

# What the Iran-Iraq War Tells Us about the Future of the Iran Nuclear Deal

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and  
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It is a truism that the 1979 Islamic Revolution transformed Iran and its place in the world. For the United States, the revolution swept away a reliable partner and replaced it with a regime long considered a “mystery” and a “puzzle.”<sup>1</sup> Although scholars and analysts have devoted many pages to deciphering the Iranian enigma, most have failed to adequately examine the event in modern Iranian history whose significance and impact rival that of the revolution itself: the 1980–88 Iran-Iraq War.

Neglect of such a momentous event reveals a major shortcoming in the scholarship on Iran. Although that is significant in itself, Iran is not a country of interest only to scholars. Since the revolution, Washington has viewed Tehran with fear and enmity, especially after the 2002 exposure of the Natanz uranium enrichment facility, which the Iranian government had not declared to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). Since then, one of the most pressing national security issues for the United States and its allies has been to prevent such an apparently enigmatic and threatening regime from weaponizing its nuclear program. To this end, the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the United Nations Security Council plus Germany) and Iran concluded the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) on July 14, 2015, which places limits on Tehran’s sensitive nuclear activities in exchange for sanctions relief. It is precisely on this issue of the JCPOA’s implementation that the lessons of the Iran-Iraq War have immense and immediate bearing.

While most of the discussion surrounding the nuclear negotiations and deal has focused on the untrustworthiness of the Islamic Republic, little attention has been paid to how Iranians view that process, its outcome, and its broader impact on Iran’s security outlook. Responding to domestic opposition to the deal, U.S. officials have stated that it is built not on trust but on verifica-

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1. Kenneth M. Pollack, *The Persian Puzzle: The Conflict between Iran and America* (New York: Random House, 2005).

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tion.<sup>2</sup> Iranian officials, especially Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and some leaders of the powerful paramilitary conglomerate, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), have indicated a similar reluctance to trust the United States.<sup>3</sup> Despite declaring their support for the process, Khamenei and others have warned Iranians that the United States cannot be trusted, contending that Washington would not remove the sanctions against the country and would find other excuses to stymie Iran's progress.<sup>4</sup> Elite and popular support for the deal in Iran ebbed following the JCPOA's official Implementation Day on January 16, 2016, as economic recovery was slow to materialize and Khamenei distanced himself from the deal and from the moderate president, Hassan Rouhani, who delivered it.<sup>5</sup> Iranians' concerns were further exacerbated by the election of Donald Trump as president of the United States in November 2016. Trump's denigration of the JCPOA and hostility toward Iran appeared to confirm the Iranian belief that the United States' ultimate objective is to isolate Iran and undermine its ability to protect itself.<sup>6</sup>

This article examines how Iran's experience in the Iran-Iraq War affects its nuclear policy. We argue that the influence of that war has been greatly underestimated and misinterpreted outside Iran. We demonstrate that the conventional wisdom, which views Iran through the lens of the Islamic Revolution without considering the impact of the Iran-Iraq War, is incorrect and misleading for those seeking to understand Iran and prevent it from acquiring nuclear weapons. We further demonstrate how Iran's interpretation of the war has di-

2. Bernie Becker, "Kerry: Iran Deal Not about Trust," *The Hill*, November 24, 2013, <http://thehill.com/policy/international/191272-kerry-iran-deal-not-about-trust>.

3. Ariane Tabatabai, "Don't Fear the Hard-Liners," *Foreign Policy*, April 4, 2015, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2015/04/04/dont-fear-the-hardliners-iran-nuke-deal-zarif-khamenei/>.

4. "Bayanat dar didar-i farmandihan va karkunan-i Niru-yi Havayi-i Artish" [Remarks in a meeting with air force commanders and staff], Khamenei.ir, February 8, 2015, <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=25260>; and Annie Tracy Samuel, "Revolutionary Guard Is Cautiously Open to Nuclear Deal," *Iran Matters* blog, December 20, 2013, <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/revolutionary-guard-cautiously-open-nuclear-deal-1>.

5. "Bayanat dar didar-i aqshar-i mukhtalif-i mardum" [Remarks in a meeting with various groups of people], Khamenei.ir, August 1, 2016, <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=34429>.

6. Carol Morello, "Iran Nuclear Deal Could Collapse under Trump," *Washington Post*, November 9, 2016, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/iran-nuclear-deal-could-collapse-under-trump/2016/11/09/f2d2bd02-a68c-11e6-ba59-a7d93165c6d4\\_story.html](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/iran-nuclear-deal-could-collapse-under-trump/2016/11/09/f2d2bd02-a68c-11e6-ba59-a7d93165c6d4_story.html); "Netanyahu Hopes to Work with Trump to Undo Iran Nuclear Deal," Associated Press, December 12, 2016, <http://www.foxnews.com/politics/2016/12/12/netanyahu-hopes-to-work-with-trump-to-undo-iran-nuclear-deal.html>; Karen DeYoung, "Trump Administration Says It's Putting Iran 'On Notice' Following Missile Test," *Washington Post*, February 1, 2017, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/2017/02/01/fc5ce3d2-e8b0-11e6-80c2-30e57e57e05d\\_story.html?utm\\_term=.fe4d83f4d557](https://www.washingtonpost.com/world/national-security/2017/02/01/fc5ce3d2-e8b0-11e6-80c2-30e57e57e05d_story.html?utm_term=.fe4d83f4d557); and Yeganeh Torbati, "Trump Administration Tightens Iran Sanctions, Tehran Hits Back," Reuters, February 3, 2017, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-usa-idUSKBN15H253>.

rect bearing on its approach to international relations, its security outlook, and its decisions regarding its nuclear program.

One of the clearest indications of the Iran-Iraq War's importance is found in the vast amount of research that has been published on the conflict by a variety of official and unofficial institutions and individuals. Foremost among these is the IRGC, whose research and publications on the war constitute an impressive and substantial project, including a multivolume analytical chronology of the war (hereafter: *War Chronology*). The IRGC publications are particularly significant because they shed light on the incompleteness and inaccuracy of Western analyses of the organization and of the lasting impact of the war on Iran's strategic culture. As highlighted by an IRGC volume published in 2001, "The Iran-Iraq War, . . . because of its vast impact and outcomes, will affect every issue of internal and foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran for at least the next several decades."<sup>7</sup>

Western scholars and analysts, however, have failed both to examine such Iranian sources and to understand the full impact of the Iran-Iraq War on Iranian decisionmaking, in general, and on nuclear policy, in particular. There are surprisingly few English-language monographs on the Iran-Iraq War, and those that do exist are limited by a number of temporal, thematic, and methodological shortcomings.<sup>8</sup> In contrast to the existing scholarship, this article relies heavily on Iranian sources available only in Persian, including official statements; the IRGC publications mentioned above; publications on Iran's nuclear program, such as Rouhani's memoir describing the 2003–05 round of nuclear talks;<sup>9</sup> and interviews with key Iranian decision-makers, including Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, Deputy Foreign Minister Majid Takht-e Ravanchi, former Iranian representative to the IAEA Ali Asghar Soltanieh, and the father of Iran's nuclear program, Akbar Etemad.

7. *Tajziyah va tahlil-i Jang-i Iran va 'Iraq* [Analysis of the Iran-Iraq War], Vol. 1, 2nd ed. (Tehran: Center for War Studies and Research, 2001/02), p. 15.

8. Shirin Tahir-Kheli and Shaheen Ayubi, eds., *The Iran-Iraq War: New Weapons, Old Conflicts* (New York: Praeger, 1983); J.M. Abdulghani, *Iraq and Iran: The Years of Crisis* (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1984); Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at War* (London: I.B. Tauris, 1988); Edgar O'Ballance, *The Gulf War* (London: Brassey's Defence, 1988); John Bulloch and Harvey Morris, *The Gulf War: Its Origins, History, and Consequences* (London: Methuen, 1989); Dilip Hiro, *The Longest War: The Iran-Iraq Military Conflict* (London: Grafton, 1989); Efraim Karsh, ed. *The Iran-Iraq War: Impact and Implications* (Houndmills, U.K.: Macmillan, 1989); Stephen C. Pelletiere and Douglas V. Johnson II, *Lessons Learned: The Iran-Iraq War* (Carlisle Barracks, Pa.: Strategic Studies Institute, U.S. Army War College, 1991); and Stephen C. Pelletiere, *The Iran-Iraq War: Chaos in a Vacuum* (New York: Praeger, 1992). A notable exception is Farideh Farhi, "The Antinomies of Iran's War Generation," in Lawrence G. Potter and Gary G. Sick, eds., *Iran, Iraq, and the Legacies of War* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004), pp. 101–120.

9. Hassan Rouhani, *Amniyat-i milli va diplomasi-i hastih-i* [National security and nuclear diplomacy] (Tehran: Center for Strategic Research, 2011).

While official Iranian sources and statements, like those of other countries, should not be read uncritically or be taken at face value, they should also not be disregarded because of the particular perspectives they present. Rather, we posit that analyzing Iranian perspectives is vital to understanding Iran's decisionmaking process and policy outputs, even if those perspectives are not always accurate. That is because they shed significant light on the Islamic Republic's views of itself and of international affairs, and bridge key gaps in analysts' understanding of Tehran's interests, ambitions, and actions. Indeed, although scholars and analysts have long dismissed Iranian accounts as either the manifestation of its revolutionary ideology or as part of a face-saving strategy, we argue that there is much more to the narrative and that having a systematic appreciation of post-revolutionary Iran's self-image is vital to interpreting its policies and conduct.

This article demonstrates that point by emphasizing the necessity of understanding the Iran-Iraq War in order to move forward with the implementation of the JCPOA and to ensure that the deal's achievements are sustained past its implementation time frame. After outlining the relevant theoretical and historical background, we present our argument in two main sections. In the first, we analyze Iran's view of its experience in the war and draw out the main ways in which the war has shaped the Islamic Republic's security outlook, strategic culture, and policies since. In the second, we examine the two major implications of that outlook for resolving the nuclear standoff and implementing the JCPOA: (1) Iran's distrust of what it views as an unjust international system; and (2) its resultant determination to be self-reliantly secure.

### *Iran's Strategic Defensive Realism*

Although our assessment of Iran's nuclear decisionmaking is based primarily on a critical and source-driven analysis of Iranian perspectives and actions, our arguments are also framed by a number of theoretical considerations. First, we borrow from the scholarship on the Cold War and the theoretical framework on Soviet attitudes and strategic culture—in particular, Jack Snyder's *The Soviet Strategic Culture*—to present the Iran-Iraq War as a catalyst event shaping Iranian attitudes toward the nuclear crisis, negotiations, and resulting deal, placing them within Iran's strategic culture.<sup>10</sup> Drawing on Snyder, we posit that the particular rationale observed in Iranian decisionmaking does not stem from or indicate irrationality, as the conventional wisdom of “mad

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10. Jack L. Snyder, *The Soviet Strategic Culture: Implications for Limited Nuclear Operations* (Santa Monica, Calif.: RAND Corporation, 1977).

mullahs” holds. Rather, as Snyder argued in the case of the Soviet Union, Iran’s rationale and decisionmaking “reflect[] real differences in strategic thinking,”<sup>11</sup> which have their roots in the Iran-Iraq War.

Second, we posit that Iran’s security policy and strategic culture are deeply rooted in defensive realism, which contends that in the “self-help system” that characterizes a fundamentally anarchic world, “units worry about their survival, and the worry conditions their behavior.”<sup>12</sup> Iran’s position in a perennially volatile region, surrounded by U.S.-backed adversaries stocked with advanced weapons, and its belief that the United States’ ultimate objective is to weaken and isolate the country heighten its sense of vulnerability. This in turn fuels Iran’s security dilemma, which Tehran tries to address by building up its own capabilities, often rooted in asymmetric warfare, to compensate for its conventional inferiority.

