

Sanctions, Strikes, and Strategic Narratives: A Critical Review of U.S. Policy toward Iran (1979-2025)

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ABSTRACT: Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, U.S.–Iran relations have evolved into a complex and enduring rivalry shaped by five interlocking forces: proxy competition, economic pressure, Gulf energy politics, American exceptionalism, and the influence of U.S. think tanks. This review draws on interdisciplinary scholarship to argue that Washington’s continued use of deterrence, sanctions, and isolation reflects not just strategic concerns but also domestic politics, institutional inertia, and moral narratives that frame Iran as a permanent adversary. Energy policy, once focused on oil flows and chokepoints, now intersects with climate diplomacy and market transitions, complicating traditional containment strategies. At the same time, think tanks help convert ideological beliefs into policy orthodoxy, narrowing the space for diplomatic alternatives. By examining these material and symbolic dynamics, this review calls for more adaptive policymaking, one that reevaluates entrenched assumptions, measures coercive tools by real-world outcomes, and aligns energy strategy with an evolving geopolitical and environmental context.

Keywords: *U.S. Foreign Policy, Iran–U.S. Relations, Economic Sanctions, Proxy Warfare, Strategic Narratives*

Introduction

The 1979 Islamic Revolution transformed Iran from a close U.S. ally into a defiant republic opposing Western influence, rejecting Israel, and resisting perceived American imperialism. This rupture, as Dehnavi (2024) notes, sparked an enduring ideological confrontation: the U.S. cast Iran as a moral threat to global order, while Iran positioned itself as a leader of anti-imperial resistance. As Fiedler and Dehnavi (2024) argue, these tensions reflect broader regional patterns marked by sectarian divides, contested identities, and foreign interventions.

In response, U.S. policy has consistently relied on military presence, economic pressure, diplomatic isolation, and moral rhetoric. Sanctions have emerged as the dominant tool, framed as both strategic and ethical. Over time, military deployments and political discourse have fused into a narrative that portrays American power as both protective and principled.

Scholars analyze this relationship through varied lenses: security analysts focus on proxy conflicts, economists on sanctions, and constructivists on identity and threat narratives. More recent work emphasizes how institutional and political structures in Washington entrench these approaches, even as realities shift.

The 2025 U.S.–Israel–Iran escalation underscores this continuity. Rather than a turning point, it reflects a pattern: using calibrated force not to resolve conflict, but to manage it. The underlying strategic assumptions of deterrence, sanctions, and containment remain largely unchallenged.

This review analyzes five persistent drivers of U.S. policy toward Iran: proxy threats and evolving deterrence, the logic and effects of sanctions, energy policy in a changing geopolitical landscape, ideological framing through American exceptionalism, and the influence of think tanks on foreign policy discourse.

Ultimately, the article argues that U.S. policy is shaped not only by strategic interests but also by deeper belief systems, institutional inertia, and narrative power. Rethinking this approach requires asking why certain strategies persist, whose interests they serve, and how alternative paths can be made viable.

Strategic Foundations: Security and Proxy Dynamics

Since Iran's 1979 revolution, U.S. policymakers have viewed Tehran-backed militias as threats to Gulf stability. In response, Washington deepened military ties with Gulf monarchies and adopted a containment strategy that evolved post-2003 into a broader campaign to counter Iranian influence through force partnerships, deterrence, and surveillance.

As groups like Hizbollah, Kata'ib Hizbollah, and the Houthis grew, the U.S. expanded missile defenses, naval patrols, and regional bases. RAND analysts coined the "Iran Threat Network" (ITN), categorizing proxies as Targeters, Deterrers, Stabilizers, and Influencers. Similarly, Dehnavi and Safavipour argue Iran uses proxies both to deter aggression and destabilize rivals, enhancing its regional reach while avoiding direct confrontation.

This proxy dynamic reflects a strategic balancing act: both Iran and the U.S. advance their interests without triggering full-scale war. By the 2010s, that balance relied increasingly on drone strikes, cyber operations, and targeted sanctions. Tensions peaked in June 2025, when U.S. warplanes struck Iranian nuclear sites at Fordow, Natanz, and Isfahan, an operation described as calibrated, designed to delay Iran's program without full escalation.

A significant shift has since occurred: limited strikes are no longer seen as failures of deterrence, but integral to it. Deterrence now centers on managing, not preventing, conflict, blurring the line between proxy and state-level engagement. This normalization increases the risk of escalation, especially in a region marked by mistrust and fragmented authority.

