

The European Union's Strategies Toward the Islamic Republic of Iran: From the Islamic Revolution to the Present

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Abstract

This article examines the European Union's (EU) strategies toward the Islamic Republic of Iran from the 1979 Islamic Revolution to the present, offering a comprehensive longitudinal analysis of EU-Iran relations through a constructivist lens. The relationship between the EU and Iran has traversed a landscape marked by ideological divergence, geopolitical tensions, and shifts in diplomatic approaches, providing an essential case study for understanding the role of ideas, norms, and identities in international relations. While previous scholarship has largely addressed isolated aspects of EU-Iran relations—such as critical and comprehensive dialogue frameworks, nuclear negotiations, and regional strategy—this study seeks to provide a cohesive overview of the EU's evolving policy by situating these engagements within the broader context of the EU's normative commitments and strategic interests. Employing constructivism as the theoretical foundation, this research argues that the EU's strategies have been shaped not solely by material interests but by the EU's self-perception as a promoter of international norms, such as human rights and nuclear non-proliferation. Additionally, the EU's continuous emphasis on dialogue and diplomacy, even amid rising tensions, reflects its identity as a distinct actor in the international system. The study delves into key aspects of this evolving relationship, including the EU's perception of Iran as a regional actor, the influence of interfaith and intercultural dialogue on EU-Iran engagements, and the ways in which social learning has reshaped EU strategies over time. The analysis reveals that repeated interactions between the EU and Iran have fostered mutual understanding and reframed strategic priorities, shifting from a focus on human rights to broader concerns of energy security and regional stability. This constructivist approach underscores the socially constructed nature of threats, opportunities, and interests, offering a nuanced understanding of the EU's enduring engagement with Iran. By shedding light on the ideational factors that inform EU policy, this study contributes valuable insights into the complexities of EU-Iran relations within an evolving global context.

Keywords: EU-Iran relations, constructivism, diplomatic strategy, normative identity, Middle East stability.

Introduction

The relationship between the European Union (EU) and the Islamic Republic of Iran represents a complex tapestry of diplomatic, economic, and strategic interactions that have significantly shaped the geopolitical landscape of the Middle East and beyond. This multifaceted relationship, characterized by periods of engagement and estrangement, offers a rich terrain for scholarly inquiry into the dynamics of international relations in an increasingly multipolar world. Extant literature on EU-Iran relations has predominantly focused on specific aspects of this relationship, such as the frameworks of critical and comprehensive dialogue (Kaussler, 2008), the challenges and opportunities presented by evolving geopolitical realities (Mousavian, 2008), and the EU's role in nuclear negotiations (Kienzle, 2013). While these studies have undoubtedly contributed valuable insights, they often present a fragmented view, concentrating on particular timeframes or isolated facets of the relationship. Consequently, there exists a notable lacuna in our understanding of the EU's overarching strategic approach toward Iran, especially from a longitudinal perspective that encompasses the period from the 1979 Islamic Revolution to the present day.

This study aims to address this gap by posing the following central research question: How has the EU's foreign policy strategy toward the Islamic Republic of Iran evolved from the 1979 revolution to the present, and what factors have shaped this evolution? To elucidate this complex issue, the research employs constructivism as the theoretical framework. Constructivist theory, with its emphasis on the role of ideas, norms, and identities in shaping international relations, offers a particularly apt lens through which to analyze EU-Iran relations (Checkel, 1998; Wendt, 1999; Adler, 1997). Unlike realist or liberal approaches that prioritize material interests or institutional structures, constructivism allows us to explore how the EU's perceptions of Iran-informed by historical, cultural, and interfaith dynamics-have influenced its foreign policy strategy (Manners, 2002; Diez, 2005).

This research will investigate several key aspects of EU-Iran relations:

- 1- The EU's regional strategy in the Middle East and Iran's position within this broader framework.
- 2- The EU's self-perception as a promoter of international norms, particularly in the realms of human rights and nuclear non-proliferation, and how this identity has shaped its approach to Iran.

- 3- The role of interfaith dialogue in fostering mutual understanding and its impact on the trajectory of EU-Iran relations.
- 4- The evolution of both the EU's and Iran's identities and normative frameworks over time, and how these changes have influenced their diplomatic engagement.

Furthermore, this study will provide a comprehensive historical overview of EU-Iran relations, contextualizing these interactions within the broader landscape of regional and global transformations. By applying a constructivist framework to this longitudinal analysis, we aim to offer novel insights into how ideational factors have shaped the EU's foreign policy toward Iran over time.

1. The Strategic Evolution of EU Foreign Policy Toward the Islamic Republic of Iran

Ervand Abrahamian underscores a significant transformation in the economic and political relations between Iran and European states, particularly during and after the Cold War. Following the decline of European influence during this era, the United States emerged as Iran's dominant political partner. This partnership persisted until the 1979 Iranian Revolution, which drastically altered Iran's international engagements. While the revolution severed Iran's ties with the United States and substantially strained its relationships with Europe, European countries, unlike the U.S., refrained from entirely suspending their diplomatic relations with Tehran (Mousavian, 2008: 30–42). Political science scholars widely agree that European-Iranian relations began to recover after the eight-year Iran-Iraq War in the 1980s, as Europe recalibrated its strategic approach toward Iran.

