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## Analyzing Determinate Factors Affecting the Relations Between Islamic Republic of Iran and European Union (1979-2022) from the View Point of Discourse Theory

Mohammad Amin Ahmadi Rad\*<sup>ORCID</sup> - Rooholamin Saeidi Ph.D.\*\*<sup>ORCID</sup>



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### Abstract

Talking about the history of relations between European countries and Iran dates back to the Safavid era. Almost from the beginning of the relations between Iran and Europe, the importance of dealing with a country with the geographical coordinates of Iran became apparent to all European leaders; This unparalleled importance led to a countless European departure toward Iran over the years and the history of Iran witnessed the presence and influence of European forces. The hypothesis of this article is that After the Islamic Revolution, the relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Europe have undergone significant changes, and the logic governing Iran-Europe relations has completely changed. In fact, it seems following the Islamic Revolution, the relationship between these actors, entered a state where even changes in governments and policymakers, the occurrence of various influential events, and efforts by both sides to improve relations, did not lead to continual progress. This indicates the presence of a fundamental factor in Iran-Europe relations that has consistently weakened their interactions over the years. But What is this fundamental factor that transcends all changes and influences their relationship? By employing

\* Master student in Islamic Studies and Political Science, Faculty of Islamic Studies and Political Science, Imam Sadiq University, Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran. / Corresponding Author / Email: [ma.ahmadi@isu.ac.ir](mailto:ma.ahmadi@isu.ac.ir)

\*\* Assistant Professor, Department of International Relations, Faculty of Islamic Knowledge and Political Science, Imam Sadiq University, Tehran, Islamic Republic of Iran/ Email: [r.saeidi@isu.ac.ir](mailto:r.saeidi@isu.ac.ir)

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discourse analysis methodology, the findings of this article suggest that the primary factor affecting the improvement or deterioration of Iran-Europe relations is the different and often conflicting discourses of these international actors; which serves as the main structural element shaping their interactions. This basis factor, brings two additional categories of factors—domestic and external ones—that play a secondary role in shaping Iran-Europe relations.

### **Keywords**

Islamic republic of Iran, Iran-EU relations, Iranian Revolution, European union, discourse analysis, internal and external factors

### **1. Introduction**

The Iranian Revolution in 1979 was one of the crucial events of the 20th century. It brought not only deep transformations in political, social, and economic frameworks of Iran but also a great impact on the whole Middle East region. It considerably changed the evolving relationship between Iran and the European Union, which had been strengthening during almost twenty years. It also brought an end to the monarchy of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi, an American policy executor who had managed to create strong ties with the European Union and the United States. After the revolution, the foreign policy of Iran was transformed and its diplomatic relations with the EU were deeply changed.

Initially, the EU was careful about the Iranian Revolution, trying to protect its investments in Iran while being concerned with the politics of the newly established regime; But occurrence of subsequent events, caused that EU instituted diplomatic sanctions against Iran and cut off political relations and adopted a hostile policy. As the EU placed some sanctions, relations strained more (Karimi and Keshvarian, 2015: 93). The period of 1980 to 1988 was marked by the Iraq-Iran War that had a lasting impact on Iran-EU relations. The opposed war caused Iran's extreme aggression towards the West, especially the U.S. and its allies, as it became increasingly isolated from the world order. The EU sympathized with Iraq, which caused political and economic complications for its relations with Iran, as well as worries about Iran's rising role in the region. The war further fueled Iran's revolutionary doctrine and hostility towards the West. The war seriously affected economic relations by devastating Iran's oil exports and economy, thus leading to an upheaval of trade and investment relations with the EU.

Since those years, various events and issues have continuously challenged Iran-Europe relations, preventing them from reaching a stable and lasting level. It appears that multiple

factors influence Iran-EU relations, each exerting its own effects. However, the aim of this article is to demonstrate that there is a fundamental underlying factor that has shaped all other influences and has essentially made a permanent improvement in relations impossible. The significance of this article lies in its attempt to identify a fundamental and impactful underlying factor in Iran-EU relations, one that is often overlooked despite its profound influence. Therefore, the authors have employed discourse analysis method to validate the article's hypothesis, leveraging a vast array of documents, sources, and library research, which has significantly contributed to proving the argument.

## **2- Research Background**

It appears that the articles and works on Iran-Europe relations can be categorized into three groups: articles that examine the status of relations between Iran and the European Union: among these, we can name works of: Tafreshi (2013), Moradi (2018), Posch (2010), Niknami (2021), Javadi (2021) and Kiyani (2021). Second category belongs to articles that analyze key issues between Iran and the European Union: articles of authors such as Tabatabai & Tam (2020), Nazir Hussain (2015), Jalilvand (2018), Alcaro (2018), Robinson (2022) and Kienzle (2012). Last category belongs to articles focus on factors influencing the improvement or deterioration of Iran-EU relations. In this category there are a few works, among them Rahmati (2021), Karimi and Keshvarian (2015), Tork Ladani and Moradi (2015), Mohammad Nia (2012), Karimifard (2024) and Wastnidge (2023). However, it appears that studies in this category have either focused on secondary factors or adopted different perspectives, such as constructivism and post-colonialism. In contrast, this article seeks to identify the factors influencing Iran-EU relations through a discursive framework. From this standpoint, it seems that the article is innovative and original in terms of its subject matter, comprehensiveness, and objectives.