Accordingly, Iran’s main objective lies in the key tenet of defensive realism: survival. As Kenneth Waltz argues, “In a self-help system each of the units spends a portion of its efforts, not in forwarding its own good, but in providing the means of protecting itself against others.”<sup>13</sup> Indeed, much of the Islamic Republic’s foreign activities—its support for nonstate actors and its involvement in regional conflicts—have been driven by self-protection, even though they are generally portrayed as expansionist. This misconception exemplifies the necessity of understanding such issues from all the relevant perspectives. What Gulf Arab officials term “Iran meddling in Arab affairs” is to Iran an essential part of an “aggressive defense” of its national security.<sup>14</sup> And, as Snyder argued in the case of the Soviet Union, Iranian policies, whether aligned with U.S. interests and values or not, should not be dismissed as irrational or branded fundamentally expansionist.<sup>15</sup> Rather, they must be examined within the framework of defensive realism and its emphasis on states’ primary goal of ensuring their own survival in an anarchic world. This is not to say that U.S. and Persian Gulf states’ concerns surrounding Iran’s activities are ill-founded. To be sure, Tehran’s policies in certain areas (e.g., the Syrian civil war) are disruptive if not destructive and should be countered. What our

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11. *Ibid.*, p. 22.

12. Kenneth N. Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Long Grove, Ill.: Waveland, 1979), p. 105.

13. *Ibid.*

14. Author interviews with Gulf Cooperation Council officials, Doha, Muscat, Kuwait City, and Abu Dhabi, May and November 2016; and Annie Tracy Samuel, “Perceptions and Narratives of Security: The Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps and the Iran-Iraq War,” *International Security Program Discussion Paper 2012-06* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, John F. Kennedy School of Government, Harvard University, 2012), pp. 17–18.

15. Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, “Security Seeking under Anarchy: Defensive Realism Revisited,” *International Security*, Vol. 25, No. 3 (Winter 2000/01), p. 128, doi:10.1162/016228800560543.

research indicates, however, is that Iran's activities have as their primary aim not destabilization but the country's survival.

Iran's acquisition of a nuclear capability must accordingly be understood in those terms as well. As we discuss further below, Tehran's policy of hedging—of developing a nuclear energy program that could also serve as the infrastructure for a weapons program—is as old as its nuclear ambitions, going back to the 1950s. At the time, Iran did not make a decision to weaponize its nuclear program because its conventional superiority and alliance with the United States made doing so unnecessary. After the revolution and the outbreak of the Iran-Iraq War, however, Iran's vulnerability and isolation in a self-help system led Tehran to pursue weaponization. By 2003, Iran had built a basic nuclear infrastructure and was developing the technical know-how and capability to weaponize its program. Yet, when it became clear that the nuclear program was making Iran less rather than more secure, with crippling sanctions imposed on the country and the looming threat of another war, Tehran came to the negotiating table prepared to discuss halting some of its nuclear activities.

Despite this record of pragmatic decisionmaking, the conventional wisdom that has dominated the international security scholarship on Iran's nuclear policy suffers from several of the shortcomings introduced above. For example, James Sebenius and Michael Singh have argued that Iran's "overriding interests" concern the "persistence of [its] current . . . system of government," and that the "development of a nuclear weapon would serve these interests by acting as a deterrent," but they fail to explain how or why that could be true. Sebenius and Singh also assert that Iranian leaders "acknowledged" this "fact" in the late 1980s, "when they cited the need for such weapons in light of Iran's concerns about perceived threats from Iraq and Israel."<sup>16</sup>

This statement is a mischaracterization of both historical events and Iran's interests. First, what Sebenius and Singh describe as a "perceived threat" from Iraq was neither "perceived" nor a "threat" but an actual war, one in which Iran was invaded and attacked with chemical weapons. Second, by viewing Iran exclusively in terms of the Islamic Revolution and ignoring the Iran-Iraq War, Sebenius and Singh incorrectly assert that Iran's overriding interest is the survival of its regime rather than national security and the defense of its territory. In part, this and other flaws in their argument stem from the neglect of Iranian sources and perspectives and their reliance instead on

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16. James Sebenius and Michael Singh, "Is a Nuclear Deal with Iran Possible? An Analytical Framework for the Iran Nuclear Negotiations," *International Security*, Vol. 37, No. 3 (Winter 2012/13), pp. 52–91, at p. 60, doi:10.1162/ISEC\_a\_00108.



“infer[ences]” based on Iran’s “actions, behavior,” and “studies on the regime’s ideology.”<sup>17</sup>

The failure of scholars such as Sebenius and Singh to examine Iranian sources and appreciate the impact of the Iran-Iraq War is one of the primary reasons why the Islamic Republic has remained a seemingly impenetrable puzzle, especially with regard to its nuclear ambitions, and why the conventional wisdom on Iran has shed little light on that subject. Further, the scholarship on Iran’s nuclear program has focused overwhelmingly on subjects such as the dangers that a nuclear-armed Iran would present to its neighbors and the world,<sup>18</sup> the specific methods that should be used to prevent Iran from weaponizing,<sup>19</sup> and whether Iran actually wants nuclear weapons.<sup>20</sup> What is missing from much of this scholarship is consideration of the history, sources, and subjects that shed the most light on the Islamic Republic’s nuclear policy.<sup>21</sup> These form the basis of the present article.

Indeed, in analyses of Tehran’s nuclear file, the Iran-Iraq War has come to serve merely as a metaphor. When commentators mention the war, they do so almost exclusively with superficial references to the founder and first supreme leader of the Islamic Republic Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini’s likening his decision to end the war to drinking a chalice of poison.<sup>22</sup> Will Iran’s current supreme leader drink from a poisoned chalice like his predecessor and move forward with a nuclear deal?, observers have asked. Will he give up his re-

17. *Ibid.*, pp. 59, 60.

18. Dalia Dassa Kaye and Frederic M. Wehrey, “A Nuclear Iran: The Reactions of Neighbours,” *Survival*, Vol. 49, No. 2 (Summer 2007), pp. 111–128, doi:10.1080/00396330701437777; and Eric S. Edelman, Andrew F. Krepinevich, and Evan Braden Montgomery, “The Dangers of a Nuclear Iran: The Limits of Containment,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 90, No. 1 (January/February 2011), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/persian-gulf/2011-01-01/dangers-nuclear-iran>.

19. Dina Esfandiari and Mark Fitzpatrick, “Sanctions on Iran: Defining and Enabling ‘Success,’” *Survival*, Vol. 53, No. 5 (October/November 2011), pp. 143–156, doi:10.1080/00396338.2011.621639; Ray Takeyh, “Iran’s Nuclear Calculations,” *World Policy Journal*, Vol. 20, No. 2 (Summer 2003), pp. 21–28, doi:10.1215/07402775-2003-3006; Andrew Parasiliti, “Iran: Diplomacy and Deterrence,” *Survival*, Vol. 51, No. 5 (October/November 2009), pp. 5–13, doi:10.1080/00396330903309824; and Scott D. Sagan, “How to Keep the Bomb from Iran,” *Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 84, No. 5 (September/October 2006), <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2006-09-01/how-keep-bomb-iran>.

20. Shahram Chubin, “Does Iran Want Nuclear Weapons?” *Survival*, Vol. 37, No. 1 (Spring 1995), pp. 86–104, doi:10.1080/00396339508442778; and Shahram Chubin and Robert S. Litwak, “Debating Iran’s Nuclear Aspirations,” *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 26, No. 4 (Autumn 2003), pp. 99–114, doi:10.1162/016366003322387136.

21. Edelman, Krepinevich, and Montgomery, “The Dangers of a Nuclear Iran”; Daniel Brumberg, “Internal Politics and Iranian Foreign Policy” (Washington, D.C.: Working Group on Internal Politics and Iranian Foreign Policy, Stimson Center, undated); and Matthew Levitt, “The Iranian Security Threat in the Western Hemisphere: Learning from Past Experience,” *SAIS Review*, Vol. 32, No. 1 (Winter/Spring 2012), doi: 10.1353/sais.2012.0018.

22. Robert Pear, “Khomeini Accepts ‘Poison’ of Ending the War with Iraq; U.N. Sending Mission,” *New York Times*, July 21, 1988, <http://www.nytimes.com/1988/07/21/us/khomeini-accepts-poison-of-ending-the-war-with-iraq-un-sending-mission.html>.

gime's decades-long struggle with the United States to save his country and its faltering economy?<sup>23</sup> As with so much of the sound-bite-driven analysis of Iran, the allusion to the poisoned chalice greatly oversimplifies a critical and complex issue and reveals little about Iran's nuclear program (or the Iran-Iraq War). It is also representative of how scholars and policymakers have failed to appreciate the depth and breadth of the Iran-Iraq War's significance, thus preventing them from accurately understanding and applying the lessons of the war to the nuclear issue.

### *The Islamic Republic of Iran: Revolution and War*

The Islamic Revolution of 1978–79 was a movement of several different groups that were united most strongly in their opposition to the Pahlavi dynasty and the rule of Mohammad Reza Shah.<sup>24</sup> The shah faced opposition to his efforts to rapidly transform the country through social reforms, the costly modernization of infrastructure, and the military and the diversification of its energy sources, which included the establishment of a nuclear program with the help of the United States.<sup>25</sup> By the mid-1970s, when domestic opposition was becoming more organized and galvanizing around Ayatollah Khomeini,

23. Dore Gold, *The Rise of Nuclear Iran—How Tehran Defies the West* (Washington, D.C.: Regnery, 2009); Amir Taheri, "Opinion: When Mullahs and Generals Forget Their Duties," *Asharq al-Awsat*, May 22, 2015, <http://english.aawsat.com/amir-taheri/opinion/opinion-when-mullahs-and-generals-forget-their-duties>; Arash Karami, "Rouhani: Khomeini Chose Peace When Necessary," *Al-Monitor*, January 29, 2015, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/pt/contents/articles/originals/2015/01/rouhani-says-khomeini-chose-peace.html>; Barbara Slavin, "Result Trumps Deadline in Marathon Iran Nuclear Talks," *Al Jazeera*, March 31, 2015, <http://america.aljazeera.com/articles/2015/3/31/Marathon-Iran-nuclear-talks-extend-past-deadline.html>; Abolhassan Bani-Sadr, "How Iran Can Escape Its Nuclear Deadlock with the U.S.," *Huffington Post*, January 5, 2015, [http://www.huffingtonpost.com/abolhassan-banisadr/iran-us-nuclear-deadlock\\_b\\_6419612.html](http://www.huffingtonpost.com/abolhassan-banisadr/iran-us-nuclear-deadlock_b_6419612.html); and Michael Rubin, "The Danger of Negotiating with Iran," *Washington Free Beacon*, March 9, 2015, <http://freebeacon.com/national-security/the-danger-of-negotiating-with-iran/>.

24. For more on the Iranian Revolution, see David Menashri, *Iran: A Decade of War and Revolution* (New York: Holmes and Meier, 1990); Said Amir Arjomand, *The Turban for the Crown: The Islamic Revolution in Iran* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988); Ervand Abrahamian, *Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993); and Mohsen M. Milani, *The Making of Iran's Islamic Revolution: From Monarchy to Islamic Republic*, 2nd ed. (1988; repr. Boulder, Colo.: Westview, 1994).

25. "Naguffih'ha-yi mas'ul zidd-i ittila'at Parchin" [Untold from the head of counter-intelligence at Parchin], *Farda News* (news agency), January 23, 2013, <http://www.fardanews.com/fa/news/243470>; Stephen McGlinchey, "How the Shah Entangled America," *National Interest*, August 2, 2013, <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/how-the-shah-entangled-america-8821>; and author telephone interview with Akbar Etemad, Tehran, October 2014. As part of President Dwight D. Eisenhower's Atoms for Peace initiative, Iran signed an agreement with the United States in 1957 to start a nuclear program and then purchased the Tehran Research Reactor and highly enriched uranium to fuel the reactor from the United States. "Tehran Research Reactor," *Nuclear Iran*, undated, <http://www.isisnucleariran.org/sites/facilities/tehran-research-reactor-trr/>.