By the mid-1990s, European policies toward Iran had diverged significantly from those of the United States. Under President Clinton, the U.S. adopted a "dual containment" strategy targeting both Iraq and Iran, imposing comprehensive sanctions on both states. While the European Union (EU) supported United Nations sanctions on Iraq, no similar UN-mandated sanctions applied to Iran. Instead, the EU pursued a "critical dialogue" policy, emphasizing engagement with Tehran (Mousavian, 2016: 89–91). This divergence became more pronounced following the election of President Mohammad Khatami in 1997, whose administration prioritized repairing Iran's foreign relations. Khatami's presidency witnessed notable improvements in EU-Iran trade and diplomatic relations, marked by high-profile visits, including his official trips

to Italy, Germany, and France, and Iranian Foreign Minister Kamal Kharazi's visit to the United Kingdom in 1999, which followed the restoration of full diplomatic relations between Tehran and London.

The late 1990s saw a surge in EU-Iran trade, as European energy firms capitalized on lucrative opportunities in Iran's market. In contrast, American companies faced limitations under U.S. sanctions, particularly following the enactment of the Iran and Libya Sanctions Act in 1996. This legislation imposed secondary sanctions on foreign firms operating in Iran. In response, the EU implemented a blocking statute to protect European companies from U.S. penalties, enabling them to maintain their market presence in Iran. American firms criticized their European counterparts for allegedly exploiting this divergence, characterizing Europe's policy as a "more ethical" approach to engagement with Tehran.

Iran viewed European trade partnerships as a critical element of its strategy to counterbalance U.S. hostility. Tehran sought to demonstrate that major European and Japanese economies did not fully align with American policy. During a visit to London in 2000, Kharazi expressed Iran's perception of Britain as a potential intermediary with Washington, given its close relationship with the U.S. (Chatham House, 2000). However, this aspiration remained unrealized. Nonetheless, Iran actively sought to leverage European solidarity in resisting American pressure.

While Washington initially expressed cautious optimism about Khatami's reformist agenda and his "dialogue between civilizations" initiative, this optimism dissipated as U.S. officials became skeptical of Tehran's willingness to alter its foreign policy. For example, despite then-Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's speeches advocating improved Iran-U.S. relations, Tehran's lukewarm response reinforced American doubts about Khatami's capacity for meaningful policy changes (Mirbagheri, 2007: 307). Conversely, European states sustained their engagement through critical dialogue, albeit with challenges. European diplomats often navigated Tehran's sensitivities regarding media coverage and cultural exchanges. For instance, a series of controversies-such as the BBC's reporting on student protests and the perceived cultural affronts during official visits-tested the patience of European representatives.

Despite these difficulties, the EU demonstrated a level of unity in its approach to Iran that contrasted with its divisions over Iraq. Since 2002, Britain, France, and Germany (the EU3) have maintained a unified position on Iran's nuclear program. The British

Foreign Secretary at the time, Jack Straw, emphasized this European unity to counter perceptions of British alignment with U.S. policies. The EU3 played a pivotal role in negotiations with Iran, leading Tehran to sign the Additional Protocol to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 2003. This agreement allowed the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) to conduct more intrusive inspections of Iranian facilities and secured a temporary suspension of Iran's uranium enrichment activities (Sauer, 2008: 274–279).

Nevertheless, Iran's nuclear ambitions remained a point of contention. While Tehran argued that its nuclear program was for peaceful purposes, revelations of undisclosed facilities raised international concerns. The U.S. accused Iran of pursuing nuclear weapons, prompting a more rigorous stance from Britain and France. Germany, Iran's leading European trade partner, played a central role in the EU's anti-proliferation efforts while advocating for continued economic cooperation. The EU3's negotiations faced persistent challenges. Despite Tehran's initial concessions, including signing the Additional Protocol and suspending enrichment activities, tensions resurfaced when the U.S. adopted a more aggressive posture under President George W. Bush. American criticism of Iran, particularly its inclusion in the "axis of evil," compounded Iranian mistrust of U.S. intentions. The EU sought to reassure Iran of its commitment to diplomacy, but divisions between European and American strategies became increasingly pronounced.

By 2006, disagreements over Iran's nuclear program escalated to the United Nations Security Council, which imposed sanctions on Tehran. The EU, while aligned with the broader international response, also pursued its own sanctions regime (Mousoyan, 2016: 86). This marked a turning point in the EU's diplomatic approach, as it sought to balance its commitment to non-proliferation with the need to maintain dialogue with Iran.

The election of Hassan Rouhani in 2013, coupled with a shift in U.S. policy under President Obama, facilitated a breakthrough in nuclear negotiations. Recognizing the impracticality of demanding a complete cessation of Iran's nuclear program, the U.S. adopted the EU's more pragmatic stance, permitting limited enrichment for civilian purposes. Rouhani's administration, led by Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, embraced a more flexible negotiating approach. This culminated in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015, a landmark agreement that imposed strict limits on Iran's nuclear activities in exchange for the lifting of sanctions. The EU

played a central role in these negotiations, with High Representative Catherine Ashton earning recognition for her diplomatic leadership (Rettman, 2014). The JCPOA's implementation in 2016 marked a significant achievement for European diplomacy. It facilitated the reintegration of Iran into the global economy and opened new opportunities for European companies in sectors such as energy and manufacturing (Mansouri, 2023). However, the agreement faced challenges following the election of President Donald Trump, who withdrew the U.S. from the JCPOA in 2018, undermining European efforts to preserve the deal. Despite attempts by European leaders to salvage the agreement, U.S. sanctions and escalating tensions hindered progress (Nakhjavani, 2023).