## **3- Theoretical Framework**

This article employs the discourse analysis method. Although the concept of discourse is used in various meanings, in this article, discourses are understood as “semantic systems in which concepts acquire identity and meaning based on their distinctions from one another” (Ajili, 2010: 35). In other words, discourses are a set of propositions and signs that constitute a distinct semantic system separate from others. Discourses shape the perception and understanding of reality and the social world. Discourse analysis considers reality to be a “socially construct”. “Discourse analysis is more than just a method for understanding texts; it carries a set of assumptions about how the world is constructed through language.” In other words, discourse analysis is a useful tool for explaining the world around us. It focuses

on understanding how our perceptions construct and produce our surrounding reality (Lamont, C. 2015: 183).

Discourses are formed around a “nodal point”, and the interconnected set of propositions related to this nodal point establishes the chains of equivalence and difference within discourses. “In other words, these two sets of elements define the 'self' and 'other' within a discourse” (Ajili, 2010: 36). “Discourse analysts believe that the world is constructed by actors whose identities are shaped through intersubjective understanding” (Lamont, C. 2015: 181). A key point is that a shared discourse leads to a relative shared understanding of subjects, whereas differing discourses result in perceptual differences. This is how two discourses can view the same phenomenon but interpret it in entirely distinct ways—often leading to contradictions and conflicts. Another point is an inevitable function of discourses; Every discourse necessarily requires a competing discourse in order to define its own identity (Ajili, 2010: 80). The identity shaped by different discourses, influences behaviors in response to the structure and events of the international system (Rahmati et al., 2021: 81).

Among the various approaches to discourse analysis, the present study employs Norman Fairclough’s Critical Discourse Analysis (CDA) method. “Fairclough introduces discourse analysis as a critical tool for understanding the relationships of power, ideology, and domination embedded in language” (Mohseni, 2012: 66). Fairclough assumes that language is not neutral but rather a means through which social and political domination is enacted and maintained. In fact, he views language as a form of social practice. He identifies three main levels for text analysis: textual analysis, discursive practice, and social practice. Each level represents a layer of meaning and contributes to a deeper understanding of how discourse functions in context. The first dimension, textual analysis (Description level), focuses on the linguistic features of the text itself. In this stage, the analyst looks at how certain meanings are produced through language and how certain perspectives are foregrounded while others are silenced. The second dimension, discursive practice (Interpretation level), considers how texts are distributed and interpreted. Here, the focus shifts to the process of discourse: How is the text linked to the nodal point of a discourse? This level helps uncover the institutional or political mechanisms that shape discourse circulation and reception. Social practice (Explanation level), the third dimension, connects discourse to larger social and ideological structures. This involves asking how a given discourse reflects, supports, or challenges dominant ideologies and power relations. At this level, discourse is understood as a means of sustaining or transforming social structures, such as institutions, norms, and identities (Jahani Nasab, 2022: 97-102). This method is especially valuable for analyzing political discourses, where language often reflects deeper ideological conflicts and power struggles.

A crucial point in Fairclough's approach is that these three levels of analysis are not separate or isolated; rather, they evolve within one another. Fairclough argues that even before a discourse is formed, social contexts influence human actor, prompting the actor to shape a discourse based on specific social and historical circumstances. Subsequently, this emerging discourse gives form to the text and its meanings. Interestingly, Fairclough emphasizes that the process does not stop at the level of text production. The meanings generated in this stage feed back into the discourse itself, transforming it into a more mature and structured entity. Even more significantly, this developed discourse, in turn, begins to influence the broader social context and can shape future historical events. Through this method, it becomes clear how and why previous historical and social contexts exert a significant influence on future events and the trajectory of subsequent developments. Moreover, it demonstrates how two different discourses (for example, the Islamic discourse and the liberal-democratic discourse) can act as a fundamental barrier in the relations between two actors and prevent the convergence of social and historical developments.

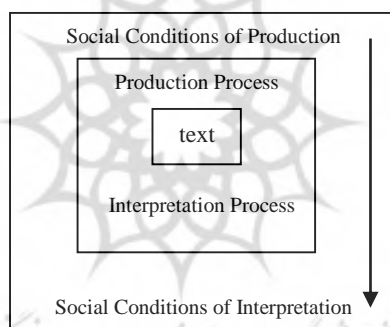


Figure 1: The Three-Dimensional Model of Discourse, Its Constituent Elements, and the Interaction Among These Elements. (Mohseni, 2012: 66)

Having established these preliminary statements, the next question is: What discourses shape the perceptual systems governing the Islamic Republic of Iran and the European Union, leading to conflicts? It appears that the differences in the foreign policy discourses of Iran and the EU are profoundly fundamental, due to their contrasting historical and social backgrounds and the emergence of their discourses within these contexts—such as the discourses of resistance versus imperialism, or Islamic versus liberal discourses. In another words, at the epistemological, ontological, and methodological levels, they represent two distinct discourses with fundamental differences. In fact, the discursive foundations of the EU and the Islamic Republic of Iran—at least in the realm of foreign policy—are not just different but conflicting and incompatible. This discursive conflict underlies many of the disputes between the EU and Iran. The article proceeds to argue that the primary factor

behind all their disagreements, either directly or indirectly, can be traced back to this discursive conflict and other factors emerge and play a comparatively minor role.