Proponents of "calibrated coercion" argue it enables strong responses without war. But its effectiveness relies on rational actors and clear communication, both of which are often absent. Without robust crisis management, even limited actions can spiral out of control.

In sum, the U.S. strategy combines military presence, alliances, and precision strikes to counter Iran. Yet this mix increasingly strains regional stability. The very tools

meant to deter conflict now risk deepening it. As the region shifts from deterrence to conflict management, flexible diplomacy and reliable communication channels are more urgent than ever.

Sanctions and Economic Statecraft

Since the Islamic Revolution, economic pressure has been central to U.S. policy toward Iran. What began as a spare-parts embargo has evolved into a broad sanctions regime targeting banking, energy, and academia. Framed as a humane alternative to war, these measures are influenced by U.S. domestic politics as much as by Iranian actions.

Sanctions aim to impose enough “pain” to change behavior, offering leverage without military risk. As Chan and Drury note, they work by withdrawing access to resources. Yet, their application often aligns more with U.S. political cycles than with Iranian provocations. The 1996 Iran–Libya Sanctions Act and the 2012 NDAA sanctions, for example, coincided with politically sensitive moments, suggesting symbolic rather than strategic motives.

This logic extends beyond Congress. Analysts such as Dehnavi, Niafar, and Ahmadzada highlight the role of think tanks like the Foundation for Defense of Democracies and AEI, which frame escalating sanctions as moral imperatives. The revolving door between these institutions and the government helps entrench coercive tools as defaults, regardless of their effectiveness. As Fiedler and Dehnavi (2024) argue, economic isolation persists not due to results, but because it reinforces ideological narratives.

Meanwhile, sanctions impose real human costs. Batmanghelidj and Moret document disruptions in medical supply chains, even for exempted items like cancer and dialysis treatments. These effects deepen public suffering, fuel nationalist sentiment, and empower Iranian hardliners. Scholars increasingly see sanctions as symbols of U.S. political resolve rather than instruments of change. The July 2025 sanctions on 22 entities linked to Iran’s shadow banking system were framed as a crackdown on illicit finance, but offered no diplomatic path forward, reinforcing familiar narratives of permanent enmity.

Critics advocate evaluating sanctions not only by their enforcement or messaging, but by actual outcomes. Proposals include pairing humanitarian data with compliance benchmarks to better assess effectiveness.

Ultimately, sanctions function within a broader U.S. framework that portrays Iran as irredeemable and coercion as morally necessary. This framing narrows diplomatic space and reinforces confrontation. Rethinking economic statecraft means questioning not only the tools used but the assumptions and narratives that justify them.

Energy Security and Geopolitical Coordination

Energy has long anchored U.S. strategy in the Persian Gulf, with Iran playing a central, often disruptive role. As David S. Painter notes, Washington began treating Gulf oil as a “vital interest” once domestic supplies declined. Iran, after 1979, complicated this picture: it held vast reserves and controlled the critical chokepoint at the Strait of Hormuz. From the hostage crisis to the Gulf War, threats to oil flow consistently pulled the U.S. further into the region.

This security posture became routine. Scholars like Ellias Dehnavi and Radosław Fiedler describe how the U.S. and U.K. jointly patrol sea lanes, lay minesweeping plans, and impose sanctions when Iran tests boundaries. Bases in Bahrain, Qatar, and Diego Garcia serve as constant reminders of Western protection over oil routes.

Yet this framework is showing its age. As Meghan L. O’Sullivan points out, global energy dynamics have shifted. With rising U.S. shale output, LNG markets, and growing climate commitments, energy security now means more than keeping tankers safe; it’s about withstanding change. Today’s vulnerabilities include not just chokepoints but supply volatility, tech transitions, and climate shocks.

Iran’s position is also evolving. Sanctions have kept it isolated, but reintegration could bring new relevance. Whether it's seen as a spoiler or a stakeholder depends on how it adjusts to a world moving away from fossil fuels.

While the Strait of Hormuz still matters in times of crisis, like during the 2025 flare-up, its strategic weight is fading. Ironically, these disruptions often accelerate the

shift toward renewables, highlighting the fragility of oil-dependent systems and spurring investment in cleaner alternatives.

