policy analysis showed that Iran's nuclear policy and behaviour towards the international community varied depending on the constructed narratives, perceptions, and beliefs. This insight underscores the importance of social, historical, and normative contextual factors in understanding Iran's nuclear policy.

The strategic approach to nuclear hedging, which involves maintaining the potential to develop nuclear weapons while stopping short of actual weaponisation, allowed Iran to assert its sovereignty and technological prowess, reinforcing its national identity as a resilient and capable state. This policy of nuclear ambiguity serves to navigate the delicate balance between domestic assertions of independence and demands of global diplomacy, particularly in the face of persistent scrutiny and pressure from Western powers. Iran's nuclear hedging is a fundamental part of its quest for ontological security. This reflects Iran's need to uphold a consistent self-image as a sovereign, independent, and technologically modern nation, unyielding to external coercion while engaging in international systems that demand transparency and conformity to non-proliferation norms. This nuanced approach helps Iran project strength and deter potential threats, thereby securing a place on the global stage that acknowledges its regional and technological stature. This is a manifestation of the dual need for physical security and identity confirmation. By maintaining capabilities that align with the technical parameters of international treaties, such as the NPT, while asserting its sovereign right to peaceful nuclear development, Iran manages the persistent tension between national pride and international obligations.

Iran's deeply ingrained national identity narratives—stemming from a historical context marked by foreign intervention—influence its foreign policy and nuclear strategy. These narratives, enriched by experiences, not only shape Iran's policy decisions but also their strategic posture within the international arena. In other words, its nuclear policies are deeply intertwined with ontological security and self-image, reflecting the complex interplay of historical, ideational, and materialistic factors. The concept of ontological security, which refers to the need for a stable sense of identity and continuity, has played a crucial role in shaping Iran's nuclear hedging. Its identity as an Islamic revolutionary state is not only about physical security, but also about maintaining a stable and continuous sense of self in the international arena.

In cases where there is a contradiction between ontological and physical security, Iran may prioritise ontological security. Thus, maintaining its identity as an Islamic revolutionary state can take precedence over material costs and physical security concerns. The domestic political context, including the influence of various societal actors such as the *bazaaris*, intellectuals, and, more importantly, the role of Iran's supreme leader and the colour clergy, also plays a role in shaping Iran's nuclear policy. The dynamic interplay between these traditional power structures and modern civil society frameworks highlights the shifting locus of influence on Iran's political landscape. Iran's nuclear programme reflects its ontological security and self-image by emphasising the preservation of its identity as an independent, technologically advanced, and revolutionary state. The strategy of nuclear hedging allows Iran to maintain a state of nuclear latency by balancing between advancing its nuclear capabilities and adhering to international agreements. This approach is shaped by historical experiences, shared cultural-religious norms, and the need for a stable sense of identity, demonstrating that Iran's nuclear policy is constructed through social interactions and the broader construct of its ontological security.

From a constructivist perspective, the logic of appropriateness crucially links national identity to foreign policy decisions. The impact of shared identity narratives and norms influences policy actions, a clear departure from the neorealist and utilitarian-liberal perspectives, which primarily attribute the impact of norms to power or interests. Unlike neorealist models, where identities and norms affect actor behaviour only to the extent that compliance can be enforced by power or anticipated due to fear of sanctions, social constructivism views identity and its associated norms as primary drivers of policy, not merely as responses to material capabilities or incentives. Iran's commitment to the NPT and the JCPOA is motivated by a combination of strategic considerations and a deep-seated national identity that prioritises norm-compliance along with responsible membership in the international community. The logic of appropriateness suggests that shared identity narratives and societal norms fundamentally influence policy decisions. Within the constructivist framework, national identity and norms precede and shape actors' interests. The norm against nuclear proliferation, along with the aspiration to be perceived as an independent, sovereign, and responsible member of the international community, influenced the nuclear policy. The necessity of relief from sanctions is a strategic priority and equally contributes to Iran's adherence to the NPT and the JCPOA, indicating the interplay between internal norms and strategic calculations. Thus, the fundamental premise of constructivism, which posits that norms and identity influence state behaviour alongside power balancing and security, is particularly applicable to Iran's nuclear programme and the JCPOA.