#### **4- Main Factor: Different Discourses**

Iran and the European Union have experienced a fluctuating and unstable relationship over the past few decades. This ever-changing pattern itself reflects the influence of various factors on their interactions. The occurrence of different events, shifts in policies and policymakers, and alternating periods of dialogue, negotiation, and conflict all stem from factors shaping Iran-EU relations. It seems possible to categorize the factors that have had both positive and negative effects on these relations. However, before analyzing these factors, it is crucial to highlight that, since the Islamic Revolution, a deeper and more fundamental factor has continuously influenced the relationship—one that has shaped the conditions for the emergence of all other strengthening and weakening elements. It seems over the past few decades, this persistent underlying factor has consistently played a role in Iran-EU relations, setting the stage for events and dynamics that have undermined their ties. A closer look suggests that this ever-present factor has governed the relationship since the 1979 revolution, fostering deep-seated mistrust between the two sides and amplifying forces that weaken their interactions.

Evidence for this claim can be found in the state of Iran-EU relations before the revolution. A brief review of their pre-revolutionary ties shows that even during times of tension and crisis, relations were restored relatively quickly. Disputes were resolved more smoothly, and both sides managed to return to stable cooperation much faster. However, after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, even minor incidents have had prolonged and severe negative effects on relations. In contrast, much more significant challenges before the revolution had far less impact and were often resolved within months or a few years. After the revolution, even smaller events have led to deeper and more lasting disruptions in bilateral relations. Another key indicator of this underlying factor is that after the revolution, even during periods when both sides were fully committed to improving relations—engaging in negotiations and reaching agreements—a hidden determining force has prevented any lasting progress. As a result, cooperation has remained limited to specific cases rather than evolving into a broader, more sustainable partnership.

It appears that this decisive factor is the emergence of Political Islam as the dominant discourse in foreign policy, following the Iranian Revolution (Mohammadnia, 2012: 30). According to Fairclough's CDA, this marks a transformation in the 'social practice' level of discourse, where broader ideological shifts shape institutional discourses, such as foreign policy narratives. Before the revolution, Iran's foreign policy was shaped by materialistic models of international relations. The most significant evidence, was the Shah's regime's

economic and political cooperation with Israel, in contrast to all Arab countries. During this period, national material interests were considered the main determinant of foreign policy. Iran's strategic approach was based on alignment and cooperation with the United States, leading the country to assume the role of the regional gendarme and operate within Western and American frameworks (Karimi and Keshvarian, 2015: 93). "The occurrence of the Islamic Revolution in the last decade of the 1970s was a severe shock to the materialist ideas and theories of the West and the East and created a new meaning and policy in the world" (Rahmati et al., 2022: 38). Before revolution, although "Islam and Shiism play a primary role in constructing Iranian identity and geopolitical factors, but in shaping interests of the country it plays a secondary role. That is why the issue of identity take precedence over national interest in Iranian foreign policy" after the revolution (Mohammadnia, 2012: 30). From a CDA perspective, the Islamic discourse can be seen as not only reflective of ideological positioning but also as a reproduced discursive practice that has become institutionalized through official speeches, legal frameworks, and cultural narratives post-1979. With the establishment of this discourse, a major shift occurred in foreign policy, replacing interest-driven approaches with normative, ideological, and ethical frameworks.

Another important point is that the Islamic Revolution brought with it ideals and slogans that emerged from the core of Iranian-Islamic identity. However, the remarkable skill of ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the revolution, was his ability to delicately shape these historical identity elements into a new discourse, introducing it to the world along with its ideals and slogans. This discourse not only transformed Iran but also had a profound impact beyond its borders, influencing many Shia and even Sunni-majority countries (Tork Ladani and Moradi, 2015: 151). The impact of the Iranian Revolution on the emergence of movements and the formation of parties and groups aligned with its ideals in countries such as Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen is undeniable. In CDA terms, this process reflects how dominant discourses are not only ideologically constructed but also interdiscursively embedded in historical narratives, enabling them to extend their reach beyond national boundaries.

It is essential to examine the extent to which this new discourse has influenced Iran-EU relations. It appears that the establishment of Political Islam in Iran has been the most significant factor shaping these relations for several reasons. The first reason is that the very foundations of Iran's discourse and those of European countries were formed in entirely different contexts. When there is a fundamental divergence in the underlying principles, differences—and even conflicts—in opinions and decisions become inevitable. To elaborate, Iran's discourse has always been deeply rooted in Iranian and Islamic culture, with religion consistently serving as one of the primary elements shaping Iranian identity (Karimifard, 2024: 242). The belief in religious principles, such as Tawhid (monotheism),

is reflected in Iran's political discourse. In contrast, Europe was historically the birthplace of the Renaissance, which led to the transformation of traditional religious systems and the rise of humanism as a dominant paradigm. Another major phenomenon that emerged alongside this era in Europe was the establishment of secularism. In fact, this fundamental contradiction in the intellectual foundations of Iranians and Europeans inevitably leads to a difference in discourse. This difference has a profound consequence: a divergent perception of issues and a fundamentally different understanding of various matters. Differences in issues such as human rights, freedom, and support for Islamic groups all stem from this discursive divergence (Rahmati et al., 2021: 82). In the following sections of this article, we will examine the impact of these differing perceptions across multiple cases.