Iran's nuclear program was well under way, and what became the Middle East's first nuclear power plant in the Iranian city of Bushehr was under construction. Khomeini strongly objected to a number of the shah's domestic and foreign policies, and denounced nuclear technology as a waste of the country's resources.<sup>26</sup> After the revolutionaries succeeded in ousting the shah in February 1979, they abandoned many of his projects, including the nuclear program. Shortly after they established the new Islamic Republic, Iraq attacked Iran.

The Iran-Iraq War is part of a long history of conflict between the rulers and peoples of those lands. Ultimately, however, the causes of the war were political and proximate, and it was the Iranian Revolution that formed its most significant catalyst. Iran's post-revolutionary government was based on the centrality of Islam in public life, and Khomeini vowed to fight for the revival of Shi'i Islam and for the freedom of the "oppressed" throughout the world. To Iraqi President Saddam Hussein, who presided over a Sunni-dominated, secular government ruling a Shi'i majority,<sup>27</sup> these policies presented a threat to his power.

At the same time, Iran appeared to be in a vulnerable position, as violent disputes over the post-revolutionary order persisted into its second year. Saddam decided to take the opportunity to launch what he intended to be a quick military operation to defeat the revolution and safeguard his rule and, while he was at it, to seize the oil-rich territory in southwestern Iran and assert his leadership of the Arab world. After a year of steadily worsening relations and several months of border clashes, Iraqi forces invaded Iran on September 22, 1980, marking the beginning of the Iran-Iraq War.

What Saddam thought would be a swift and easy strike to check the revolutionary regime quickly transformed into a brutal and drawn-out conflict that instead revitalized the flagging revolution. After a series of victories that allowed Iraqi forces to advance into Iran through early 1981, Iranian forces halted the Iraqis' march and retook most of their territory over the course of the next year. Iran then pursued the retreating forces into Iraq in the summer

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26. Rouhani, *Amniyat-i milli va diplomasi-i hastih-'i*, p. 27; and author interview with Ali Asghar Soltanieh, Tehran, June 2014.

27. For the period under question, the demographic breakdown between Sunnis and Shi'is in Iraq is unclear and has been the subject of debate, because censuses either were not taken or are unreliable. In 1980 Shi'is made up between 55 and 65 percent of the Iraqi population. See Helen Chapin Metz, ed., *Iraq: A Country Study* (Washington, D.C.: Government Printing Office for the Library of Congress, 1988), pp. 87–93; Hanna Batatu, *The Old Social Classes and the Revolutionary Movements of Iraq* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1978), pp. 13–50; and Yitzhak Nakash, *The Shi'is of Iraq* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), pp. 13–47.

of 1982, but was unable to gain or hold much ground. The war broadened as it stalled, entangling the rest of the Middle East and both superpowers and spreading from the land to the Tanker War in the Persian Gulf and several series of aerial attacks on civilian areas, known as the War of the Cities. The conflict continued largely as a bloody stalemate until August 20, 1988, when the cease-fire terms of United Nations Security Council Resolution (UNSCR) 598 came into force.<sup>28</sup> The end of the war restored the status quo ante, with both regimes still in power and without territorial adjustments.

Although neither side emerged as the clear victor, the war had a profound impact on both countries. The war's eight years amount to about one-fifth of the life of the Islamic Republic. Casualty figures remain highly uncertain, but estimates of Iranian deaths range from 170,000 to 750,000.<sup>29</sup> The conflict was brutal, with the use of trench warfare; extensive attacks on civilian areas; and Iraq's widespread use of chemical weapons, the effects from which Iranians continue to suffer.<sup>30</sup> The horrors of the war persist in other ways as well: land mines left over from the conflict still explode along Iran's western border, sometimes inflicting additional casualties,<sup>31</sup> and soldiers' remains continue to be unearthed and passed on to their proper resting places in either Iran or Iraq.<sup>32</sup>

Finally, the Iran-Iraq War remains a central component of Iran's national identity. Although it was a disaster for the country, the leaders of the Islamic Republic emerged from the war smarter and stronger. Many of its war veterans now hold key positions in the government and military. For the revolution and the regime it brought to power, the Iran-Iraq War was a test, one that provided Iran with important lessons that have driven its policies since.

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28. United Nations Security Council Resolution 598, July 20, 1987.

29. Bethany Lacina and Nils Petter Gleditsch, "Monitoring Trends in Global Combat: A New Dataset of Battle Deaths," *European Journal of Population*, Vol. 21, No. 2 (June 2005), pp. 145–166, doi:10.1007/s10680-005-6851-6.

30. Ramin Mostaghim and Patrick J. McDonnell, "Iran's Nuclear Resolve Fueled by Iraq's Chemical Assault in War," *Los Angeles Times*, October 17, 2013, <http://articles.latimes.com/2013/oct/17/world/la-fg-iran-chemical-20131017>; and Narges Bajoghli, "Iran's Chemical Weapon Survivors Show Twin Horrors of WMD and Sanctions," *Tehran Bureau* (online newspaper), September 2, 2013, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/iran-blog/2013/sep/02/iran-chemical-weapons-wmd-sanctions>.

31. "Landmine from Wartime Kills 6 in Western Iran," *Tehran Times*, November 4, 2012.

32. International Committee of the Red Cross, "Iran/Iraq: Efforts Continue to Clarify Fate of Missing from 1980–1988 War" (Geneva, Switzerland: International Committee of the Red Cross, June 5, 2013), <https://www.icrc.org/eng/resources/documents/news-release/2013/05-06-iran-iraq-missings.htm>; and Saman Kojouri, "Iran Holds Funeral Procession for 92 Soldiers Killed in Iran-Iraq War," *Press TV*, September 2, 2013.

*Unfinished History: The Iran-Iraq War in the Iranian Perspective*

In their writings and declarations, Iranian leaders provide several reasons for why the war will “affect every issue of internal and foreign policy” in Iran for decades to come.<sup>33</sup> First, the war’s length, intensity, and human and material costs make the war extremely significant, as discussed above.<sup>34</sup> Second, the war and the revolution that immediately preceded it are “linked closely” to each other and can only be understood together.<sup>35</sup> But whereas the impact of the Islamic Revolution (and other historical events, especially the 1953 coup that overthrew Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh) on Iranian positions and policies is taken as fact and has been examined closely by scholars, the impact of the war has not been fully acknowledged or properly analyzed. This failure has contributed materially to skewed representations of the Islamic Republic. Finally, the war’s significance stems from the way Iranian leaders view the role of history, in general, and the history of the Iran-Iraq War, in particular, in shaping Iran’s national identity and foreign policy outlook in the present day. This, too, is an issue that has often confounded Western policymakers, who have been unsure what to make of Iranians’ meandering references to the ancient or recent past, especially during formal negotiations over Iran’s nuclear program. Yet, for many Iranians, history and, again, that of the war in particular, is inextricable from the present. In the words of a 2003 IRGC volume, “[T]he war is part of the reality of Iran’s history whose place and influential role leave[] no doubt that for a minimum of the next several decades the results and consequences of the war will be clear in . . . the political, social, cultural, and military life of Iran.”<sup>36</sup>

Hence, the Iran-Iraq War has great bearing on every aspect of Iranian decisionmaking, including the nuclear file. Ultimately, the war is the chief development that has shaped the strategic thinking that is so “unique to the [Iranian] experience.”<sup>37</sup> The remainder of this section examines two significant aspects of Iran’s understanding of the war that stand out as central to Iran’s view of international affairs and as having the broadest and most direct implications for the Iranian nuclear program and the JCPOA’s viability: (1) Iran’s experience of

33. *Tajziyah va tahlil-i Jang-i Iran va ‘Iraq*, Vol. 1, p. 15.

34. *Ibid.*, pp. 13, 15; *Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va ‘Iraq* [Chronology of the Iran-Iraq War], Vol. 1 (Tehran: Center for War Studies and Research, 1997), p. 15; *Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va ‘Iraq* [Chronology of the Iran-Iraq War], Vol. 4 (Tehran: Center for War Studies and Research, 1993/94), p. 30; Muhammad Durudiyān, *Naqd va barrasi-i Jang-i Iran va Iraq* [Critique and review of the Iran-Iraq War], Vol. 1, 2nd ed. (Tehran: Center for War Studies and Research, 2003/04), p. 15.

35. *Tajziyah va tahlil-i Jang-i Iran va ‘Iraq*, Vol. 1, p. 15.

36. *Naqd va barrasi-i Jang-i Iran va Iraq*, Vol. 1, p. 15.

37. Snyder, *The Soviet Strategic Culture*, p. 22.

being attacked and its belief that the country is on the defensive, and (2) Iran's international isolation during the conflict.

#### ON THE DEFENSIVE: FIGHTING FOR SURVIVAL

One of the West's key beliefs about the Islamic Republic is that the regime pursues aggressive policies that threaten Iran's neighbors and international security. That outlook had an immense impact both on U.S. policy regarding the Iran-Iraq War and on the way American analysts have understood the conflict. During the war, Saddam Hussein played on Western fears that the Islamic Republic would damage U.S. interests in the region in order to secure weapons and support from Washington. He also appealed to the conservative Gulf monarchs, whose fear of the Iranian Revolution prompted them to create the Gulf Cooperation Council in 1981 and to provide substantial support to Iraq during the war.<sup>38</sup> States such as Saudi Arabia and Israel have recently pursued a similar policy by building their security discourse around the threat of Iran as a regional hegemon and aggressor, allowing them to receive security guarantees and weapons from the United States. In a March 2015 speech before the U.S. Congress, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu asserted that Iran "dominate[d] four Arab capitals" and that, "if Iran's aggression is left unchecked, more will surely follow." The prime minister's remarks were designed to derail the then-ongoing nuclear negotiations with Tehran.<sup>39</sup> This belief that Iran is an aggressive actor has pervaded discussions of the country's nuclear program, and Netanyahu has frequently used the image of a militant and fanatical Iranian establishment as the centerpiece of his campaign against negotiations.<sup>40</sup>

Iran's view of its actions in the Iran-Iraq War (and thereafter) is diametrically opposed to the understanding outlined above. The most fundamental feature of the Iranian narrative fits the defensive realist model and holds that Iran faces numerous threats to its national security and territorial integrity and has persistently fought to defend itself from those threats. Indeed, that same view, more than any other factor, defined Iran's prosecution of and policies during the war. For example, a publication overseen by Mohsen Rezaee, the IRGC commander during the war, emphasizes the security threats that charac-

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38. R.K. Ramazani, *The Gulf Cooperation Council: Record and Analysis* (Charlottesville: University Press of Virginia, 1988).

39. "The Complete Transcript of Netanyahu's Address to Congress," *Washington Post*, March 3, 2015, [https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/03/03/full-text-netanyahus-address-to-congress/?utm\\_term=.37904bb76ce0](https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/post-politics/wp/2015/03/03/full-text-netanyahus-address-to-congress/?utm_term=.37904bb76ce0).