The EU's continued commitment to the JCPOA underscores its broader strategic interest in promoting stability and non-proliferation in the region. While European states have encountered obstacles in balancing their relations with Iran against transatlantic pressures, their diplomatic efforts reflect a sustained commitment to engagement and multilateralism.

2. The EU's Regional Strategy in the Middle East

The relationship between the European Union (EU) and the Middle East has been deeply shaped by historical interactions between the two regions. Historically, the Middle East served as a critical overland trade route connecting Europe to the Far East, particularly prior to the advent of maritime navigation (Beitler, 2006: 118). The decline of the Ottoman Empire, coupled with advancements in European military technology and industrial capabilities, facilitated the entry and subsequent dominance of European powers in the region (Beitler, 2006). These historical processes laid the groundwork for the enduring strategic importance of the Middle East to Europe.

The Middle East occupies a central position in Europe's peace and security agenda due to its unique geopolitical location at the crossroads of three continents. This proximity heightens the implications of regional instability for Europe, as evidenced by the potential for large-scale refugee flows and disruptions to energy supplies, particularly crude oil (Nonneman, 2003). Beyond these pragmatic concerns, European policy toward the Middle East reflects a broader belief in the stabilizing potential of regional integration and cooperation. Beitler (2006) observes that this approach aligns with a foundational aspect of the EU's governance model: the pursuit of stability and human security through

multilateral frameworks. This philosophy, encapsulated in the 1957 Treaty of Rome, emphasizes diplomacy, negotiation, and the rule of law over coercive measures. The treaty further underscores the establishment of common institutions and fostering interdependence as essential mechanisms for conflict resolution and governance (Miller, 2004: 124). Consequently, the EU's policies toward the Middle East are often characterized as idealistic, in stark contrast to the more coercive and power-driven strategies frequently employed by its transatlantic partner, the United States.

European engagement with the Middle East between 1970 and 2000 featured several key elements that reflect this strategic orientation. Saleh (1999) identifies initiatives such as the Euro-Arab Dialogue, the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership, and strengthened relations with the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) as central to the EU's approach. This strategy was grounded in the belief that the Mediterranean region's principal challenges were socio-economic rather than military. Enhanced economic cooperation with regional governments was thus seen as a means to address these challenges (Youngs, 2003: 414). Additionally, the EU viewed economic development as a catalyst for the emergence and growth of civil society, which in turn could promote democratization within the Persian Gulf states (Otte, 2004). This outlook informed the EU's efforts to deepen its engagement with the GCC and other regional actors as part of a broader strategy to encourage stability through economic and political integration.

The post-Cold War period marked a significant evolution in European strategy toward the Middle East. European governments increasingly eschewed military intervention in favor of institutional frameworks to foster and maintain regional stability. This approach not only reinforced the EU's preference for soft power but also led to the establishment and strengthening of ties with key regional economic and political institutions. These institutions have since become pivotal instruments of the EU's long-term influence in the region.

In examining the EU's contemporary strategy toward the Middle East-including the Maghreb, the Levant, Israel, and the Islamic Republic of Iran-it becomes evident that the EU does not operate under a unified, comprehensive strategic framework for the entire region. Instead, its policies are fragmented into sub-regional and sector-specific initiatives tailored to the unique political, social, and cultural dynamics of each area. For instance, the EU engages Mediterranean countries through the Euro-Mediterranean Partnership (EUROMED), participates in the Middle East Peace

Process (MEPP), conducts dialogues with the GCC, and develops individualized strategies for states like Iran and Iraq, as well as sub-state actors. The European Commission manages foreign relations through distinct initiatives for specific geographical areas, such as the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf, while treating countries like Iran and Iraq as isolated cases alongside efforts to address the Israeli-Arab conflict (Hollis, 2011). This fragmentation is shaped by historical relationships, economic conditions, geopolitical dynamics, and the presence or absence of U.S. influence.

Two primary considerations shape the EU's strategic approach to the Middle East: migration and energy security. Regional instability has driven significant flows of asylum seekers to the EU, creating substantial challenges for its internal stability. These include concerns over terrorism, rising crime rates, social tensions between refugees and local populations, and unemployment. The second critical factor is ensuring stable access to Middle Eastern energy markets, given the region's role as both a major transit route for Persian Gulf oil and a crucial supplier of energy resources to Europe. Ongoing instability and conflict in the region threaten the EU's energy security, compounding the strategic importance of the Middle East. In addition to these traditional challenges, the EU must navigate the growing influence of other global actors in the Middle East, including China, Russia, and India, which have expanded their presence in the region. Despite these shifts, the EU has largely kept the Middle East on the periphery of its broader economic and political agenda, primarily addressing the region through the "European Neighborhood Policy" introduced in 2004 (Beitler, 2006). This policy reflects the EU's continued emphasis on fostering stability through cooperation and interdependence rather than through direct intervention. In summary, the EU's relationship with the Middle East is deeply informed by historical legacies and shaped by its commitment to promoting stability through institutional and cooperative frameworks. Although fragmented in its implementation, the EU's strategy reflects an overarching idealistic approach that prioritizes diplomacy, economic cooperation, and multilateral engagement. This stands in marked contrast to the more interventionist policies of other global powers, particularly the United States. While the EU's influence in the region faces significant challenges, its strategic focus on migration, energy security, and institutional engagement underscores its enduring commitment to fostering a stable and secure Middle East.