Another key reason is that the discourse of the Islamic Revolution not only dismantled Iran's previous alignment with Western actors during the Shah's regime but also fundamentally transformed Iran into one of the main centers of revisionism in global politics. With its "Neither East nor West" slogan, the Islamic Republic positioned itself as a third alternative to both liberalism and socialism, redefining its role as a challenger to these dominant ideologies. This perspective led both sides to perceive the Iran-Europe divide as not merely political but rather a civilizational and ideological conflict. From a CDA perspective, this illustrates how discourse shapes political subjectivities, positioning Iran and Europe as ideologically 'Other' in relation to each other. As a result, many of the disputes between Iran and the European Union have since been understood through this lens. In fact, the revolutionary ideals of opposing oppression, fighting imperialism, non-alignment, supporting the oppressed, positioning Iran as the "Ummah's central state", and advocating independence—all reinforced the notion that this fundamental divergence between the two actors was inevitable (Dadandish, 2012: 60).

Another reason is rooted in the nature of international relations. Kenneth Waltz, the pioneer of structural realism, argues that when the international structure positions actors against one another, they inevitably align themselves accordingly. In other words, states form alliances and counterbalance opposing actors. The European Union, in addition to its ideological and identity-based alignment with Western players like the United States, also positioned itself against Iran due to balance-of-power considerations. A closer examination of EU decisions reveals that, in many instances, the Union has aligned its positions with those of the U.S. and Israel, both of which have been defined as Iran's primary adversaries (Dadandish, 2012: 61). Moreover, the United States and Israel have leveraged this dynamic to exert significant influence over the European Union's foreign policy-making. This discursive alignment has fundamentally hindered Iran and Europe from reaching lasting agreements, even during periods of cooperation. As a result, the U.S. and Israel have been able to negatively impact EU-Iran relations, shaping Europe's perception of Iran from their

own strategic standpoint. In fact, the fourth type of balancing in international relations literature—identity balancing—has consistently fueled discord between Iran and the EU, preventing any substantial or lasting improvement in their relations (Bakhtiari and Salimi, 2013: 168).

For the reasons outlined above, it appears that the discursive factor is the primary determinant in Iran-EU relations. In the following sections of this article, we will attempt to demonstrate how this underlying factor has influenced and shaped other internal and external variables, ultimately playing a fundamental role in their formation.

## **5- Internal factors affecting Iran-EU relations**

One of the most significant manifestations of the Islamic discourse's influence has been in domestic policies and policymakings. In fact, the new discourse reshaped Iran's perception of various issues, leading to a new way of understanding and, consequently, different actions and stances. It appears that all factors within Iran that have been influenced by the Islamic discourse can be categorized under internal factors.

### **5-1- The Impact of Presidential Terms on Relations**

While the discourse of the Islamic Revolution has persisted throughout the post-revolution years, each administration's policies and approaches have differed, resulting in varying degrees of its impact on their foreign policy. It seems that one of the most important internal factors affecting the relations between Iran and the European Union has been the way governments have approached these relations. Therefore, based on the extent to which governments have been influenced by the Islamic discourse, the relations between Iran and Europe can be divided into seven periods which we will examine further. This periodization reflects not just changes in political leadership, but shifts in how discourse is constructed and enacted across time.

#### **5-1-1-The non-tension relations of nationalist realists**

The first approach in foreign policy after the Islamic Revolution was an optimistic view of the international system, which prescribed de-escalation in foreign relations and tried to formulate a new plan in the field of Iran's foreign policy (Mir Fakhrai, 2014: 69). Although the interim government and the Prime Minister were committed and completely religious, their intellectual context was focused on national values and standards and within the framework of international norms. They adhered to the idea of freedom, advocated the free activity of institutions of legal participation, ensuring political stability, and ultimately establishing and strengthening civil society, while from the perspective of many others, the life of the revolution depended on the adoption of radical policies that should be adopted in

the Middle East and It would eventually change the world (MirFakhrai, 2014: 69). This conflict led to the early termination of the interim government.

#### **5-1-2-The period of stagnation and mistrust in the era of revolutionism**

This era started with the beginning of the war and continued until 1368. As previously mentioned, the outbreak of war brought Iran significantly closer to the Islamic discourse and shaped the behavioral pattern of the governments during these years(Alaaldin, 2020). At the beginning of the revolution and following the withdrawal of liberals from the political arena and the passivity of other non-religious groups in influencing the process of domestic and foreign policies, and the radicalization of the process of the revolution following the imposed war, the issuance of the revolution and the confrontation of the country with regional and international powers and the priority of the necessities Ideological and Islamic over national interests, Iran's foreign policy approach was aimed at changing the rules and structures of the international system(Taremi and Moradi, 2013:143).