40. Aviad Glickman, "Netanyahu Links Holocaust to Iranian Threat," *Y-Net News*, April 18, 2012, <http://www.ynetnews.com/articles/0,7340,L-4217989,00.html>.

terize a country at war and the lessons the war holds for Iranian security: "Considering the substantial impact Iraq's war against Iran had on . . . the country, it is necessary to [examine] this war . . . in order to adopt appropriate measures . . . to prevent or lessen the damages that competitors of the Islamic Republic of Iran might impose on the country. Among these experiences, the outcomes were that in this period national security and the preservation of territorial integrity were in such a difficult position that the regime's decision-makers and people have become determined to deter neighbors and great powers from invading Iran's territory [again]."<sup>41</sup>

In their publications, the Revolutionary Guards emphasize that restoring Iran's security and territorial integrity was the goal of Iran's strategy throughout the war, and Iran's actions in the war support that claim. Although Tehran's decision to continue the war in 1982 by invading Iraq is often given as evidence of the regime's aggression, in Iran the invasion is depicted in defensive terms, as essential to securing its territory and borders.<sup>42</sup> According to contemporary reports included in the IRGC sources, Khomeini sanctioned the assault only after being persuaded that it was necessary to "completely secure the country" and only on the condition that it be limited to those defensive aims.<sup>43</sup>

The centrality of the defensive realist notions of survival and national defense to Iran's prosecution of the war is also evident in how Iranian sources characterize the conflict's outcome. In their publications, the Revolutionary Guards portray the war as a victory for Iran because Iran successfully defended its territory and because Iraq failed to achieve its goals of gaining sovereignty over the Shatt al-Arab (the river that runs along part of the Iran-Iraq border) and occupying pieces of Iranian land.<sup>44</sup> Although this argument certainly helps Iranian leaders compensate for their failure to achieve their own, more expansive, war aims, the weight they put on defense and territorial integrity reflects core tenets of Iran's security outlook.

Today, Iranian leaders often directly connect their "aggressive defensive" policies to their experiences in the Iran-Iraq War. In their view, the aggression against Iran that the war embodied has continued, as the country exists in an anarchical system without security guarantees and a region in which the

41. *Tajziyah va tahlil-i Jang-i Iran va 'Iraq*, Vol. 1, p. 12.

42. Iraqi forces still occupied pieces of Iran's territory at the time of the invasion. See *Atlas-i rahnamai* [Guide atlas], Vol. 2 (Tehran: Center for War Studies and Research, 2001/02), p. 96; *Atlas-i rahnamai* [Guide atlas], Vol. 1, 5th ed. (Tehran: Center for War Studies and Research, 2002/03), p. 48; *Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va 'Iraq* [Chronology of the Iran-Iraq War], Vol. 20 (Tehran: Center for War Studies and Research, 2002/03), pp. 17, 24; and "Iraqis Vow to Be Out of Iran within 10 Days," *Los Angeles Times*, June 21, 1982.

43. *Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va 'Iraq*, Vol. 20, pp. 18–19.

44. *Atlas-i rahnamai*, Vol. 1, p. 64, back cover.

inability to meet one's basic security needs can lead to the loss of sovereignty. Therefore, the effort to derive strategic lessons from the war stems also from the view of the conflict as ongoing. During a May 2011 conference for Iranian veterans of the war, for example, IRGC deputy Husayn Daqiqi declared that even though it is being fought in a different manner, "the [Iran-Iraq] war has still not ended."<sup>45</sup> A year earlier, former IRGC Commander Yahya Rahim Safavi asserted, "[C]ertain countries, with the United States in the lead, which could not realize their hostile plot against Iran during the 1980–1988 war with Iraq, are making efforts to create problems for the Islamic Republic" today.<sup>46</sup>

Similar language is also used to characterize the conflict over Iran's nuclear file. In 2012, a Tehran Friday prayer leader described U.S. sanctions against Iran as an "imposed economic war" and stressed that Iranians would defend themselves as they did in the imposed (Iran-Iraq) war.<sup>47</sup> In the Islamic Republic's narrative, the nuclear crisis is thus a continuation of the war being waged to defeat Iran. Just as Iran's political and security establishments saw and portrayed the nuclear crisis through the lens of the war, President Rouhani's government has also tried to frame the nuclear negotiations and resulting deal within the framework of the war. To do so, Rouhani and his team have explained the talks and the JCPOA as defensive measures to put an end to the "unjust" and "illegal" international sanctions against Iran, removing the threat of another war and allowing Tehran to maintain and build up its defense capabilities to deter its adversaries. Moreover, Rouhani put the JCPOA's importance on par with that of the Iran-Iraq War and the Islamic Revolution when he described his chief foreign policy achievement as the "third great victory of the Iranian nation in the international arena."<sup>48</sup>

#### OUTCAST: IRAN'S WARTIME ISOLATION

Iranian leaders define the Iran-Iraq War as a conflict between Iran and a powerful group of states.<sup>49</sup> Iranian sources emphasize the "terrible inequality of the two belligerent camps,"<sup>50</sup> and state that "Iran's military power, economic

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45. "Gharbi'ha fikr fath-i Khurramshahr ra ham nimikardand" [Westerners also thought Khurramshahr could not be conquered], Fars News (news agency), May 27, 2011, <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9003067301>.

46. "Iran Should Be Prepared for Every Imaginable Scenario: General," Mehr News (news agency) via Tabnak (news agency), August 30, 2010, <http://en.mehrnews.com/news/41629/Iran-should-be-prepared-for-every-imaginable-scenario-general>.

47. "Mushkilat-i iqtisadi az su'-i tadbir ast" [Economic problems are the result of mismanagement], Jahan News (news agency), October 5, 2012, <http://www.jahannews.com/analysis/248182>.

48. "Rouhani: Muzakirat-i hastih-'i sivumin piruziy-i buzurg-i millat-i Iran dar sahnih-'i baynulmillal ast" [Rouhani: The nuclear negotiations are the third great victory of the Iranian nation in the international arena], Young Journalists' Club (news agency), August 6, 2015, <http://www.yjc.ir/fa/news/5283307>.

49. *Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va 'Iraq*, Vol. 1, p. 14.

50. *Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va 'Iraq*, Vol. 4, p. 608.



situation, and international position were in no way comparable to Iraq[’s].”<sup>51</sup> The IRGC’s *War Chronology* asserts that the numerous supporters Iraq drew to its side came not because of any particular affinity for the Iraqi regime, but because of Iraq’s “vindictive opposition to Iran.”<sup>52</sup> As the war dragged on, the common animosity toward the Islamic Republic proved powerful enough to unite otherwise unlikely partners even more closely.<sup>53</sup>

In many cases, the IRGC asserts that increased international involvement in the conflict came as a result of Iranian advances and with the intention of ensuring that Iraq did not lose the war. Such was the case after Iran’s invasion of Iraq in July 1982. Despite its mixed results, the invasion demonstrated Iran’s tenacity and ability to challenge Iraq militarily. According to IRGC sources, that challenge was deemed unacceptable by those who feared an Iranian victory, something that then seemed possible. Therefore, Baghdad’s supporters “were persuaded to restore the military and political advantage in the war to Iraq.”<sup>54</sup>

The same pattern was repeated in the aftermath of Iran’s occupation of Iraq’s Faw Peninsula and its drive toward Basra in January 1987,<sup>55</sup> which convinced Iraq and its allies that more was needed to “prevent the victory of the Islamic Republic of Iran and to end the war.”<sup>56</sup> To accomplish those goals, Iraqi leaders sought to broaden the scope of the war in order to “increase the pressure on the Islamic Republic to capitulate.”<sup>57</sup> The most significant expansion of the war took place in the Persian Gulf, where Iraq very effectively carried out its strategy of drawing in additional supporters while hurting Iran economically by attacking its energy infrastructure.<sup>58</sup> The intensification of attacks and the initiation of the Tanker War internationalized the conflict, given the interest of third parties in ensuring the export of oil.<sup>59</sup> U.S. naval forces increased their presence in the Persian Gulf and Indian Ocean over the course of the war, but

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51. *Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va ‘Iraq* [Chronology of the Iran-Iraq War], Vol. 51 (Tehran: Center for War Studies and Research, 2008/09), p. 36.

52. *Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va ‘Iraq* [Chronology of the Iran-Iraq War], Vol. 33 (Tehran: Center for War Studies and Research, 2000), p. 23.

53. *Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va ‘Iraq*, Vol. 51, pp. 35–36.

54. *Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va ‘Iraq*, Vol. 20, pp. 28–31.

55. *Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va ‘Iraq* [Chronology of the Iran-Iraq War], Vol. 47 (Tehran: Center for War Studies and Research, 2002/03) pp. 18–19, 21, 82, 122–123, 195–196, 502–503.

56. *Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va ‘Iraq* [Chronology of the Iran-Iraq War], Vol. 50 (Tehran: Center for War Studies and Research, 1999/2000), p. 3.

57. *Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va ‘Iraq*, Vol. 51, p. 39.

58. *Sayri dar Jang-i Iran va ‘Iraq* [Survey of the Iran-Iraq War], Vol. 1 (Tehran: Center for War Studies and Research, 1998/99), pp. 89, 163, 170–177; *Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va ‘Iraq*, Vol. 20, pp. 17, 33; and *Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va ‘Iraq* [Chronology of the Iran-Iraq War], Vol. 43 (Tehran: Center for War Studies and Research, 1999/2000), p. 29.

59. *Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va ‘Iraq*, Vol. 50, p. 3.

did so dramatically in the spring of 1987 when the Ronald Reagan administration agreed to escort Kuwaiti oil tankers with the aim of shielding them from Iranian retaliatory strikes.<sup>60</sup> But despite the importance of oil to outside powers, the Revolutionary Guards again assert that the underlying reason for the United States' more direct participation in the war was its fear of an Iranian victory.<sup>61</sup>

The support that key players gave to Iraq continues to shape Tehran's outlook today, with many Iranian leaders viewing the United States and its regional allies (e.g., Israel and Saudi Arabia) as adamantly opposed to the Islamic Republic and resolute in their efforts to isolate it. Shortly after the JCPOA was concluded in 2015, for example, President Rouhani conveyed the Iranian belief that the Saudis want to eliminate Tehran's influence in the region. He recounted his discussion with a Saudi official some twenty years prior, during which Rouhani raised the issue of the kingdom's aid to Iraq during the war, enumerating the many ways Saudi Arabia had contributed to Iraq's efforts. According to Rouhani, the Saudi official boasted that there were in fact many other contributions, which he then proceeded to list.<sup>62</sup> To Iranian leaders, this experience demonstrates their neighbors' commitment to isolating Iran. These leaders tend to remain similarly dubious about reconciliation with the United States because they assert, while referring to the Iran-Iraq War as a case in point, that Washington has shown itself unwilling to "come to terms" with the Islamic Republic and its position in the Middle East.

### *Dealing with History: The Iran-Iraq War and the JCPOA*

The two key features of Iran's understanding of the Iran-Iraq War outlined above have direct and substantial bearing on Iran's nuclear policies and on the continuing efforts to implement the JCPOA. Together, Iran's experience of being attacked and its isolation during the conflict gave rise to a security doctrine built on the conviction that, in an inequitable international order, Iran

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60. *Ibid.*; and *Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va 'Iraq*, Vol. 47, pp. 465–466.

61. *Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va 'Iraq*, Vol. 43, p. 19; *Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va 'Iraq*, Vol. 50, pp. 3, 6, 15; and *Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va 'Iraq*, Vol. 51, pp. 26, 37. A May 1987 news report makes the same point. See Jim Muir, "Gulf Attack Could Spur New Efforts to Resolve Iran-Iraq War," *Christian Science Monitor*, May 20, 1987. See also Julian Borger, "Rumsfeld 'Offered Help to Saddam,'" *Guardian*, December 31, 2002, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2002/dec/31/iraq.politics>; Malcolm Downing and Sara Beck, *The Battle for Iraq: BBC News Correspondents on the War against Saddam* (London: BBC Worldwide, 2003), p. 141; and Robin Wright, "The War That Haunts Iran's Negotiators," *New Yorker*, June 28, 2015, <http://www.newyorker.com/news/news-desk/the-war-that-haunts-irans-negotiators>.