Reframing energy security now means focusing less on warships and more on resilience. Iran's influence will increasingly hinge not on how much oil it exports, but on how it engages with a changing energy order. The geopolitics of oil is giving way to the geopolitics of transition, and U.S. strategy will need to keep up.

Ideological Framing and U.S. Exceptionalism

U.S. policy toward Iran has long been shaped by a belief in American exceptionalism, the idea that the United States has a unique moral role in global affairs. Under the Trump administration, this notion was reframed through nationalism. As Dehnavi (2024) notes, policies like the JCPOA withdrawal and the “maximum pressure” campaign were presented not just as strategic moves, but as moral imperatives to defend universal values.

Dehnavi and Fiedler extend this view in their analysis of how think tanks such as the Foundation for Defense of Democracies (FDD) and the American Enterprise Institute (AEI) help convert abstract ideals like democracy and freedom into emotionally resonant foreign policy narratives. In these frameworks, Iran is cast as a persistent antagonist, its defeat reinforcing America's sense of global mission.

Constructivist scholars like Paul Pillar explain how identity-based contrasts between democracy vs. theocracy become embedded in policymaking and media narratives. These mental shortcuts frame Iran not as a state capable of change, but as a fixed threat. Realist Stephen Walt similarly critiques exceptionalism as a myth masking power politics, warning that it transforms coercion into a moral duty while sidelining diplomatic alternatives.

The 2025 U.S.–Israel–Iran conflict further illustrates this framing. Rather than reevaluating the broader conflict, officials defaulted to familiar binaries: liberty vs. oppression, civilization vs. chaos. As Dehnavi and Tabatabaei (2023) argue, counterterrorism narratives have long served as ideological mechanisms to reinforce U.S. moral authority, particularly post-9/11.

Yet this framing obscures domestic Iranian critiques. Fiedler and Dehnavi (2024) document governance failures, elite emigration, repression, and mismanagement that validate some Western concerns. Still, these problems don't justify portraying Iran as ideologically static. Instead, they highlight the need for engagement that recognizes both Iran's internal dissent and the costs of moralistic foreign policy. Once Iran is cast as irredeemable, confrontation becomes the default. Cooperation is treated with suspicion, reinforcing a cycle where diplomacy appears naive and coercion is necessary. Exceptionalism forms the foundation, think tanks shape the narrative, and institutions internalize both.

Once Iran is cast as irredeemable, confrontation becomes the default. Cooperation is treated with suspicion, reinforcing a cycle where diplomacy appears naive and coercion is necessary. Exceptionalism forms the foundation, think tanks shape the narrative, and institutions internalize both. To understand U.S. policy toward Iran, we must move beyond tactical analysis and confront how ideology, narrative, and institutional habits shape what policymakers consider possible.

Think Tanks and Foreign Policy Discourse

Think tanks play a subtle yet powerful role in shaping U.S. policy toward Iran. They don't merely analyze policy, they help write it. As Dehnavi notes in *Sorry, How Can I Get to Washington?*, funding and institutional branding shape the language these organizations use, which often finds its way into memos, hearings, and policy briefings. Donald Abelson adds that institutions like AEI, FDD, and WINEP do more than publish: they lobby, advise the media, and exchange personnel with the government. This revolving door helps institutionalize a view of Iran as inherently hostile and diplomacy as suspect.

These groups exert influence not only through data but also through framing. Joseph Nye's concept of soft power helps explain how persuasive narratives, such as sanctions defending international norms or diplomacy signaling weakness, shape which policy options are seen as legitimate. Over time, such narratives lock in confrontational defaults.

Following the 2025 U.S.–Israel–Iran escalation, think tanks quickly reaffirmed long-standing claims: Iran is aggressive, untrustworthy, and incapable of reform. Sanctions and force weren't just advocated, they were framed as moral imperatives. Instead of rethinking policy, the focus returned to proving resolve.

These views often show up nearly verbatim in official speeches, briefings, and congressional testimony. By the time decisions are made, diplomatic alternatives are often already sidelined. The policy debate narrows, with engagement dismissed as naive or even disloyal.

This insular ecosystem reinforces itself. Former officials move into think tanks, reaffirm prevailing narratives, then return to government roles where they act on those same assumptions. This circulation creates structural incentives to escalate rather than reassess.

In such an environment, advocating diplomacy isn't just unpopular, it can be professionally risky. The boundary between dissent and disloyalty blurs. Think tanks don't just shape policy; they shape the limits of what policymakers imagine as possible.