3. Iran's Role in the Regional Politics of Europe

For decades, the EU's approach to Tehran has diverged significantly from the U.S. policy of containment and isolation. At the height of European engagement, Javier Solana, the EU's foreign policy chief, often acted as a key negotiator with Iran on behalf of the international community. The EU's most prominent role in the nuclear crisis occurred when the U.S. expressed willingness to engage in direct talks with Iran. However, as Iran delayed the negotiation process, the EU increasingly aligned with U.S. policies, imposing stricter sanctions on the Islamic Republic, even when this conflicted with Europe's own economic and strategic interests in the region. The EU played a pivotal role in the renewed diplomacy between Iran and the six major world powers, a process that gained momentum following the election of President Hassan Rouhani in 2013. The EU's key strategies toward the Islamic Republic of Iran can be categorized as follows:

➤ From the Iranian Islamic Revolution to the End of the Iran-Iraq War

Throughout the 1979 Iranian Revolution and its subsequent developments, Iranian political figures and European analysts posited that, in contrast to the United States and the Soviet Union, Western Europe had managed to maintain more stable and favorable relations with Tehran. Despite the prior regime's close alignment with Western nations, there was a prevailing optimism that the conclusion of the revolution's initial tumult would enable the newly established government to cultivate advantageous economic and commercial ties with Europe. However, a confluence of aggravating factors during the early to mid-1980s—including the Iran-Iraq War, the "export of the revolution," and the hostage crisis involving Western nationals in Lebanon—exacerbated tensions between the West and Tehran (Fred Halliday, 1994: 309).

By the end of the decade, as many of these issues approached resolution, renewed hopes for improved relations were expressed by both parties. Nonetheless, the emergence of new and distinct challenges, such as the controversy surrounding Salman Rushdie's publication in February 1989 and a series of targeted assassinations of Iranians associated with the former regime in Europe, further complicated Tehran's relations with Western Europe. Moreover, Iran's support for various Islamic militia groups in the Arab world precipitated additional crises. Consequently, senior Iranian officials condemned the European hostility directed at the Islamic Republic, resulting in the withdrawal of European ambassadors from Tehran (Grajewski, 2022).

➤ **From the Conclusion of the Iran-Iraq War to the Hashemi Rafsanjani's Second Presidential Term**

Following a protracted decade marked by war and revolutionary upheaval, President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, who assumed office in 1989, directed Iran toward the normalization of both its domestic and foreign policies. This shift, combined with Iran's geopolitical and economic significance, led the European community to reconsider and subsequently resume diplomatic relations with the Islamic Republic. In 1992, the Council of Europe formally decided to establish relations with Iran. However, several contentious issues, notably Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini's fatwa regarding the assassination of Salman Rushdie, the author of *The Satanic Verses*, had engendered serious tensions between the Iranian government and European nations. Rather than pursuing formal relations through a trade and cooperation agreement or a political dialogue agreement-strategies typically employed by the EU with other countries in the region-the EU opted to initiate a "critical dialogue" with Tehran. This dialogue embodied two key elements of the EU's new diplomatic approach: first, it allowed European officials to articulate pressing concerns regarding Iran, including its dismal human rights record, support for terrorism, opposition to the Middle East peace process, and issues related to proliferation (Struwe, 1998). Second, it facilitated a better understanding of Iranian perspectives through ongoing discussions. Despite its intentions, the "critical dialogue" faced significant criticism within Europe, as well as from the United States and Israel, with detractors arguing that the diplomatic discussions served merely as a pretext for enhancing Europe's trade relations with the oil-rich Islamic Republic. Nonetheless, this initiative prompted the Iranian authorities to reevaluate certain human rights issues. However, over the subsequent five years, relations between the EU and Iran deteriorated once again. A pivotal turning point occurred with the 1997 ruling of the Mykonos Court in Germany, which implicated Iranian officials in terrorist activities. Iran's response to this ruling resulted in the withdrawal of all European ambassadors from Tehran (Kaussler, 2012).

➤ **From Mr. Khatami's Presidency to the Disclosure of Nuclear Activities**

The unexpected election of President Mohammad Khatami in 1997 significantly altered the political dynamics in Iran, both internally and externally. Khatami's reformist agenda facilitated a renewed engagement between the EU and the Islamic Republic of Iran. In

response, the EU restructured its "critical dialogue" to initiate a new "comprehensive dialogue." Within this framework, officials from the EU and Iran convened biannually at the Deputy Minister of Foreign Affairs level, thereby broadening the range of issues under discussion to include human rights and non-proliferation. Following Khatami's re-election in 2001, the EU endeavored to further deepen its relations with Iran, leading to substantial progress on several sensitive issues that had historically characterized Iran's interactions with the international community. During this period, relations between the EU and Iran flourished across various dimensions, including economic, social, academic, and cultural spheres (Dupont, 2009: 95-98). Many European stakeholders, influenced by the vigorous internal discourse on democracy and human rights within Iran, harbored hopes that enhanced engagement-characterized by trade cooperation agreements and political dialogue-would catalyze democratic reforms in the country. Nevertheless, this second diplomatic initiative encountered significant obstacles following the disclosure in 2002 of Iran's undeclared nuclear sites in Natanz and Arak (Orlov, 2004). Consequently, Iran's nuclear program has since become a primary concern for European policymakers, eclipsing other political issues.