62. Hassan Rouhani, remarks at United Nations General Assembly sideline meeting, New York, October 27, 2015.

cannot rely on anyone for its security and that it therefore must maintain the ability to independently defend its national security and interests. As this section demonstrates, that security doctrine has two major implications for Iran's nuclear file that must be recognized and addressed in order for the JCPOA to be effectively implemented and sustained: (1) Iranian leaders' fundamental distrust of international law and institutions, which they believe serve the interests of certain powers to the detriment of the others; and (2) their pursuit of self-sufficiency in matters of security and technology.

#### DISTRUST OF AN UNJUST INTERNATIONAL ORDER

The first important strategic implication of the Iran-Iraq War for Tehran's nuclear dossier is the profound distrust that the war instilled in Iran of its neighbors, the international community, and the United States. It reinforced Iran's feeling of isolation and its determination to "go it alone," or at least to maintain its ability to do so. It also led Iran to the conclusion that the international system is inherently unjust, as it benefits (by design) the great powers (especially the permanent members of the UN Security Council) and their allies at the expense of the rest. Tehran continues to see the international order through that lens, one shaped by the defensive realist notions of anarchy and self-help.

Iran's distrust of the international community, law, and institutions stems from the failure of other states and international organizations—the United Nations, in particular—to condemn Iraq's wartime breaches of *jus ad bellum* and *jus in bello*. First, the international community failed to condemn Baghdad's breach of *jus ad bellum* by not recognizing Iraq as the instigator of the war and not punishing Iraqi aggression accordingly. This, Iranians argue, had a substantial impact on Iran's prosecution of the war, beginning with its rejection of the first UN Security Council resolution on the conflict. Adopted on September 28, 1980, a week after the war began and when Iraq's advance had stalled, UNSCR 479 called for an end to the hostilities and was quickly accepted by Iraq.<sup>63</sup> Iran rejected the resolution, however, because it "did not mention Iraq's aggression and/or its violation of Iran's territorial integrity" and did not "request Iraq's . . . forces to withdraw from the occupied territories." Instead, says the *War Chronology*, "This Resolution only requested that Iran and Iraq avoid further use of force, and indeed the implication was that Iraq's aggressor army could thus hold the occupied areas and Iranian forces could not carry out operations to recover [their] own occupied territory!"<sup>64</sup> The indignation apparent in this passage exemplifies the way Iranian officials portray such international pressure for peace, especially from the UN

63. United Nations Security Council Resolution 479, September 28, 1980.

64. *Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va 'Iraq*, Vol. 20, p. 21.

Security Council, which they argue was consistently applied to Iran but failed to deal justly with the realities of the war and its initiation by Iraq. According to Iranian officials, the Security Council's position in the beginning of the war generated a profound distrust of the organization that made them wary of entrusting it with their country's national security.

Iran's rejections of subsequent UN Security Council resolutions were in part the result of that distrust. UNSCR 514, the next major resolution that Iraq also declared its willingness to accept, came on July 12, 1982, after Iran had recaptured most of its territory and appeared poised to carry the war into Iraq, and called for an immediate cease-fire and withdrawal to international borders.<sup>65</sup> Iran viewed this resolution as an improvement on UNSCR 479 because it "spoke of establishing a cease-fire and the withdrawal" of forces. But given the fact that the Security Council had remained reticent for nearly two years, and given Iran's existing distrust of the Council based on its actions in the war's first weeks, Iranian leaders concluded that "the main goal of the Security Council in adopting Resolution 514 was preventing Iranian forces from entering Iraqi territory," rather than reaching a just conclusion to the war. They therefore remained intransigent, rejected the proposal, and took the war into Iraq.<sup>66</sup> One of the primary considerations leading to the invasion, states one IRGC volume, "was the international system's lack of cooperation in condemning Iraq's aggression and its disregard of Iran's requests to bring the war to an end."<sup>67</sup>

Further contributing to Iran's distrust of international involvement was the perception that Iraq was effectively using international pressure to isolate Iran and to secure military and political advantages, which aligned with Iran's view of the biased nature of the international order. Baghdad was not, Tehran argues, truly interested in peace or even in a cease-fire. It was only interested in using a cease-fire to maintain its advantage so that it could attack Iran again if it chose and continue the war from an improved position.<sup>68</sup> Just as it had imposed the war on Iran, Iraq was now using diplomacy to "impose new political conditions" on the country.<sup>69</sup> Iranian leaders were accordingly resistant to ending the war because they believed that cease-fires and negotiations would

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65. United Nations Security Council Resolution 514, July 12, 1982.

66. *Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va 'Iraq*, Vol. 20, p. 23; Amir Taheri, "Iran Softens Demands on Iraq," *Times of India*, June 3, 1982; "Iran Rejects Cease-Fire Call, Builds Up Troops," *Los Angeles Times*, July 13, 1982; "Iran Says New Offensive against Iraq Under Way," *Washington Post*, July 14, 1982; Robert C. Toth, "U.S. Offers Support to Nations Threatened by Invasion of Iraq," *Boston Globe*, July 15, 1982; and Geoffrey Godsell, "Resurgent Iran Worries Arabs More Than Lebanon War," *Christian Science Monitor*, July 15, 1982, p. 1.

67. *Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va 'Iraq*, Vol. 20, p. 17.

68. *Ibid.*, pp. 19–20, 24–25, 26–27.

69. *Ibid.*, pp. 25, 27, 31.

place Iran in a dangerous position. This distrust of international political involvement in the war grew deeper as the conflict continued, and reinforced Tehran's thinking that its isolation made it necessary to look out for its own interests. That position and sense of insecurity are summed up well in a prescient publication produced during the war by the Islamic Republic's Supreme Defense Council: "When [Iraqi] leaders . . . are explicitly opting out of observing international principles, how can one trust [them] . . . to ensure the implementation of . . . a peace agreement? . . . [T]he Iranian people have no other alternative but the continuation of [the war] until the aggressor is punished. Has the time not yet arrived for international organizations to cease in their dereliction of duty and unequivocally condemn the aggressor. . . ? No doubt, today's silence . . . will merely embolden [Iraq] to commit another [act of] aggression in the future."<sup>70</sup>

Hence, for Iran the most important issue of the war was the failure of international assemblies and cease-fire proposals to recognize and punish Iraq as the aggressor in the war.<sup>71</sup> Bringing about a change in that situation was the goal of continuing the fight, and eventually Iran's military and diplomatic efforts produced a shift in its favor in the form of UNSCR 598 of July 20, 1987.<sup>72</sup> Specifically, 598 was "the first resolution that set forth the responsibility and determination of the aggressor."<sup>73</sup> Although Iranian leaders regarded this resolution as a step toward resolving the conflict, they asserted that it did not do enough to satisfy Iran's requests. As a result, while Iraq accepted Resolution 598, Iran neither accepted nor rejected it, which reflected its mixed feelings but represented a break from Iran's past policy of rejecting UN Security Council cease-fire proposals outright.<sup>74</sup> According to a contemporary press report, "Iran's chief delegate to the United Nations criticized [this] resolution as . . . 'inherently incapable of addressing the Iran-Iraq conflict,' but he stopped short of rejecting [it]."<sup>75</sup> The goal of Iran's new, equivocal position was to demonstrate its willingness to work with the United Nations to end the war

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70. *The Imposed War: Defence vs. Aggression* (Tehran: Supreme Defence Council of the Islamic Republic of Iran, 1983/87); and Mohammad-Ali Tashkiri, *Islamic View on Imposed Peace* (Tehran: Islamic Propagation Organization, 1986), p. 16.

71. *Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va 'Iraq*, Vol. 43, pp. 23–24.

72. *Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va 'Iraq*, Vol. 47, p. 18.

73. *Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va 'Iraq*, Vol. 50, p. 4; United Nations Security Council Resolution 598; *Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va 'Iraq*, Vol. 47, p. 18; *Atlas-i rahnamai*, Vol. 1, pp. 54, 60; and *Atlas-i rahnamai*, Vol. 2, p. 107.

74. *Atlas-i rahnamai*, Vol. 1, p. 54; *Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va 'Iraq*, Vol. 50, pp. 5–6; and *Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va 'Iraq*, Vol. 51, pp. 45–46.

75. "Iranian Assails Demand," *New York Times*, July 21, 1987; and Marianne Houk, "Iranians Hint at Cooperation with UN on Cease-Fire," *Christian Science Monitor*, July 24, 1987, p. 7.

and to prevent Iraq from appearing as the only party interested in peace, while still indicating its dissatisfaction with certain parts of the resolution.<sup>76</sup>

Iran also withheld its full approval to ensure the adoption of a particular method for the resolution's implementation. Iranian officials insisted, as they had throughout the war, that they would not agree to a cease-fire without the granting of their demands. In the case of UNSCR 598, this meant that the establishment of the "immediate cease-fire" called for in the first paragraph not be implemented before the formation of a commission to identify the aggressor called for in the sixth.<sup>77</sup> Indeed, "Iran did not have very much confidence in international organizations," particularly as a result of "the functioning of the Security Council in the beginning of Iraq's aggression against the Islamic Republic."<sup>78</sup> Iran's insistence during the nuclear negotiations that the sanctions against the country be removed upon the signing of the agreement limiting its nuclear program mirrors its approach to Resolution 598 and is a product of its experience in the Iran-Iraq War.<sup>79</sup>

In addition to the failure to condemn Iraq for initiating the war, Iran's distrust of the international community stems from the failure to denounce Iraq's breach of *jus in bello* in using indiscriminate means and methods of warfare. The West, led by the United States, and the United Nations were reluctant to censure or take action to prevent Iraq's use of chemical weapons, which, Tehran argues, gave Baghdad the freedom to continue its deployment of such armaments.<sup>80</sup> As noted by the IRGC, "[W]hile Iraq had complete freedom to aggressively use this kind of weapon, Iran was prohibited from procuring tools to defend [itself] against such weapons!"<sup>81</sup>

Iran is also critical of the international community for its unwillingness to

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76. *Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va 'Iraq*, Vol. 50, pp. 5–6; and *Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va 'Iraq*, Vol. 51, pp. 45–46.

77. *Atlas-i rahmami*, Vol. 1, p. 60; *Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va 'Iraq*, Vol. 50, p. 5; and *Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va 'Iraq*, Vol. 51, pp. 45–47.

78. *Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va 'Iraq*, Vol. 51, p. 47; *Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va 'Iraq*, Vol. 50, pp. 5–6; and *Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va 'Iraq* [Chronology of the Iran-Iraq War], Vol. 52 (Tehran: Center for War Studies and Research, 2003/04), p. 29.

79. Parisa Hafezi, "Iran's Khamenei Demands All Sanctions End When Nuclear Deal Signed," Reuters, April 9, 2015, <http://www.reuters.com/article/us-iran-nuclear-rouhani-idUSKBN0N00EQ20150409>.

80. *Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va 'Iraq* [Chronology of the Iran-Iraq War], Vol. 37 (Tehran: Center for War Studies and Research, 2004/05), p. 91. Instead, the UN suggested that both sides had used chemical weapons, a position articulated in United Nations Security Council Resolution 582 (February 24, 1986), which "deplored" their use but did not single out Iraq.