#### **5-1-3-The period of critical dialogues in the era of pragmatists**

Since the early 1990s, with the adoption of Resolution 598 and the end of the war, and the end of the Cold War due to the collapse of the Soviet Union, and the announcement of the new world order by the United States on the one hand, and due to the special domestic, regional, and international conditions on the other hand We are witnessing changes in the direction of Iran's foreign policy(Posch, 2010). The beginning of this period coincided with Hashemi Rafsanjani's tenure and emphasized de-escalation in foreign policy, and as a result of the requirements of living in an interconnected international system, realistic approaches appeared in Iran's foreign policy. In line with the coordinated work and pragmatism of the cabinet, the general process of de-ideology of the country's executive management increased during the Hashemi Rafsanjani era. This was done through the appointment of technocrats who had an executive orientation. He named his government the Construction Cabinet. He emphasized the expertise, technical skills, and administrative abilities of his ministers in carrying out assigned tasks. The new president considered Islamic discourse and revolutionary tendencies to be necessary but insufficient. This accelerated the process of pragmatism in the executive behavior of the cabinet (Khashai & Poormola, 2017: 230).

#### **5-1-4-The period of comprehensive and constructive dialogues in the government of culturalists**

With Khatami taking office, a relative shift away from the Islamic discourse and an emphasis on shared cultural and human aspects were officially put on the agenda of Iran's diplomacy. In this era, the new principles in foreign policy emphasized de-escalation and peaceful coexistence and gaining global recognition. Iran's foreign policy towards Europe during the Khatami era should be started with the theory of dialogue between civilizations (Moradi, 2018:143). This theory was presented in a situation where cultural and civilization conflicts

were discussed as the main issue in international relations. Khatami tried to change the literature and formations of conflicts. He presented a peaceful interpretation of Islam discourse. It was organized based on cooperation, partnership, constructivism and also manifestations of trans-civilizational solidarity (Taremi & Moradi, 2013: 149). This created the necessary conditions to minimize the threats. The European Union welcomed this situation and with the return of the ambassadors to Tehran, a new round of talks under the title of constructive and comprehensive talks began.

#### **5-1-5-Hostility and confrontation in the era of Fundamentalists**

As a result of adopting ideological and discursive policies, foreign relations with the European Union are interrupted during this period (Nazir Hussain 2015: 34). Then, with the approval of the sanctions resolution, the commercial agreements between the parties were canceled. With the coming of the 9th government, the political and economic cooperation between the parties decreased in a very obvious way (Jalilvand, 2018) High-level negotiations and exchange of delegations and political and economic visits were greatly reduced and we no longer see political, diplomatic and economic-commercial trips at the level of presidents and even foreign ministers (Fuladi & Yousefi, 2018: 269). Ahmadinejad provoked different reactions at the international level. On the one hand, under the influence of the propaganda of the western media, different fronts were opened in the world against Iran. The atmosphere governing Iran's talks with the Troika changed and the voluntary and temporary suspension of most nuclear activities was stopped (Posch, 2010). With these events, the suspensions that took place in the "Reform government" were removed. These issues brought Iran's relations with the European Union into a new phase of challenges and various sanctions, and Catherine Ashton called for new sanctions against Iran in an interview with Spiegel. (Tabatabai, Tam, 2020: 6).

#### **5-1-6-Negotiation and reconciliation in the era of moderates**

The relation between Iran and the European Union underwent some remarkable development during Hassan Rouhani's presidency. Rouhani's emphasis on the strategy of negotiation in foreign policy, as well as defining the aspects of negotiation based on material interests (rather than discursive and ideological aspects), led Iran-EU relations toward economic and political cooperation. (Sanaee and Rahmati, 2014: 152). For this reason, following the JCPOA agreement, Iran-EU relations significantly improved and the EU played an influential role in implementing the agreement. Economic relations between Iran and the EU have been another striking point of interest in Iran-EU relations during Rouhani's presidency (Robinson, 2022). "Rouhani has sought to attract foreign investment and promote economic development in Iran, and the EU has been a key partner in these efforts" (Sanaee & Rahmati, 2014:158). It seems that the reason for the failure and discontinuation

of this improving trend was the same discursive factor, which hindered the implementation of agreements and once again led to mutual distrust between Iran and Europe.

### **5-1-7-The coldness of relations during the fundamentalist era**

The relations of Iran with the European Union during the presidency of Ebrahim Raisi were complicated and at variance. By the start of Ebrahim Raisi's term of office, which coincided with failing to get a result in the nuclear negotiations, and the occurrence of street riots in Iran, the relations between Iran and Europe got cold again. (Kiyani, 2021: 207). The escalation of disagreements on human rights issues and the divergence in discursive perspectives on matters such as freedom, women's rights, and other related topics were among the main reasons for the deterioration of relations.