Breaking this cycle requires more than outcome critique. It demands scrutiny of how institutions like AEI and FDD construct and protect the narratives that make confrontation seem necessary. Only by challenging these deeper storylines can space be made for alternative approaches.

Synthesis and Critique of Literature

Scholars broadly agree that U.S. policy toward Iran reflects both practical concerns like Gulf security and energy interests and deeper ideological narratives about America's global role. Where they diverge is in assessing which of these factors matter most and how effectively they shape outcomes.

Sanctions remain one of the most contested tools. Though widely used, many studies argue they reflect domestic political cycles more than shifts in Iranian behavior. Think tanks often frame sanctions as moral imperatives, while humanitarian research highlights their toll on civilians and their limited leverage in diplomacy.

The 2025 conflict with Iran reinforced these critiques. New sanctions appeared more performative than strategic, symbolizing resolve rather than shifting Iranian actions, while exacerbating civilian suffering and emboldening hardliners.

In energy security, much scholarship still emphasizes chokepoints like the Strait of Hormuz. Yet newer work points to changing dynamics such as U.S. shale growth and global energy transitions that challenge traditional containment logic. Some argue conflicts like that of 2025 may even accelerate the shift away from fossil fuel dependency.

Regarding American exceptionalism, Iran is often framed as a moral antagonist. While this narrative has staying power, less attention has been paid to how it evolves in response to crises. The 2025 clash, for instance, reinforced binary thinking that leaves little room for diplomacy.

Finally, literature on think tanks shows their influence in narrowing policy debate. Through close ties to government and media, they shape which ideas gain traction, often sidelining alternatives in favor of confrontational norms, especially during heightened tensions.

In sum, U.S. policy toward Iran reflects not just strategic logic but entrenched routines, institutional feedback loops, and ideological framing. These forces make shifts toward diplomacy difficult, even when conditions on the ground demand rethinking long-standing approaches.

Future Directions

In the post-2025 context, future research must broaden its lens to better understand and potentially reshape U.S. policy toward Iran. First, scholars should integrate climate–economy models with regional security analysis, recognizing that Gulf dynamics increasingly depend on decarbonization, tech shifts, and energy transitions. Second, comparing U.S. portrayals of Iran with other sanctioned states like Cuba or North Korea could uncover broader patterns of adversary construction.

Third, think tanks deserve closer scrutiny, especially how funding, leadership, and media access influence which ideas gain traction. Fourth, sanction assessments

should move beyond enforcement metrics to include humanitarian impact and diplomatic outcomes. Lastly, researchers should explore why diplomatic openings are often overlooked, identifying institutional responses to disruption that may block innovation.

Ultimately, future scholarship must go beyond refining policy instruments. It must challenge the deeper narratives and structures that normalize confrontation and limit the space for alternative strategies.

Conclusion

U.S. policy toward Iran is anchored in five interlinked pillars: military strategy, sanctions, energy concerns, ideological framing, and think tank influence. While proxy threats dominate security assessments, the habitual use of sanctions reflects deeper patterns shaped by domestic politics and institutional inertia.

The 2025 Israel–Iran–U.S. clash marked a shift in deterrence. Limited strikes are now seen as standard tools of diplomacy, framed as strategic precision rather than signs of policy exhaustion. This normalization increases the risk of escalation under the illusion of control.

Energy policy, once rooted in oil scarcity and chokepoint threats, now operates in a world shaped by decarbonisation and supply diversification. Though old containment doctrines persist, their rationale weakens. Ironically, instability like that seen in 2025 may accelerate transitions to renewables, undermining the very assumptions justifying U.S. presence in the region.

Ideological narratives continue to cast Iran as a moral adversary. Think tanks help institutionalize this framing, transforming beliefs into policy scripts that make coercion seem ethically necessary. Their revolving door with the government reinforces orthodoxy, narrowing the space for alternative thinking.

Sanctions exemplify this cycle. Despite limited strategic success, they endure as symbols of resolve, often worsening humanitarian conditions and entrenching hardline factions. Their moral framing obscures their real-world limitations.

A more adaptive strategy requires questioning not just the tools of U.S. policy but the narratives and structures that legitimize them. Future approaches must confront outdated assumptions, reassess coercive defaults, and build space for diplomatic alternatives. Only by addressing both material dynamics and ideological routines can the U.S. escape the trap of escalation and design policies suited to a changing geopolitical landscape.

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