81. *Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va 'Iraq*, Vol. 37, p. 92; and Shane Harris and Matthew M. Aid, "Exclusive: CIA Files Prove America Helped Saddam as He Gassed Iran," *Foreign Policy*, August 26, 2013, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2013/08/26/exclusive-cia-files-prove-america-helped-saddam-as-he-gassed-iran/>.



reproach Iraq's strikes on civilian areas during the war.<sup>82</sup> Iranian leaders' efforts to urge the United Nations to "take action to prevent the violation of international laws and commitments" eventually bore fruit in the summer of 1985, when the secretary-general expressed concern regarding Iraq's announcement that the country would resume attacks on Iranian residential areas and called for both sides to cooperate to end the war.<sup>83</sup> Such statements, however, did little to deter Baghdad. According to Iranian sources, the international support for Iraq and the ineffectiveness of international organizations provided incentives for Saddam Hussein to continue such actions.<sup>84</sup>

These wartime experiences led Iran to see international law and institutions as products of a biased international order and strengthened the country's feeling of isolation in a world of hostile powers. As Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, then speaker of the Majlis (Iran's parliament), stated in October 1988: "[T]he [Iran-Iraq W]ar taught us that international laws are only scraps of paper."<sup>85</sup> Likewise, the IRGC's Safavi questioned the role and effectiveness of the nonproliferation regime in enhancing Iran's security, arguing that international treaties and conventions would not protect the country.<sup>86</sup> As a result, Tehran remains dubious about the viability of the positive and negative assurances that enjoin nuclear weapon states that have signed the Nuclear Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) from using or threatening to use nuclear weapons against nonnuclear weapon states and to come to their aid if they are subjected to their use, encapsulated in UNSCRs 984 (1995) and 225 (1968), respectively.<sup>87</sup> Instead, Tehran maintains a fundamentally realist view of its own security in a world of *bellum omnium contra omnes*,<sup>88</sup> in which a country's power and security are tied to its material capabilities.

This narrative of distrust and self-reliance was further reinforced by the sanctions imposed on Iran as part of efforts to curb its nuclear program. As some of these sanctions were put in place by the Security Council—the same entity that neglected the Iranian people during the war—the Islamic Republic views them as another instance of its unfair treatment by the international

82. Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va 'Iraq, Vol. 37, p. 26; Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va 'Iraq, Vol. 47, p. 25; and Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va 'Iraq, Vol. 51, pp. 40–41.

83. Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va 'Iraq, Vol. 37, p. 25.

84. Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va 'Iraq, Vol. 51, p. 39.

85. Anthony H. Cordesman and Adam C. Seitz, *Iranian Weapons of Mass Destruction: The Birth of a Regional Nuclear Arms Race?* (Santa Barbara, Calif.: Praeger Security International, 2009), p. 420.

86. Ray Takeyh, "Nuclear Iran: Has the Train Left the Station?" in James A. Russell, ed., *Proliferation of Weapons of Mass Destruction in the Middle East: Directions and Policy Options in the New Century* (London: Palgrave Macmillan 2006), p. 58.

87. United Nations Security Council Resolution 984, April 11, 1995; and United Nations Security Council Resolution 225, October 14, 1966.

88. Thomas Hobbes, *On the Citizen* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1998), pp. 29–30.

community and as another sign that the world order the Council epitomizes is unjust and untrustworthy.

Therefore, Tehran's nuclear policies are based on the conviction that international laws and institutions such as the UN, IAEA, and NPT are designed not to promote international peace and security but to serve the interests of the great powers at the expense of the rest of the world. As a result, they are inherently biased and unjust. A statement read on behalf of Khamenei at the 2012 Nonaligned Movement summit, held in Tehran, encapsulates these views: "The UN Security Council has an illogical, unjust and completely undemocratic structure and mechanism. This is a flagrant form of dictatorship, which is antiquated and obsolete and whose expiry date has passed. It is through abusing this improper mechanism that America and its accomplices have managed to disguise their bullying as noble concepts and impose it on the world."<sup>89</sup> In other words, Khamenei asserts that Iran cannot and should not put its faith in an unjust world order, and should focus instead on standing on its own feet.

Manouchehr Mottaki, then the Iranian foreign minister, expressed similar positions in an address to the UN Security Council several years prior, drawing on Iran's experience during the Iran-Iraq War to explain his objection to the Council's resolution calling on Iran to limit its nuclear program by halting its enrichment activities: "This is not the first time the Security Council is asking Iran to abandon its rights. When Saddam Hussein invaded Iran 27 years ago, this Council waited [seven] days so that Iraq could occupy 30,000 square kilometers of Iranian territory. Then it . . . asked the two sides to stop the hostilities, without asking the aggressor to withdraw. That is, the Council—then too—effectively asked Iran to suspend . . . its rights . . . [to] its territory. . . , but . . . we did not [agree]."<sup>90</sup>

As the above quotations demonstrate, for Iran, the injustice of the international order is just as apparent in its policing of nuclear issues as it was in its handling of the Iran-Iraq War. Iranian leaders argue that Western powers are using the proliferation concerns surrounding Iran's nuclear program as an excuse to maintain their monopoly on nuclear technology. This, Iranian officials assert, is not surprising given that the West is the untrustworthy protector of an international system that benefits itself exclusively, as was illustrated

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89. "Bayanat dar shanzdahumin ijlas-i saran-i Junbish-i 'Adam-i Ta'ahud" [Remarks in the sixteenth nonaligned movement summit], Khamenei.ir, September 30, 2012, <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=20840>.

90. "Security Council Toughens Sanctions against Iran, Adds Arms Embargo, with Unanimous Adoption of Resolution 1747 (2007)" (New York: United Nations, March 24, 2007), <http://www.un.org/press/en/2007/sc8980.doc.htm>.

clearly by its stance during the war. According to Khamenei's statement to the members of the 2012 Nonaligned Movement summit:

The bitter irony of our time is that the American government, which possesses the deadliest and greatest number of nuclear weapons and other WMD [weapons of mass destruction] and the only perpetrator of their use, today wants to be the flag bearer of opposition to nuclear proliferation! The [United States] and its Western allies have provided the Zionist regime [Israel] with nuclear weapons, creating a great threat for this sensitive region; but [they] . . . do not accept the peaceful use of nuclear energy [by] independent countries and even oppose the production of nuclear fuel for radiomedication and other peaceful, humane purposes with all their might. . . .

I insist that the Islamic Republic is not pursuing nuclear weapons, and will never give up its right to peacefully use nuclear energy. Our people's slogan is "nuclear energy for all, nuclear weapons for no one." We will stand by these statements and we know that breaking the monopoly [held by] a few Western states on the production of nuclear energy, in the context of the NPT, is in the interest of all independent states.<sup>91</sup>

This assertion that world powers profess to be concerned about the proliferation and use of WMD while possessing nuclear arsenals themselves is a key element of Iran's nuclear narrative and is often discussed in parallel with the country's experience during the war.<sup>92</sup> That position became particularly apparent during the nuclear negotiations, when Iranian officials placed a number of issues in the context of the Iran-Iraq War's legacy, including the similarity between the imposition of sanctions and Iraq's 1980 invasion; the use of international law and institutions to pursue the interests and wishes of the major powers, predominantly the United States and its allies, at the expense of the Iranian people; the efforts to collect information and intelligence on Iran's military to use against the country; and the efforts to isolate Iran politically and economically.<sup>93</sup> Javad Zarif, Iran's foreign minister and chief negotiator in the 2013–15 nuclear talks, echoed many of the same motifs in a YouTube video just a few days before the JCPOA was concluded. In the video, he criticized international powers for what he described as their misplaced focus on maintaining the sanctions on Iran: "[My negotiating partners] have seen that eight years of aggression by Saddam Hussein and all his patrons did not bring the Iranian nation—that stood all alone—to its knees. And now, they realize that

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91. "Bayanat dar shanzdahamin ijlas-i saran-i Junbish-i 'Adam-i Ta'ahud."

92. *Ibid.*

93. Mohammad Javad Zarif, "Mohammad Javad Zarif: A Message from Iran," *New York Times*, April 20, 2015, <https://www.nytimes.com/2015/04/20/opinion/mohammad-javad-zarif-a-message-from-iran.html>; and Steve Inskeep, "Iran's Parliament Chief: Nuclear Deal Is 'Acceptable,' U.S. Interpretation Is Not," *NPR*, September 8, 2015, <http://www.npr.org/sections/parallels/2015/09/08/437519714/iran-parliament-chief-nuclear-deal-is-acceptable-u-s-interpretation-is-not>.

the most indiscriminate and unjust economic sanctions against my country have achieved absolutely none of their declared objectives; but instead have harmed innocents.”<sup>94</sup>

Thus, UNSCR 2231,<sup>95</sup> endorsing the comprehensive nuclear deal, was of critical importance to Iran because of the ways in which the resolution, from the Iranian perspective, altered the approach to Iran that the Security Council had adopted during and since the Iran-Iraq War.<sup>96</sup> Accordingly, this resolution could become instrumental in enabling Tehran to overcome the distrust of the Security Council that Iran developed during and as a result of the war. It does so by validating the JCPOA, which includes several provisions that Iran views as finally recognizing its legitimate rights and allowing Iran to become a “normal” member of the international community.

First, the JCPOA acknowledges that Iran undertakes its commitments “voluntarily.” Second, while the JCPOA includes “certain restrictions” on and the scaling back of sensitive nuclear activities such as uranium enrichment and research and development, it also recognizes that Iran will continue those activities.<sup>97</sup> This provision allowed Iranian negotiators to sell the deal at home by highlighting Iran’s ability not only to continue scientific research in nuclear medicine and other areas, but also to work with international institutions in those efforts. Third, though the JCPOA requires Iran to redesign the Arak Heavy Water Reactor, here again the deal’s language allowed the negotiators to frame this stipulation in positive terms as contributing to the modernization of the nuclear program and allowing Iran to work with countries such as the United States and China to build a more advanced reactor.<sup>98</sup>

Finally, the JCPOA provides for a Security Council endorsement of its terms (UNSCR 2231) and for the “terminat[ion of] all provisions of previous UN Security Council resolutions on the Iranian nuclear issue . . . simultaneously with the IAEA-verified implementation of agreed nuclear-related measures.”<sup>99</sup> This last provision was vital to Iran, as its leaders believed that the language in those resolutions made the country “abnormal” within the international community, especially given the use of language stronger than that

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94. Mohammad Javad Zarif, “Iran’s Message: Our Counterparts Must Choose between Agreement and Coercion,” YouTube (video), July 3, 2015, <https://www.youtube.com%2Fwatch%3Fv%3Dcw71HMKDpco&usg=AFQjCNG5h59JGkvHH4a0H2QknUypURL3FQ&sig2=350jtZPLMLQfBzPAKflu4g>.

95. United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231, July 20, 2015.

96. Author interview with Mohammad Javad Zarif, New York, September 2014.

97. “The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action” (Brussels: European Union External Action Service, July 14, 2015), A(1), [http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/statements-eeas/docs/iran\\_agreement/iran\\_joint-comprehensive-plan-of-action\\_en.pdf](http://eeas.europa.eu/archives/docs/statements-eeas/docs/iran_agreement/iran_joint-comprehensive-plan-of-action_en.pdf).

98. “The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action,” B(8).

99. “The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action,” C(18).

of similar resolutions targeting Iraq before 2003.<sup>100</sup> The significance of these changes was encapsulated in Zarif's tweet accompanying the Council's adoption of 2231 on July 20, 2015: "Iran never got a fair treatment from #UNSC in the last 35 years. Expect to see evidence of 'fundamental shift' promised in today's resolution."<sup>101</sup>

Although the JCPOA and UNSCR 2231 have done much to ameliorate Iran's distrust of the United Nations, there is still trust-building to be done, efforts on which the successful implementation of the nuclear deal depend. Of particular concern for Tehran is that some of the steps it pledged to take as part of the nuclear deal, such as the removal of a critical part of the Arak Heavy Water Reactor and the shipment out of the country of most of Iran's stockpile of low-enriched uranium, are essentially irreversible.<sup>102</sup> This irreversibility is crucial for the P5+1, but the snapback option, which provides the P5+1 with leverage over the process by allowing for the reimposition of sanctions, prevented Tehran from enjoying the same degree of irrevocability. Moreover, the United States holds the key to Iran's ability to do business with international entities and to access the international financial system. And given the historic distrust between the two key parties, fueled by the Iran-Iraq War, Tehran did not have confidence that Washington would deliver on its promises to grant Iran sanctions relief. Today, the regime's argument that the United States is the main reason why Iranians are not seeing the tangible benefits of the deal is gaining traction among the population (though Iran's own domestic challenges—its opaque political and economic systems, lack of regulations, corruption, and mismanagement—certainly play a significant role in deterring foreign businesses and investors).