### **5-2-turning points of relations**

Examining the trajectory of relations between Iran and Europe reveals several key milestones and historical events that have significantly influenced their interactions. A broad spectrum of factors, including political, social, legal, and religious, induced the rise and fall of the two regions' relationship, hence the wave – like interaction pattern. Key turning points in international relations should not only be examined as events but as discursive moments—where language, power, and ideology intersect. Each of these events marked a shift not only in material relations but also in how both parties constructed meaning about the other, thus influencing future interactions at all three levels of discourse: text, discursive practice, and social practice (Nozari et al. 2013: 154).

#### **5-2-1-Salman Rushdie's apostasy decree**

After the adverse effects of certain European countries supporting Saddam Hussein during the war with Iran, a further significant event was the fatwa against Salman Rushdie issued by Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989. (Moradi, 2018: 141) This decree was prompted by the publication of Rushdie's novel *The Satanic Verses*, which Ayatollah Khomeini deemed blasphemous and insulting to Islam, the Prophet Muhammad (pbuh), and the Quran.

The fatwa had far-reaching effects on the relations between Iran and the European Union. It resulted in the severance of diplomatic ties between Iran and the United Kingdom in 1989, with the withdrawal of ambassadors and staff from other European countries. Furthermore, the fatwa unleashed Muslims into violent protests and attacks in various European cities. These included bookshops, publishers, translators, and writers associated with Rushdie or his work. This decree drew a line of division between Iran and the EU: Iran accused the European nations of supporting blasphemy against Islam, while the EU condemned the fatwa for violating human rights and freedom of expression (Strategic Communications, 2022). From a discursive perspective, this event created a rupture in shared norms and meanings between Iran and Europe. The opposing interpretations of freedom of speech versus religious sanctity illustrate a clash between liberal secular

discourse and Islamic revolutionary discourse, reflecting a deeper ideological incompatibility embedded in each side's discursive traditions.

#### *5-2-2-the Mykonos restaurant assassinations*

The assassinations of the Mykonos restaurant in Berlin in 1992, which involved several Kurdish and Iranian opposition members and were allegedly performed by the Iranian government, had been another pivotal event that frankly startled the Iran-EU relationship. This incident further deteriorated the already fragile relationship between Iran and the European Union with serious repercussions on both sides. The killings were condemned by the EU and the greater international community and called for the immediate and drastic handling of the assassins. The EU imposed sanctions and other diplomatic actions against Iran following the assassinations, which seriously deteriorated their relations.

The ramifications of the Mykonos restaurant assassinations were wide-ranging as they affected Iran-EU relations in many aspects. First, the incident led to a breakdown in the communication and cooperation in diplomatic efforts between both parties. The imposition of the EU sanctions and downgrading of diplomatic ties strongly indicated that such actions would not be tolerated and created a climate of mistrust and reduced cooperation on issues related to trade and security (Taremi & Moradi, 2013: 144). A notable point is that this incident was a relatively small event that resulted in the deaths of only a few individuals, but it had profound effects on diplomatic relations, effectively reducing Iran-Germany relations to zero. As previously mentioned, it seems that the underlying discursive factor was the main reason for tensions at this level, amplifying its impact to such an extent.

#### *5-2-3-Nuclear program*

The disclosure of the Iranian nuclear program by the Mojahedin Khalq Organization was done at the time when the fundamentalist government of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was rising to power in the beginning of the 21st century. This program has a huge influence on Iran-European Union relations, bringing both positive and negative consequences into action (Sinovets et al. 2022: 164). Primarily, the Iranian nuclear program has increased tensions and distrust between Iran and the EU. The EU has continuously criticized Iran's nuclear pursuits through sanctions meant to hinder the program. These sanctions have hurt Iran-EU relations by compromising trade and diplomatic cooperation between both parties. In the first years after the revelation of Iran's nuclear activities, the negative implications for the Iran-EU relationship were evident, especially in the form of economic sanctions. Due to Iran's situation and lack of transparency and cooperation with respect to its nuclear activities, the EU, supported by the United States and other states, imposed a set of sanctions that affected the Iranian economy, notably in the oil and financial sectors (Alcaro, 2021). These certainly crippled the ability of Iran to pursue international trade and commerce. The repercussions of these sanctions have had lasting effects on Iran-EU relations, with the high

level of difficulties posed by the nuclear program of Iran, and the continuous need for efforts toward the resolution of these issues (Javadi, 2021).

#### *5-2-4-JCPOA*

The negotiations leading to the JCPOA served as a point of inflection within Iran-EU relations, as the negotiations focused on political and economic issues rather than fundamental Discursive disagreements (Robinson, 2022). During this period, Iran and Europe moved toward negotiating smaller-scale issues that allowed for bargaining on both sides and did not constitute red lines for either party. This was in contrast to identity-based and ideological disputes, which Iran had repeatedly defined as non-negotiable red lines. Since the issue revolved around the specific case of the nuclear program, both sides were able to reach a conclusion, ultimately leading to an agreement. The JCPOA provided a pathway to expanded investment and greater economic cooperation between Iran and the EU. European firms, particularly in the energy, automotive, and financial sectors, quickly sought opportunities in Iran following the removal of sanctions, resulting in a notable increase in foreign direct investment and a vital role for European companies in the nation's economic growth (Strategic Communications, 2022). JCPOA has also had broader consequences for the role of the EU in the Middle East. The EU tried to play a more active role in the process of stabilization and security building in the region, viewing the Iran nuclear program as part of those processes. It has worked in the direction of promoting, on one hand, dialogue between Iran and other regional actors, while on the other hand, it has used its influence to prevent the situation from deteriorating further. This, in turn, has ensured deeper engagement between Iran and the EU on regional security issues, thereby creating space for talking and cooperating with each other on most of the regional challenges (Niknami, 2021: 321).