The religious edict (*fatwa*) issued by the Iranian Supreme Leader, which bans the production and stockpiling of nuclear weapons, reinforces Iran's norm-compliance. By explicitly prohibiting nuclear weapons, the *fatwa* not only dismisses nuclear proliferation but also aligns Iran's nuclear policy with its religious and ethical principles. This *fatwa* has been a critical element in Iran's diplomatic strategy, emphasising its commitment to non-proliferation in international negotiations. Iranian negotiators have frequently referenced the *fatwa* to underscore their adherence to non-proliferation commitments and to build trust with the international community. This alignment between religious doctrine and state policy underscores the influence of internalised norms on Iran's foreign policy actions. Thus, Iran's nuclear policy is shaped by a complex interplay of internalised norms, strategic considerations, and the desire to integrate into the global community on equitable terms. These factors collectively drive Iran's engagement with international agreements and institutions, reflecting both its national identity and its strategic interests.

The unique theocratic-republican characteristics of Iran's political system, particularly the role of *Velayat-e Faqih*, were instrumental in developing a flexible negotiating strategy. This strategy aimed to demonstrate Iran's peaceful nuclear intentions by agreeing to hold bilateral talks with the United States, accepting unprecedented inspections, and making other concessions outlined in the JCPOA. For instance, under Khatami, there was a pronounced emphasis on dialogue and engagement with the West, reflecting societal aspirations for reform and international cooperation. Conversely, during Ahmadinejad's presidency, a more confrontational stance resonated with the nationalistic and conservative segments of society, demonstrating a different alignment with public expectations. In each case, failing to adhere to these societal expectations risked eroding the government's legitimacy. However, this constructivist analysis encounters limitations when societal and international norms are in conflict. For example, while societal norms might demand assertive nuclear development as a symbol of sovereignty, international norms under treaties such as the NPT and pressures from bodies such as the UN Security Council advocate for non-proliferation and transparency.

This study found that when societal and international expectations are aligned, constructivist theory provides robust explanatory power. Conversely, the theory struggles to fully explain the decision-making processes when these expectations diverge. Moreover, this study highlights that societal expectations can still influence Iran's foreign policy decisions, even if they do not align with international norms. The complexity of balancing these often-conflicting expectations poses a significant challenge for Iranian policymakers and underscores the limitations of constructivist theory, which sometimes fails to predict or explain foreign policy decisions when identity-based norms are not cohesive. This research posits that, for foreign policy decision-makers, congruence between societal and international norms amplifies the explanatory power of constructivist theory. When these expectations align, the theory can robustly explain the behaviour of states such as Iran in adhering to or resisting international pressures. Conversely, when an expectation of appropriate behaviour is pronounced at only one level, either international or societal, the influence on policy decisions is less potent. Moreover, the study reveals that even in the absence of an international consensus, domestic norms rooted in national identity can still shape foreign policy outcomes.

The disparity between international and societal norms highlights a fundamental limitation of social constructivism: its reduced capacity to predict and explain foreign policy behaviour under conditions where identity-based norms are either conflicting or not universally acknowledged. In sum, while social constructivism offers a valuable framework for understanding the interplay between national identity and foreign policy, its prognostic accuracy diminishes in scenarios where there is clear discord between domestic and international normative expectations.

This dissertation conclusively argues that Iran's nuclear policy is intricately shaped by its national identity and profoundly influenced by external pressures, particularly international sanctions. By integrating historical narratives and societal values, this study reveals how domestic imperatives and international norms guide Iran's strategic decisions. Ultimately, Iran's nuclear actions are a balancing act between maintaining sovereign identity and adapting to global expectations, highlighting the complex dance between internal motivations and external constraints on the international stage. From the perspective of social constructivism, Iran's pursuit of nuclear technology is a symbol of national pride, independence, and technological advancement. This reflects a desire to reclaim Iran's status as a powerful and modern nation, resonating with both the pre-Islamic and Islamic elements of Iran's national identity. The nuclear programme is tied to its ontological security, which involves maintaining a stable sense of identity and continuity. This means that Iran's actions are not just about physical security, but also about preserving its identity as an independent, sovereign Islamic revolutionary state.