Matters are made more complex by the fact that Tehran complied quickly with many of the agreement's obligations,<sup>103</sup> because it was anxious to begin receiving sanctions relief. But even with the sanctions lifted, economic recovery takes longer to materialize. Further, U.S. domestic politics leading up to the 2016 presidential election and the policies of the Trump administration only exacerbated foreign businesses' reluctance to reenter the Iranian market. After all, if the deal is not set in stone and can be "dismantle[d]" every four years, why should risk-averse businesses bother bearing the costs of investing in a market that can close off as quickly as it re-opened?<sup>104</sup>

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100. Author interviews with senior Iranian officials, Lausanne, Switzerland, March 2015.

101. Mohammad Javad Zarif tweet, July 20, 2015, <https://twitter.com/jzarif/status/623164220536979456>.

102. Author interviews with senior Iranian officials, Vienna, June 2015.

103. "Verification and Monitoring in the Islamic Republic of Iran in Light of the United Nations Security Council Resolution 2231 (2015); (GOV/2016/46)" (Vienna: International Atomic Energy Agency, September 21, 2016), <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/16/09/gov2016-46.pdf>.

104. Morello, "Iran Nuclear Deal Could Collapse under Trump"; Ariane Tabatabai, "Trump Said

The domestic debate surrounding the deal in Washington and the uncertainty it has created further reinforce the lessons of the war: the United States cannot be trusted. To mitigate the negative impact of U.S. politics on the deal's reception in Iran, the Rouhani government has tried to highlight its positive aspects. Iranian leaders argue that the deal allows their country to "blossom" by gaining its rightful place within the community of nations and recovering economically, while also trying to explain the intricacies and slow pace of the process to the Iranian people.<sup>105</sup> But conservatives, including some members of the Revolutionary Guards and Khamenei, have been quick to point out U.S. efforts to damage the deal, including the passage of new congressional legislation to impose additional sanctions on Iran for its other activities—such as its ballistic missile program—or the extension of existing ones—such as the Iran Sanctions Act in late 2016.<sup>106</sup> They also argue that their country has seen "no concrete or distinct impact" from the deal and that the JCPOA was supposed to remove such "unjust sanctions."<sup>107</sup>

Although these sanctions are not a violation of the JCPOA, as Tehran claims, they could impair the deal's implementation by further exacerbating Iran's distrust of international diplomatic processes, especially those involving the United States, and weakening the pro-engagement moderates within the regime. Indeed, if the implementation process remains uncertain and if Tehran does not see the tangible benefits of the deal, it is unlikely to agree to come to the table on other issues in the future. Instead of helping Iran regain a measure of trust in the international system, which the implementation of the deal has provided the first real opportunity to do, the process would then further reinforce the lesson Iranians learned from the Iran-Iraq War that the U.S.-dominated international system cannot assure Iran's security. For the deal to

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He'd Tear Up the Iran Nuclear Deal. Now What?" *Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists*, November 10, 2016, <http://thebulletin.org/trump-said-hed-tear-iran-nuclear-deal-now-what10148>; and Dan Bilefsky, "C.I.A. Chief Warns Donald Trump against Tearing Up Iran Nuclear Deal," *New York Times*, November 30, 2016, [https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/30/world/americas/cia-trump-iran-nuclear-deal.html?\\_r=0](https://www.nytimes.com/2016/11/30/world/americas/cia-trump-iran-nuclear-deal.html?_r=0).

105. "President Hassan Rouhani's 1395 Norouz Message," Rouhani.ir, March, 20, 2016, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=UHNtY8v5vQU>.

106. "Bayanat dar ijtimā'i za'iran va mujaviran-i Haram-i Razavi" [Remarks to an assembly of pilgrims and neighbors at Imam Reza's Shrine], Khamenei.ir, March 20, 2016, <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=32695>; Dan Roberts, "U.S. Imposes New Sanctions on Iranian Firms over Ballistic Missile Test," *Guardian*, March 24, 2016, <https://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/mar/24/us-treasury-new-sanctions-iran-ballistic-missile-test>; and Harry Neidig, "Iran Sanctions Bill Goes into Effect without Obama's Signature," *The Hill*, December 15, 2016, <http://thehill.com/homenews/administration/310508-iran-sanctions-bill-goes-into-law-without-obamas-signature>.

107. "Bayanat dar didar-i aqshar-i mukhtalif-i mardum" [Remarks in meeting with various groups of people], Khamenei.ir, March, 1, 2016, <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=33886>.



be effectively implemented, therefore, the West must recognize and allay Iran's national security concerns stemming from the Iran-Iraq War.

GOING IT ALONE: IRAN'S QUEST FOR SECURITY AND SELF-RELIANCE

The second implication of the Iran-Iraq War for the implementation of the nuclear deal is Tehran's determination to be as self-reliant as possible in matters of security. This aim developed in large part from Iran's view of the international community as unjust and untrustworthy and from its isolation during the war. According to Iranian leaders and sources, one of the most consequential aspects of the war for Iran's national security strategy was the difficulty that Iran had accessing weapons during the conflict. In stark contrast to Iran, Iraq had easy access to weapons and a wealth of financial and logistical aid.<sup>108</sup> This discrepancy had a significant impact on Iran's prosecution of the war, affecting tactical and strategic capabilities and choices and even the war's outcome.<sup>109</sup> The Revolutionary Guards often assert that the influxes of weapons to Iraq came in response to Iranian advances and effectively saved that country from defeat.<sup>110</sup>

In more recent years, Iranian leaders have often described how, with the help of the United States, Saddam Hussein was "armed to the teeth."<sup>111</sup> They also argue that the development of their conventional weapons programs—and their desire to protect themselves from outside domination—developed from the unfavorable position in which they found themselves during the Iran-Iraq War. Almost every article on Iran's military achievements that appears on Fars News, a website affiliated with the IRGC, notes that Iran "launched an arms development program during the 1980–88 Iraqi-imposed war on Iran to compensate for a US weapons embargo." The articles also stress that Iran's efforts to expand its defensive capabilities should not be viewed as a threat to other countries, but are the product of the lessons learned during the war and are intended to prevent another such conflict.<sup>112</sup>

Iran's isolation and inability to defend itself during the war have also

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108. *Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va 'Iraq*, Vol. 4, p. 19; *Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va 'Iraq*, Vol. 33, pp. 27, 37; *Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va 'Iraq*, Vol. 47, pp. 31–33, 37; and *Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va 'Iraq*, Vol. 51, pp. 40, 49–51.

109. *Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va 'Iraq*, Vol. 4, p. 609; *Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va 'Iraq*, Vol. 33, p. 21; *Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va 'Iraq*, Vol. 37, p. 26; *Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va 'Iraq*, Vol. 43, p. 29; *Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va 'Iraq*, Vol. 51, p. 42; and *Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va 'Iraq*, Vol. 52, pp. 18, 23.

110. *Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va 'Iraq*, Vol. 1, p. 17; *Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va 'Iraq*, Vol. 20, p. 33; and *Ruzshumar-i Jang-i Iran va 'Iraq*, Vol. 4, p. 608.

111. "Niru'ha-yi musallah pasdar-i marz'ha-yi hastand" [The armed forces are the guardian of the borders], Fars News, May 24, 2011, <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=9003030720>.

112. "IRGC Navy Commander: U.S. Warships Fearful of Iran's Speed Boats," Fars News, December 27, 2015, <http://en.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13941006001076>.

driven its nuclear policies and view of its nuclear program as an important tool in making Iran self-sufficient. In the midst of the Iran-Iraq War, Iranian leaders decided to reverse the decision to abandon the nuclear program made during the revolution. Some officials, including Rafsanjani, argued that the country should become self-reliant in defense and that possessing WMD capabilities would further that goal. Although self-reliance had been part of the early revolutionary discourse, it became increasingly important when the Iran-Iraq War reinforced the view that Iran could not rely on anyone to safeguard its security.

Although Tehran's stance on the need to be self-reliant has been clear throughout the Islamic Republic's history, its statements on weapons of mass destruction have been inconsistent. On the one hand, many Iranian leaders have applied the idea of self-reliance broadly to all aspects of defense and technology, arguing during the 1980s that Iran should be able to defend itself without having to rely on other parties, with the ongoing experiences of the war and isolation informing their stance. Some asserted that the country should go as far as developing chemical and nuclear weapons. In their view, Iraq's use of chemical weapons against Iran and Baghdad's progress toward a nuclear capability added to the pressing need to develop a deterrent.<sup>113</sup> In 1988, shortly after the war ended, Rafsanjani stated that "chemical bombs and biological weapons are the poor man's atomic bombs and can easily be produced. We should at least consider them for our defense."<sup>114</sup> He later changed his position, albeit without ever acknowledging that he had made the earlier statement. In 1997, in response to the question "Are you after the bomb," Rafsanjani claimed, "Definitely not. We despise these weapons," and added, "We are not going after the atomic bomb, we are not after biological weapons, we will not pursue chemical weapons."<sup>115</sup> Likewise, in 2010, he declared that "the need for defense and deterrence" had prompted Iran's "unfortunate" decision to consider acquiring WMD, which would have only been harmful to the nation.<sup>116</sup>

Similar ambivalence stemming from the need for security, on the one hand, and the aversion to employing such destructive tactics, on the other, informed Iran's decision during the war to develop but not use chemical weap-

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113. Dan Reiter, "Preventive Attacks against Nuclear Programs and the 'Success' at Osirak," *Non-proliferation Review*, Vol. 12, No. 2 (July 2005), pp. 355-371, doi:10.1080/10736700500379008.

114. W. Seth Carus, "The Poor Man's Atomic Bomb? Biological Weapons in the Middle East," Policy Papers No. 23 (Washington, D.C.: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 1991), p. 68.

115. Mike Wallace, interview with Ali-Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, *60 Minutes*, CBS, March 8, 1997.

116. "Hashemi Rafsanjani: Mubarizih ba silah'ha-yi shimiyyai va mikrubi, bih 'amal ast va nah bih sukhanrani" [Hashemi Rafsanjani: Combat chemical and biological weapons with action, not speeches], JARAS (news agency), June 28, 2010, <http://www.rahesabz.net/story/18356/>.

ons.<sup>117</sup> As noted by Iranian Foreign Ministry Director General Mohammad Alborzi at the 1997 Conference of the States Parties to the Chemical Weapons Convention (CWC):

Faced at the time [of the Iran-Iraq War] with continued and expanding use of chemical weapons against our soldiers and civilians alike, and persistent muteness and inaction on the part of the United Nations Security Council, Iran was left with no alternative but to seek an effective means of deterrence in the hope that it could halt or at least limit the barrage of these barbarous weapons on its people. This particularly became an absolute necessity when threats were made of chemical bombardment of the cities in the final stages of the conflict, and some indeed were carried out against civilian centers as reported by United Nations investigating missions.

In this context, the decision was made that, on a strictly limited scale, capability should be developed to challenge the imminent threat particularly against the civilian populated centers. We declared, at the time, that Iran had chemical weapons capability, while maintaining the policy not to resort to these weapons and [to] rely on diplomacy as the sole mechanism to stop their use by its adversary.

The war ended soon after. Following the establishment of [the] ceasefire, the decision to develop chemical weapons capabilities was reversed and the process was terminated. It was reiterated consequently that Iran would not seek or produce chemical weapons and would accelerate its efforts to ensure [the] early conclusion of a comprehensive and total ban under the CWC. This has continued to be my government's policy ever since.<sup>118</sup>

According to Iran's leaders, its proven restraint vis-à-vis chemical weapons serves as a precedent for nuclear weapons, too: it shows its commitment to the Shi'i ethical and legal principles prohibiting the use of weapons of mass destruction; it also demonstrates that if Iran refrained from using such weapons when it was being attacked by them, it would certainly refrain from using them in other situations.