➤ **From the Disclosure of Nuclear Activities to the Presidency of Mr. Hassan Rouhani**

Following the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, Iran emerged as a significant diplomatic challenge for the EU. The revelation of Iran's clandestine nuclear program raised concerns among European nations about the potential weakening of IAEA oversight due to American unilateralism. This situation pressured the EU to demonstrate its diplomatic capability as a unified and independent actor by addressing the crisis through dialogue with Iran and the U.S. (Tila, 2008).

In late 2003, the EU's "Big Three" (Britain, France, and Germany) spearheaded a diplomatic initiative to mitigate the crisis. Their foreign ministers traveled to Tehran, urging Iran to suspend uranium enrichment, disclose its nuclear activities, and sign an additional NPT protocol permitting intrusive inspections. Javier Solana, the EU's foreign policy chief, joined these negotiations, culminating in the 2004 Paris Agreement, which temporarily eased tensions (Roudsari, 2007). However, the Paris Agreement sparked domestic divisions within Iran. Hardliners framed the nuclear program as a symbol of sovereignty, accusing reformists of compromising national interests. Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's 2005

election marked a shift, as his administration abandoned the agreement and heightened tensions with provocative rhetoric, undermining previous diplomatic progress (Jafarzadeh, 2007).

In early 2006, Iran's noncompliance led to its referral to the UN Security Council. Solana proposed resolutions in 2006 and 2008, offering economic and diplomatic incentives supported by global powers, but Tehran rejected them, prompting sanctions (Farhi, 2009). In 2009, the EU and U.S. proposed a two-phase plan during Geneva talks, exchanging enriched uranium for reactor fuel and negotiating Iran's nuclear program. Despite initial acceptance, Iran ultimately withdrew under domestic political pressure, perpetuating the stalemate (Roudsari, 2007). This period highlighted the EU's challenges in balancing diplomatic engagement, internal unity, and external pressures in addressing Iran's nuclear ambitions.

➤ **From the Signing of the JCPOA to the Trump Administration**

Two key factors facilitated renewed diplomatic efforts to address the nuclear issue in 2013: the initiation of direct talks between the United States and Iran in 2009 and the election of moderate Hassan Rouhani as President of Iran in June 2013. The negotiations, led by EU foreign policy chief Catherine Ashton, culminated in the November 2013 interim agreement, also known as the Joint Action Plan. Under this agreement, Iran committed to freezing the most sensitive aspects of its nuclear program and permitting extensive UN nuclear inspections in exchange for a moderate easing of sanctions. On July 14, 2015, Iran and the EU announced the successful conclusion of negotiations, resulting in a final agreement known as JCPOA. In exchange for the lifting of sanctions, Iran agreed to limit its nuclear program, address questions regarding its past nuclear activities, and enhance transparency regarding the expansion of its nuclear facilities. The implementation phase of the nuclear deal commenced on January 16, 2016, following the IAEA's confirmation of Iran's compliance with the agreement. As a result, Iran not only regained access to the international financial system and billions of dollars in assets that had been blocked abroad but also re-entered the global oil market in terms of energy exports (Ahmadinejad & Yazdani, 1396).

➤ **From the Withdrawal of the United States from the JCPOA to the Resumption of Nuclear Talks**

Although the JCPOA was celebrated as a historic achievement by the Obama administration, Donald Trump immediately challenged the agreement upon taking office in January 2017, placing it under

review. He expressed skepticism regarding the agreement's utility for American national interests, deeming it incomplete. The Trump administration linked the JCPOA to human rights issues in Iran, accusing Tehran of leveraging sanctions relief to finance militant groups in the Middle East. Secretary of State Rex Tillerson articulated that both the United States and Europe made significant errors during the negotiation process, particularly by excluding serious security threats from the agreement (Salehi & Deshiri, 2017). This growing concern among the United States and its Middle Eastern allies prompted Trump's withdrawal from the nuclear deal in May 2018. The E-3 countries-Britain, France, and Germany-urged President Trump to maintain the agreement; however, the Trump administration's exit was accompanied by an apparent attempt to exert pressure on Iran through warmongering rhetoric. The withdrawal sent shockwaves through the E-3 countries, as well as Russia and China. E-3 member states specifically cautioned President Trump that terminating the nuclear deal would adversely affect the already precarious security situation in the region. In response, Iran pledged to uphold the agreement, denouncing the United States as a hostile entity and asserting that it had a longstanding history of non-compliance with agreements (Basiri, 2018). The U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA raised significant doubts about the efficacy of the 3+1 group's efforts to curtail Iran's ambitions to develop sufficient capacity to construct nuclear weapons. Additionally, the assassination of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, a senior Iranian nuclear scientist, severely undermined the confidence of both Iran and the E-3+1 group. Iran labeled the assassination a terrorist act, implicating Israel in the incident. Trump's exit from the agreement not only complicated the maintenance of the JCPOA but also intensified existing tensions, thereby hampering efforts to rebuild trust. These developments prompted Iran to reevaluate its commitment to the JCPOA and accelerate its pursuit of nuclear capabilities (Shadamani, 2019). Following the change in U.S. administration, the Biden administration has implemented a three-pronged strategy to navigate this impasse. The United States has endorsed multilateral European efforts to revive the nuclear deal with Iran, agreed to lift certain sanctions against the country, and reduced travel restrictions on Iranian diplomats.