Historically, the EU was one of the most important trading partners of Iran. The JCPOA opened up new avenues for deeper economic relations between Iran and the EU. After the conclusion of the deal, trade between Iran and the EU considerably developed since European companies wanted to take advantage of Iran's great and somewhat undeveloped market. This increase in trade boosted both the Iranian and European economies by creating new business opportunities and accelerating economic growth. In spite of all the euphoria that the JCPOA generated at the time, later events have somewhat diminished its economic benefits (Niknami, 2021: 321). In 2018, the United States unilaterally exited the agreement and reinstated sanctions on Iran, which effectively undercut the economic advantages the deal had provided to Iran-EU relations (Institute for Strategic Studies 2019). The re-imposition of sanctions created a deterrent effect on European companies and banks, many of which opted to reduce their operations in Iran to avoid the risk of violating US sanctions (Geranmayeh, 2017: 5).

Nevertheless, it seems that the more serious reason for the failure of the JCPOA was the lack of attention to deeper disagreements between the two sides. Fairclough's CDA would suggest that while textual negotiations (the literal agreement) occurred, the broader discursive practices and socio-political ideologies remained in conflict. Thus, the agreement operated only at the textual level, without harmonizing the discursive and social practices underlying each side's worldview. In fact, it appears that both parties attempted to resolve secondary issues in order to create the groundwork for addressing the main issue. However, this approach ultimately hindered the achievement of secondary objectives and failed to lead to a resolution of the core dispute.

### **5-2-5-unrest following Mahsa Amini's death**

The death of Mahsa Amini really shook the very roots between Iran and the European Union. Her death sparked protests within and beyond the borders, particularly in most European countries, forcing the European Union to rethink ties with the Iranian government. Following the death of Mahsa Amini, once more a lot of attention was brought to bear on human rights issues and in fact to fundamental discursive disagreements. France, Germany, and the UK headed several European countries that condemned the treatment of Amini and urged an investigation into her death. These statements mounted pressure on the European Union to make its stance more forceful, the result of which was sanctions imposed, among other measures. Also, the unrest made an implication for talks between Iran and the European Union over the Iran nuclear deal. The European Union has played a leading role in trying to preserve the nuclear agreement. The unrest indeed brought into question the EU's reach-out to Iran and put on-line European leaders to make the human rights situation in Iran part of the discussion (Uygur, 2022: 18).

## **6- external factors affecting Iran-EU relations**

It seems that the Islamic discourse not only in Iran but even outside of Iran has led to the formation of influential factors in the relations between Iran and Europe, which can be categorized under external causes. From a Critical Discourse Analysis perspective, external actors not only influence Iran-EU relations through concrete political actions but also through the discourses they produce. These discourses construct identities, assign roles, and define legitimacy, often reflecting deeper ideological power struggles.

### **6-1- Role of international actors on EU-Iran relations**

#### **6-1-1- USA**

The United States plays a crucial role in influencing Iran-EU relations, primarily through its foreign policy and strategic priorities (Rahmati et al., 2022: 42). Since the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the U.S. has adopted an adversarial approach toward Iran, characterized

by economic sanctions and a diplomatic strategy aimed at isolating the nation. In this respect, the approach makes the European Union's reach-out policy to Iran more complex because it makes the EU search for a tightrope balance between the development of diplomatic relations and balance-of-power considerations. This has been the case because, as a result of this, the EU's policy in Iran often gets influenced by the generalized tensions created by the U.S. (Nazir Hussain, 2015:42) and United States imposes sanctions that go beyond the sphere of Iran and permeate European companies that want to operate in Iran.

Apart from economic and political pressures, the U.S. is an influential shaper of perceptions on Iran within Europe. The Washington storyline on activities of Iran especially its nuclear ambitions and support of various militant groups has effects on public opinion and policy-making within the EU member states. This framing often constructs Iran as a key security threat, which creates barriers to the attempts of European leaders to pursue constructive engagement with Tehran in an efficient manner. It seems that the main reason for this is identity balance, which has given the United States the capacity to challenge Iran-EU relations through fundamental discursive differences (Rahmati et al., 2022: 43).

#### **6-1-2- Israel**

Israel has a very strong impact on the balance of Iran-EU relations, mostly because of its long-standing conflict with Iran and its close ties with European countries. The main factors influencing its role in these relations include the challenge of security, the close strategic partnership with both the EU and the U.S., its efforts regarding sanctions against Iran and building diplomatic pressure on this country, shaping the narrative about Iran's role, especially in the Middle East (Niknami, 2021: 322).