Yet, according to the founder of Iran's nuclear program, Akbar Etemad, Tehran's policies were long shaped by a strategy of hedging after "Rafsanjani made the decision to resume the [nuclear] program" during the Iran-Iraq War.<sup>119</sup> Etemad, whom the Islamic Republic asked to return to Iran and resume work on the nuclear program in the 1980s but who declined, noted that, after

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117. Author telephone interview with Mohsen Kadivar, February 2014; and "Report of the Organisation on the Implementation of the Convention (January 1–December 31, 1998), C-IV/5," Organisation for the Prohibition of Chemical Weapons Conference of the States Parties, Fourth Session, June 28–July 2, 1999, para. 6, <https://www.opcw.org/?id=715>.

118. "The CBW Conventions Bulletin—A Draft Convention to Prohibit Biological and Chemical Weapons under International Criminal Law," *Quarterly Journal of the Harvard Sussex Program on CBW Armament and Arms Limitation*, December 1998, p. 43.

119. Author interview with Etemad.

deciding to resume the program, Tehran focused on one particular component of nuclear technology—the front end of the fuel cycle, or enrichment. Iran has since argued that its enrichment program is geared toward meeting its “practical needs” to fuel the Bushehr reactor, part of a commercial nuclear power plant. Although Russia agreed to provide the fuel for Bushehr until 2021, Tehran argues that Moscow is not a reliable partner and has been known to manipulate energy supplies for political reasons. As is the case with its national security more generally, Iran asserts that it cannot rely on Russia or any other country to provide for the country’s needs and that it should instead be self-reliant.<sup>120</sup> It was for that reason, according to Etemad, that Iran “went and bought centrifuges from Pakistan, and tried to enrich uranium. From the beginning, [Iran’s officials] wanted to have all the options.”<sup>121</sup>

Thus, in resuming the nuclear program, the Iranian leadership sought to build an indigenous nuclear fuel cycle before developing a functioning nuclear infrastructure. According to Iranian officials, and as discussed previously, this emphasis on an indigenous enrichment program is a response to the country’s quest for self-reliance in technology. However, the fact that Tehran worked on an enrichment capacity, which would allow it to develop a nuclear weapon, indicates that it was indeed pursuing self-reliance in defense, too. The IAEA has confirmed U.S. intelligence reports’ findings that Tehran’s nuclear program since the 1990s can be divided into three stages: a “coordinated” nuclear weapons program, which ended in 2003; “feasibility and scientific studies, and the acquisition of certain relevant technical competences and capabilities,” between 2003 and 2009; and the period starting in 2009, in which there have been no “credible indications of activities in Iran relevant to the development of a nuclear explosive device.”<sup>122</sup>

Domestic uranium enrichment has subsequently become a highly politicized issue in Iran. In the negotiations over its nuclear program, Tehran accepted limitations on its activities, but presented the halting of all enrichment as a red line. This contentious issue was at the heart of the failure of the process undertaken by world powers and Iran in 2003–05, when the U.S. require-

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120. Author interview with Soltanieh; and author interview with Zarif.

121. Author interview with Etemad.

122. IAEA Board of Governors, “Final Assessment on Past and Present Outstanding Issues regarding Iran’s Nuclear Programme,” GOV/2015/68 (Vienna: IAEA, December 2, 2015), <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/gov-2015-68.pdf>; Bruno Tertrais, *The Black Market for the Bomb: Investigation on Nuclear Proliferation* (Paris: Buchet/Chastel, 2009), pp. 14, 67; David Albright and Corey Hinderstein, “Unraveling A.Q. Khan and Future Proliferation Networks,” *Washington Quarterly*, Vol. 28, No. 2 (Spring 2005), p. 5; and David Albright and Corey Hinderstein, “The A.Q. Khan Illicit Nuclear Trade Network and Implications for Non-Proliferation Efforts,” in James A. Russell and James J. Wirtz, eds., *Globalization and WMD Proliferation: Terrorism, Transnational Networks, and International Security* (London: Routledge, 2008), p. 50.

ment for zero enrichment drove Iran away from the table.<sup>123</sup> When the negotiations resumed a few years later and became public in 2013, it was with the recognition that zero enrichment would not be a possibility. This change reflects an understanding that enrichment in Iran is viewed not purely as a technical issue but as one of sovereignty and independence.

The indigenous fuel cycle remains the flagship element of Iran's narrative of scientific and technological self-reliance. This fact is often reiterated by Iranian officials, who use it to rally the nation around the flag, especially under the pressure of backbreaking sanctions. They argue that while the West has tried to isolate Iranians politically and economically and to stop their scientific and technological progress, the nation has nonetheless succeeded in pushing forward. This position is illustrated in the following statement made by Ayatollah Khamenei in 2012: "In the field of technology—petro-chemistry, petroleum, steel, defense production and industry—the progress is amazing. . . . In high tech, which is talked about in the world with pride, [the West] has been forced, despite all the animosity, to say that Iran is one of [a few] countries that has mastered the nuclear fuel cycle. This is not a small thing."<sup>124</sup> Tehran insists that the Iranian people remain undefeated by "illegal" and "unethical" sanctions, just as they were undefeated by Iraq and its allies during the "imposed war." As noted by Khamenei, Iran has refused to let such obstacles impede its technological and nuclear advancement:

From the womb of all sorts of sanctions, which have been forced upon the country for many years, . . . [f]rom the womb of all the concentrated efforts [Iran's enemies] have made, all of a sudden the ability to enrich uranium—which is [kept as a] monopoly [for] the great powers and which [they believe] should not go anywhere without their authorization—happens in this country. This is proof that the enemy has not succeeded, its sanctions are not effective, [and that] its threat is also ineffective. Why? Because this nation has kept its firm determination, which is based on its deep faith, and moves on and goes forward and they cannot [stop it].<sup>125</sup>

The idea of self-reliance, one of the key lessons of the Iran-Iraq War, has thus become the cornerstone of Tehran's nuclear narrative and has guided specific nuclear policies. For example, when asked why Iran would not convert the heavy water reactor in Arak to a light water reactor, thus eliminating it as a

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123. Author interview with Zarif.

124. Majlis Research Center, "Muz'i-i Rahbar-i Mu'azzam-i Inqilab dar barih-i tahrir'ha va diplomasi-i hastih'i Jumhuri-i Islami-i Iran" [The stance of the Supreme Leader of the Revolution on sanctions and the Islamic Republic of Iran's nuclear diplomacy] (Tehran: Majlis Research Center, 2012), p. 8.

125. *Ibid.*, pp. 10–11.

proliferation concern, Foreign Minister Zarif invoked self-reliance, noting that Iran does not have indigenous light-water technology. Conversion, he argued, would make Iran dependent on other powers, and “we can’t depend on others.” As a result, it was agreed that as part of the JCPOA Iran would redesign the reactor instead of converting it.<sup>126</sup> This stance was popular in Iran, where many believe that their country needs and deserves to be able to become self-reliant in areas relating to technology and energy.<sup>127</sup> The experience of the war is often invoked to explain this perceived need to develop indigenous technology.<sup>128</sup> As a result, being able to frame the JCPOA and its implementation in the context of Iran’s quest for self-reliance is key to its success.

As noted, since the JCPOA was concluded, some in the political and security establishments and broader population in Iran have expressed their discontent with the implementation of the deal. Nuclear-related sanctions have been lifted but economic recovery has yet to materialize. The lack of tangible benefits, Iranian leaders argue, further proves that the United States cannot be trusted and that Iran must stand on its own two feet, as it did during the Iran-Iraq War. The slow pace of economic recovery is also likely to make Iran’s “resistance economy” of continued relevance in the post-JCPOA era. In Khamenei’s words, a resistance economy is “an economy that is resilient,” that is invulnerable to sanctions and fluctuations in international markets, and that can withstand U.S. “provocations.”<sup>129</sup> Although it is built specifically around sanctions resulting from the nuclear crisis, the resistance-economy narrative borrows language and themes from the lessons learned in the Iran-Iraq War.

Iran thus remains determined to maintain as much independence and self-sufficiency as possible, so that it can safeguard its own security regardless of where world powers align politically or in the event of another conflict. This does not mean that Iran would not welcome assistance in maintaining and growing a civilian nuclear program, but that its narrative of self-reliance cannot be disregarded. Hence, for the JCPOA to be successful and sustainable over the course of its implementation, and its results viable beyond the deal itself, the P5+1 and Iran need to reconcile the country’s practical needs and its insistence upon self-reliance. If the international community can effectively guarantee that Iran’s practical needs will be met and not be employed as a

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126. Author interview with Zarif.

127. Author interviews with several dozen Iranian private citizens in Tehran and the provinces of Kurdistan, Eastern Azerbaijan, and Khorasan Razavi, 2008–10, 2014.

128. *Ibid.*; and author interviews with Iranian officials, Vienna, Geneva, and New York, 2013–15.

129. “Bayanat dar didar-i jama’i az karafarinan-i sarasar-i kishvar” [Remarks in meeting with a group of entrepreneurs from across the country], Khamenei.ir, September 10, 2010, <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=10077>.



bargaining chip, Iranian leaders can decrease the rationale behind the country's insistence upon self-reliance.

### *Conclusion*

Scholars assessing Iran's nuclear ambitions have long argued that the ideology and rhetoric of the Islamic Revolution illustrate that Iran is an irrational actor, driven by a revolutionary Islamic ideology, that would use nuclear weapons to annihilate Israel and plunge the Middle East into a cycle of death and destruction if given the chance. Yet, in assessing Tehran's intent and interests, analysts have failed to critically consider the crucial impact of the Iran-Iraq War on Iranian nuclear and security decisionmaking, which cannot be underestimated. The war has forged the Islamic Republic's image of the international community and reinforced the idea that the country must be self-reliant in all spheres, especially in matters of defense. In fact, a key driver behind Iran's return to the negotiating table was to avoid the looming threat of another interstate war. When the negotiations resumed in 2012, observers argued that it was a matter of "when" not "if" Israel would attack Iran's nuclear facilities, with the United States being inevitably dragged into the conflict. The last time Iran was at war with another state was the Iran-Iraq War. The prospect of another such war, this time with much more powerful adversaries, led Iran to choose negotiations over escalation.

The Islamic Republic has framed the nuclear crisis as the continuation of efforts by the West to undermine and weaken Iran, efforts that began with the Iran-Iraq War. The war failed to stop Iran's progress, Iranian leaders argue, and was perpetuated by Western powers as the nuclear crisis in the form of the sanctions regime, and threats of war, sabotage, and assassinations. Hence, Iran presents international efforts to limit its nuclear program as another form of warfare, intended to undermine the Islamic Republic. In the words of President Rouhani: "The enemy could not achieve its goals in the eight-year Imposed [Iran-Iraq] War. . . . [But after the war], under the pretext of the nuclear issue, it imposed a new economic war and sanctions against our nation. Our people have persisted and declare to the world that we are not considering producing weapons of mass destruction, that we only [pursue] development and scientific progress and the realization of our rights, and that we will not bow down to the pressure of the West and the superpowers."<sup>130</sup>

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130. "Ra'is-i jumhuri dar marasim-i rizhah-'i niru'ha-yi mussalah bih munasibat-i aghaz-i Haftih-'i Difa'i Muqaddas" [The president in the armed forces' march on the occasion of the beginning of the Sacred Defense Week], Rouhani.ir, September 22, 2014, <http://president.ir/fa/81065>.

For the nuclear deal to be sustainable and its implementation to proceed successfully, the West must understand Iran's security concerns and threat perceptions stemming from the Iran-Iraq War. Iran's view of its security is encapsulated in defensive realist international relations theory, which sees states as striving for survival and their national security thinking as plagued by the security dilemma. The war's legacy drives Iranian decisionmakers and the public alike, and a failure to understand and appreciate this fact can lead to missteps with the potential to derail the implementation process.