➤ **From the Resumption of Nuclear Talks to Ebrahim Raisi's Presidency**

Ebrahim Raisi's assumption of the presidency in Iran in August

2021 occurred against a backdrop of escalating geopolitical tensions and significant challenges regarding nuclear negotiations. His administration adopted a confrontational stance toward the West, particularly concerning the nuclear issue, which adversely affected Iran's relations with European nations. Indeed, Raisi's presidency coincided with stalled negotiations aimed at reviving the JCPOA, a crucial element of Iran's diplomatic engagement with Europe. While the EU, particularly the E-3 endeavored to restore the JCPOA, Raisi's administration demonstrated a hardline approach, demanding substantial concessions from Western powers before agreeing to resume discussions. This inflexible position led to increased skepticism among European leaders regarding Iran's commitment to diplomacy (Katzman, 2022). In addition to nuclear tensions, Raisi's foreign policy emphasized strengthening ties with regional partners and allies, particularly in light of perceived Western encroachments in the Middle East. The Raisi administration sought to enhance cooperation with Russia and China, viewing these alliances as vital to countering U.S. and European influence. This pivot complicated the prospects for improved relations with Europe (Mousavian, 2022). Despite these challenges, moments of diplomatic engagement emerged between Iran and European nations during Raisi's presidency. The EU maintained its role as a mediator in nuclear negotiations, organizing discussions in Vienna aimed at reviving the JCPOA. European leaders expressed interest in expanding economic cooperation with Iran, particularly in sectors such as energy and trade, even amidst the ongoing sanctions regime (Seifzadeh, 2023). Nevertheless, the deteriorating security situation in the region, characterized by Iran's missile program, raised significant concerns among European policymakers. The European Parliament condemned Iran's human rights violations and its actions in the Middle East, further straining the relationship (Baker, 2023).

➤ **The Interregnum: From Raisi's Demise to Dr. Pezeshkian's Ascendancy**

The death of Ebrahim Raisi in a helicopter crash on September 30, 2023, ushered in a period of significant uncertainty for Iran, particularly regarding its foreign relations with European nations. His unexpected demise raised concerns among European leaders about the future of negotiations surrounding Iran's nuclear program and the overall security dynamics in the region (Zand, 2023). In the aftermath of the crash, the interim government faced immense pressure to stabilize the political landscape and address ongoing economic challenges exacerbated by sanctions and internal dissent (Mousavian,

2023). European countries, eager to revive diplomatic channels, sought to engage with the interim administration to ensure continuity in discussions over nuclear issues and regional cooperation. The EU even expressed its condolences and emphasized the importance of maintaining dialogue with Iran, with leaders from France, Germany, and the United Kingdom reiterating their commitment to a diplomatic resolution concerning Iran's nuclear ambitions (EU External Action, 2023). Despite these intentions, the political vacuum left by Raisi's demise created a challenging environment for European diplomacy. The interim government struggled to assert its legitimacy and navigate the complexities of Iran's factional politics, which complicated any potential diplomatic engagement with Europe (Shirzad, 2023). Analysts noted that the uncertain political climate in Iran might lead European nations to adopt a more cautious approach, particularly as they awaited the outcome of the presidential election scheduled for early 2024 (Haghighatnejad, 2023). During this transitional period, the EU maintained its calls for Iran to uphold its commitments under the JCPOA and engage constructively in negotiations. However, the lack of a stable leadership structure in Iran hindered progress, as various factions within the government vied for influence over foreign policy (Hassan, 2023). The potential for a shift in Iran's foreign policy direction became apparent, with speculation surrounding candidates in the upcoming presidential election raising further questions about the future of Iran-Europe relations. European leaders were particularly interested in whether a new administration would adopt a more conciliatory stance or perpetuate the hardline approach that characterized Raisi's presidency. As the political landscape in Iran continued to evolve, European nations remained hopeful for a return to diplomacy that could stabilize the region and facilitate constructive dialogue on critical issues such as human rights, nuclear proliferation, and regional security (Shamloo, 2023). Iran believes this transitional phase presents an opportunity for European stakeholders to reassess their strategies and potentially engage in more constructive negotiations addressing longstanding challenges in the region (Zarif, 2023).

4. Key Dynamics in Iran-EU Relations

The following five variables are regarded as crucial due to their impact on the bilateral relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the EU:

4-1. JCPOA

Prior to the conclusion of the nuclear agreement in July 2015, the international community, particularly the E3+1 group (comprising France, Germany, the United Kingdom, and the EU, expressed persistent concerns regarding the possibility of Iran developing nuclear weapons and the consequent implications for regional security and stability. Since the inception of its nuclear program, the Islamic Republic of Iran has consistently asserted that the program serves civilian and peaceful purposes-primarily to generate electricity as part of efforts to diversify energy sources, as well as for medical applications. Nonetheless, the program's potential for dual-use capabilities, particularly its military and strategic applications, has been a source of significant apprehension for European countries (Salehi & Desheiri, 1397). Additionally, the role of the Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) in advancing missile systems capable of delivering nuclear warheads has been a primary concern influencing the EU's policies toward Iran. The principal objective of the European community in signing the JCPOA was to halt or at least decelerate Iran's nuclear program (Basiri, 1398). Although European states perceive Iran's resolute approach as an obstacle to the timely implementation of the agreement and acknowledge concerns about technical violations at Iran's nuclear facilities, they are unified in their stance that any alteration to the terms of the JCPOA could potentially undermine the agreement itself. Consequently, the central tenet of the European strategy regarding Iran's nuclear program is to avoid renegotiation and uphold the original accord.