The need to resist Western pressure and assert independence is a key aspect of this identity, influencing Iran's strategy of nuclear hedging and maintaining a state of nuclear latency without fully committing to becoming a nuclear-armed state. This strategy reflects pragmatic security considerations, balancing the advancement of nuclear capabilities with adherence to international agreements and shared norms, including the NPT, to avoid severe sanctions and military interventions. Iran's nuclear policy is also driven by the need to balance domestic consensus on nuclear advancement with international norms. Diplomatic strategies must consider the ideational dimensions of Iran's nuclear aspirations and acknowledge the importance of national identity, historical experiences, and ontological security. This involves an understanding of Iran's need for recognition, respect, and technological progress. Engaging with Iran in these ways can help build trust and create a more conducive environment for negotiations, addressing the underlying identity concerns that drive Iran's nuclear policy. Simultaneously, diplomatic strategies must address the material dimensions of Iran's nuclear aspirations, including security and economic concerns, as well as the strategic benefits of nuclear hedging. It involves offering security guarantees, economic incentives, and pathways for peaceful nuclear cooperation. A multifaceted approach that combines ideational and material considerations can help create a more comprehensive and effective diplomatic strategy that addresses the full spectrum of factors that influence Iran's nuclear policy.



## 8.2 Future Research Directions

This dissertation highlights the value of the ontological security concept in understanding Iran's nuclear policy. Ontological security, defined as the security of self-identity in a consistent and coherent manner, goes beyond mere physical security concerns. It plays a vital role in shaping nuclear decision-making and is bound to national identity and pride. This interdependence can make the negotiations particularly challenging (Mitzen and Larson, 2017; Steele, 2008; Zarakol, 2017). For instance, Iran's reluctance to discuss its missile programme, closely linked to its nuclear aspirations, may stem from ontological security concerns. The programme symbolises national resistance and independence, challenges Western dominance, and affirms Iran's sovereignty on the global stage. The intersection of ontological security with traditional security concerns is exemplified by the international response to Iran's nuclear programme, particularly the 2015 JCPOA. Understanding states' actions, including Iran's nuclear decisions, requires acknowledging the dual influence of identity preservation and physical security.

Building on this analysis, the following research questions offer pathways for future research:

- I. Nuclear Policy and Identity: How do ontological security concerns influence the nuclear policies of states perceived as revisionist? This broader investigation could lead to comparative studies, enhancing our understanding of state behaviour across different geopolitical contexts.
- II. Theorising Ontological Security: How can international relations frameworks better integrate ontological security to predict and manage conflicts arising from clashes between identity and traditional security concerns? Revisiting the existing theories to incorporate ontological security aspects can enhance the predictive accuracy and effectiveness of global security strategies.
- III. Balancing Security Needs: Can a balance be achieved between ontological security and global security requirements in state behaviour, particularly in states with contentious international relations? This question can explore strategies to reconcile a state's need for self-identity security with the broader security demands of the international community.

These questions aim to stimulate further research that deepens our understanding of the complex relationships among national identity, ontological security, and international security dynamics. Future studies could explore comparative analyses of national identity narratives and nuclear policies across different states. Quantitative methods could also be utilised to investigate the correlation between ontological security and foreign policy decisions, particularly in the realm of nuclear policy. Expanding the research focus beyond Iran to include other states with ontological security concerns would provide a broader validation of the dissertation's findings and illuminate how states leverage identity narratives in the international arena. By pursuing these directions, future research can build upon this foundation, broadening the scope of our understanding of how national identity narratives and ontological security influence state behaviour in nuclear policy and international relations. These studies would not only fill the existing gaps identified in this research, but also enhance our understanding of the complex dynamics that govern state actions on the global stage.

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