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Israel has looked upon Iran as an emerging threat to its security, largely because of Iran's support for militant groups such as Hezbollah in Lebanon and Hamas in Gaza, and other proxies across the Middle East. Israel is especially concerned about the development of missile capabilities and nuclear activities in Iran. Such security anxieties will drive Israel's active lobbying within European capitals to put pressure on EU member states to adopt a firm stance against Iran's regional activities and its nuclear program. Israel often depicts Iran as a force that disrupts security in the Middle East, fueling conflicts in Syria, Iraq, Yemen, and beyond (Jalilvand, 2018). This image will appeal to the Europeans, who have a different discursive perception of Iran regarding these issues, thus defining the current attitude of EU foreign policy toward Iran. Moreover, Israel actively encourages European countries to continue and increase economic sanctions against Iran, especially regarding its nuclear program and military operations.

With intense lobbying, Israel aims to ensure that EU policy becomes more aligned with that of the U.S. and Israel, one focused on containment and punishment, rather than engagement or diplomacy, with Iran. Historically, Israel has opposed European efforts at

restoring economic or diplomatic relations with Iran, especially under major international agreements such as the 2015 nuclear deal, or JCPOA. Although the JCPOA is not a current focal point, Israel continues to advocate for strict monitoring and enforcement of any measures that would restrict Iran's ability to benefit economically from European partnerships. Israeli officials frequently voice concerns about European businesses engaging with Iran, fearing that such economic ties could weaken international pressure or inadvertently fuel Iran's military capabilities and regional ambitions (Alcaro, 2021). Israel influences Iran-EU relations by shaping the global and European narrative regarding Iran's actions in areas of terrorism, human rights, and regional instability. All the time, Israel underlines Iran's support of militant groups and attempts to create the image that they are a threat not only to Israel but to the broader European and Western interests.

This includes, among other aspects, underlining incidents where Iranian-backed agents were implicated in attacks or attempted attacks in Europe (Jalilvand, 2018). However, Israel's influence on EU-Iran relations is not limitless. Some European countries, particularly those with more extensive economic links to Iran or a more independent foreign policy stance, have resisted aligning themselves completely with the positions of Israel (or those of the U.S.) concerning Iran.

### **6-1-3- UK and Brexit**

With the occurrence of the revolution in Iran, the United Kingdom quickly became one of Iran's discursive enemies due to its dark historical background in the country. The reason was that the Iranian discourse encompassed significant themes such as the fight against imperialism, and for nearly 200 years, the United Kingdom and its colonial presence in Iran had been the symbol and embodiment of that struggle (Bakhtiari and Salimi, 2013: 166). Moreover, the UK historically has been a crucial player in the relationship between the US and the EU. British transatlantic policies since the end of World War II have nurtured the notion in various European capitals that the UK is acting as the "Trojan horse" for the US in Europe. This framing aptly captures the phrase "special relationship". American values have often been more closely aligned with British concerns than with those of the rest of Europe, such as regarding intellectual property rights, entrepreneurship, intelligence sharing, and military cooperation. (Bakhtiari and Salimi, 2013: 168) One of the most important factors that will have many effects on Iran-EU relations in the long time is the Britain withdrawal from the Union, or what we call it now as Brexit. "Many scholars believe the Brexit will likely weaken the EU's Atlantic-oriented and US-inclined tendencies" (Seifi & Maftooh, 2019:28). Brexit will affect America's position as a European power given the UK's conduit role between the US and the EU and influence Europe's interests in the United States. This leads to a question about how it will affect the Iran-EU relationship (Seifi, & Maftooh, 2019:32). A decrease in Atlanticism would weaken the US grip within the EU, allowing

more free decisions internally in the EU. Given the high levels of conflict and tension between Iran and the US present today, a relatively independent European Union may encourage better dialogue and collaboration with Iran. The EU might be able to concentrate more on direct consultations and discussions with Iran in conflicting zones (Seifi, & Maftooh, 2019:35).

## Conclusion

The examination of the relationship between Iran and Europe indicates that with the occurrence of the Islamic Revolution in Iran, the dynamics of interaction between these two actors underwent fundamental changes, and in other words, the logic of the relations changed. It seems that a combination of factors has collectively brought about these fundamental changes, with each playing a role in influencing the relationship between these two actors. Based on what was mentioned in the article, it seems that all these factors can be categorized into two groups: internal factors and external factors. However, the more important point that this article sought to prove was that one factor stood out among all others due to its fundamental influence on the rest. This factor appears to be the impact of the differing discourses of Iran and the European Union, which, for various reasons mentioned earlier, has led to disagreements between the two actors. From the perspective of Fairclough's Critical Discourse Analysis, this discursive divergence is not merely a matter of rhetoric or language; it reflects deeper ideological and historical structures that shape how each side constructs meaning, defines legitimacy, and frames issues such as human rights, security, and sovereignty. More importantly, this factor has not been temporary or limited to specific periods; rather, it has consistently influenced relations from the beginning of the revolution to the present day. Given these considerations, it seems that this factor will persist in the future and will continue to play a dominant role in shaping Iran-EU relations, unless a fundamental discursive shift occurs on one or both sides.

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