4-2. Commercial and Economic Relations

For an extended period, the axis of trade and economic relations has been a crucial variable shaping the interactions between the EU and the Islamic Republic of Iran. The size of Iran's consumer market, along with the strong preference among Iranians for European-manufactured goods, has encouraged the EU to consistently engage with Iranian authorities at multiple levels. In addition to its commitment to ensuring regional stability and security, the EU has sought to prioritize its economic interests in Iran (Aghaei, 1394: 54). Recent economic data underscore the significance of this relationship. Following the signing of the interim nuclear agreement in 2013, trade between the EU and Iran reached a substantial 13.7 billion euros by 2016 (Sanaei & Rahmati, 1394). By 2017, the annual trade volume increased to nearly 20 billion euros. However,

the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA and the subsequent re-imposition of sanctions on Iran created significant obstacles for the EU. The EU had viewed the 2015 nuclear deal as a foundation for promoting regional cooperation and expanding its overall relationship with Iran. In response to U.S. sanctions, the EU attempted to sustain commercial and economic cooperation with Iran through alternative mechanisms, seeking to circumvent the restrictions (Adebahr, 2017). Although these efforts were largely unsuccessful, they highlight the EU's determination to prevent U.S.-Iran tensions from permeating European economic and trade relations with Iran. The EU recognizes that such tensions not only jeopardize its economic interests in the Iranian market but also obstruct avenues for dialogue and cooperation on broader issues. The EU continues to advocate for negotiation and collaboration in the commercial and economic sectors as the most effective means of addressing disputes with Iran.

4-3. Iran's Regional Activities

In recent years, a significant variable influencing EU policy toward the Islamic Republic of Iran has been the latter's regional activities, particularly its support for armed opposition groups and the assassination of Iranian opposition figures abroad. Iran's backing of groups such as Hamas and Hezbollah, along with its involvement in the formation of Shia militias in Iraq, has consistently raised concerns within the European Commission. However, the European strategy toward Iran indicates a reluctance to directly confront these actions, provided that regional stability and European interests remain unthreatened. From the European perspective, Iran is increasingly perceived as a responsible actor capable of contributing to regional stability and security. Yasser Nour Ali Vand (1399) posits that Europe's neutral stance regarding Iran's regional activities is motivated by three primary factors. First, the EU seeks to preserve its bilateral relations with Iran until the region attains the requisite level of stability. Second, the EU recognizes Iran's role in addressing regional crises as integral to its broader diplomatic engagement. Third, European policymakers aim to adopt a pragmatic approach that aligns their interests with the necessity of constructive engagement with Iran across various areas of mutual concern. This strategy allows the EU to address its interests while adeptly navigating the complexities of Iran's regional influence.

4-4. Missile Program of the Islamic Republic of Iran

The primary concern of the EU regarding Iran is the continuation and development of its ballistic missile program, which is not addressed within the framework of the nuclear agreement. Iran maintains that the enhancement of its missile capabilities is a matter of sovereignty and a legitimate means of national defense. As a result, the Iranian ballistic missile system has raised significant security concerns both regionally and beyond. United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231 prohibits Iran from engaging in any activities related to ballistic missiles designed to deliver nuclear weapons until 2023 (Bahgat, 2019: 31); however, the practical implications of this resolution remain contentious.

4-5. Human Rights

Over the past two decades, European policymakers have sought to anchor their strategies in principles such as human rights and democracy, with a heightened emphasis on promoting these ideals particularly evident following the end of the Cold War. The EU, in particular, has sought to incorporate human rights considerations into its diplomatic relations with Iran through a framework it refers to as "critical dialogue" (Bayat, 1397). Although human rights have remained a significant concern for Europe in relation to Iran, an analysis of recent developments indicates that the EU's strategic priorities now center more on issues such as upholding the JCPOA, ensuring regional stability, fostering commercial and economic cooperation, and addressing security concerns. Consequently, the prominence of human rights discussions has diminished in comparison to previous years.

5. The EU's New Strategy Toward the Islamic Republic of Iran

For over four decades, relations between Iran and Europe have predominantly centered on differences and conflicting interests. In its new strategy, the EU aims to mitigate these areas of discord by investing in shared interests, such as oil and gas, security, environmental issues, and transportation. It is anticipated that fostering cooperation in these sectors will expand the areas of mutual interest and enhance understanding between the two parties. Furthermore, this approach is expected to alleviate existing differences in other domains and facilitate a climate of closer cooperation that would benefit both sides. To promote better relations between Iran and Europe, the European Foreign Policy Council has outlined several strategic initiatives:

- a. Cooperation in Establishing Peace and Security: The crises in Iraq, Afghanistan, Palestine, and Lebanon represent significant challenges to international stability today. Iran plays a central role in these issues and has the potential to contribute substantially to peace and stability in the region, thus serving as a key strategic partner for Europe.
- b. Energy Supply: With the fourth largest oil reserves and the second largest natural gas reserves in the world, Iran possesses the capacity to fulfill Europe's energy needs, particularly concerning natural gas. Consequently, strengthening strategic relations between Iran and Europe, independent of nuclear sanctions in the energy sector, would constitute a significant development for both parties.
- c. Security-Building Dialogues: Achieving a mutual understanding regarding weapons of mass destruction, Iran's missile activities, and its nuclear program is essential for removing a major obstacle to improved relations between Iran and the EU. The following framework is proposed as a constructive model for enhancing mutual understanding:
 - i. International agreements on weapons of mass destruction—including the Non-Proliferation Treaty, the Chemical Weapons Convention, and the Biological Weapons Convention—should serve as the foundation for negotiations and agreements.
 - ii. Any conditions that extend beyond established international norms and guidelines should be excluded from negotiations. For instance, additional requirements such as access beyond the NPT, the Safeguards Agreement, and Protocol 93+2 imposed on Iran by UN Security Council resolutions exemplify extraneous stipulations that surpass accepted international standards.
 - iii. Europe recognizes that discrimination against Iran in exercising its international rights to benefit from peaceful nuclear technology must be eliminated. Iran's rights to utilize advanced technologies within the framework of international non-proliferation norms are acknowledged, and Europe is committed to actively collaborating with Iran to eliminate all restrictions (Adebahr, 2020).

Conclusion

The relationship between the European Union (EU) and the Islamic Republic of Iran has undergone significant evolution, shaped by

divergent interests, political tensions, and strategic recalibrations. A constructivist analysis provides valuable insights into this complex dynamic by emphasizing the interplay of identities, norms, and socially constructed meanings that inform international relations. Constructivism posits that actors' interests and actions are shaped not solely by material realities but also by shared ideas, perceptions, and discourses. This framework is particularly apt for analyzing EU-Iran relations, where historical contexts and normative considerations have played a prominent role. The Islamic Revolution of 1979 disrupted Tehran's alignment with Washington, creating opportunities for European nations to strengthen economic ties with Iran. Throughout these decades, the EU has prioritized maintaining commercial and economic engagement with Tehran, even during periods of heightened political tension. Unlike the United States, which adopted a confrontational stance, Europe pursued continuous dialogue with Iran, illustrated by initiatives such as the "critical dialogue" of the 1990s, the "comprehensive dialogue" under President Mohammad Khatami, and the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) negotiations. These efforts underscore the EU's commitment to diplomacy as a means of addressing contentious issues, including human rights and nuclear non-proliferation.

From a constructivist perspective, the EU's approach reflects its identity as a promoter of international norms and regional stability. Europe's self-perception as a diplomatic actor emphasizes dialogue and negotiation over coercion, even during strained relations. This normative identity has been a driving force in its sustained engagement with Tehran, ensuring that communication channels remained open even during diplomatic impasses. This strategy aligns with constructivism's assertion that international actors are influenced by their normative commitments and beliefs in the transformative potential of dialogue. Indeed, the EU-Iran relationship demonstrates a process of social learning, as repeated interactions have fostered new intersubjective understandings. In the immediate aftermath of the revolution, relations were characterized by mutual distrust. Over time, however, sustained dialogue, particularly through nuclear negotiations, has enabled both parties to identify shared interests. These include energy cooperation, environmental challenges, and regional security. Constructivism highlights how such repeated engagements can reshape perceptions and strategic approaches, even among actors with fundamentally different worldviews. The EU's gradual shift from a confrontational

to a more pragmatic stance demonstrates the role of dialogue in creating shared meanings and reducing tensions.

A key constructivist insight is the fluid nature of interests, which are socially constructed rather than fixed. The EU's shifting priorities in its engagement with Iran—from an initial focus on human rights to concerns over nuclear non-proliferation and energy security—reflect this adaptability. While human rights remain central to the EU's normative agenda, the urgency of addressing Iran's nuclear program and fostering energy cooperation has necessitated recalibration. This evolution illustrates how shared ideas and discourses shape perceptions of interests over time. Moreover, language and discourse have been pivotal in framing EU-Iran relations. The transition from "critical dialogue" to "comprehensive dialogue" signals not only a shift in strategy but also a redefinition of how the EU conceptualizes its role in engaging with Iran. Diplomatic rhetoric, such as portraying Iran as a potential partner for regional stability rather than solely as a threat, reflects the EU's strategic use of language to influence perceptions and outcomes. Constructivism underscores the importance of such framing in shaping international relations, highlighting how discourse can enable cooperation without compromising normative principles.

The EU-Iran dynamic also illustrates the social construction of threats and opportunities. Over time, perceptions of Iran have evolved from viewing it as a regional destabilizer to recognizing it as a nuclear threat and, more recently, as a potential partner in addressing shared challenges. This shift highlights the constructivist view that actors' roles are not static but are continuously reinterpreted based on changing circumstances and discourses. Europe's recent emphasis on areas of mutual interest, such as energy, environmental sustainability, and transportation, exemplifies its efforts to reduce tensions and foster a cooperative atmosphere. Historical and cultural contexts have further shaped the EU's approach to Iran. Europe's long-standing engagement with the Middle East, including Iran, is deeply rooted in historical interactions that emphasize economic and cultural ties. The EU's reliance on economic diplomacy and cultural exchanges reflects a preference for soft power strategies over coercion. By leveraging its economic influence and normative commitments, the EU has sought to navigate its relationship with Iran in a manner distinct from the confrontational approaches of other actors, such as the United States.

In conclusion, a constructivist analysis highlights the centrality of ideas, norms, and identities in shaping EU-Iran relations. The EU's approach has been defined not only by material considerations

but also by its normative commitments and evolving perceptions of threats and opportunities. Through persistent dialogue, social learning, and strategic discourse, the EU has sought to balance its identity as a promoter of international norms with pragmatic concerns. As this relationship continues to evolve, constructivist insights will remain invaluable in understanding the interplay of ideas, identities, and interests that define EU-Iran engagement.

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