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## The Impact of Iranian Political Elites' Perception and Misperception on Iran-U.S. Relations (2012-2020)

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### ABSTRACT

Relations between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States have historically oscillated between limited cooperation and pronounced antagonism. While structural and geopolitical explanations for this volatility are abundant, the perceptual frameworks of Iranian political elites remain insufficiently explored. Employing Robert Jervis's theory of perception and misperception, this article investigates how elite Iranian discourse represented the United States between 2012 and 2020. Drawing on a qualitative content analysis of 147 purposively selected speeches, interviews, and policy documents from presidential, ministerial, and parliamentary sources, the study identifies three major perceptual shifts. Following the United States' unilateral withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), Washington was increasingly depicted as an existential threat engaging in "economic terrorism." Defensive posturing was re-legitimized through historical analogies of betrayal and narratives of ontological insecurity, while regional security discourse emphasized strategic autonomy and resistance. The findings illustrate how cognitive biases—particularly confirmation bias—shape elite interpretations of U.S. actions, reinforcing threat perceptions and perpetuating mutual mistrust. The article argues that addressing these entrenched perceptual dynamics is essential for the success of any future diplomatic engagement.

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## Introduction

The historical evolution of Iran-United States relations is marked by a profound interplay of cooperative overtures and deep-seated hostilities, primarily shaped by shifting geopolitical imperatives, ideological divergences, and key historical turning points. Although the two nations established diplomatic ties as early as the mid-19<sup>th</sup> century, their relationship acquired heightened strategic significance during the Cold War era, particularly under the Pahlavi monarchy (1925-1979), which positioned Iran as a linchpin of U.S. policy in the Middle East (West Asia). Focal events—such as the 1953 CIA-engineered coup against Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh, the 1979 Iranian Revolution and subsequent hostage crisis, and U.S. support for Iraq throughout the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988)—deepened mutual suspicion and entrenched antagonistic attitudes (Abrahamian, 2008). From the Iranian perspective, these episodes indicate continual external interference, reinforcing a longstanding scepticism regarding American intentions. Conversely, American policy-makers often categorise Iran as a revisionist force undermining regional stability, thereby rationalising the imposition of sanctions, diplomatic isolation, and military deterrence measures (Maleki & Tirman, 2014).

Although prior scholarship offers substantial insights into the structural and geopolitical dimensions of Iran-U.S. relations (Ansari, 2006; Katzman, 2018), it frequently overlooks the pivotal influence of cognitive and psychological factors on elite-level foreign policy formation. Abbas Maleki and J. Tirman's work provide a compelling overview of how historical narratives and identity-based misperceptions exacerbate tensions between Iran and the United States. Nevertheless, their examination remains largely confined to broad misperceptions and identity constructs, without systematically tracing how Iranian elites conceptualise or respond to discrete security threats. Moreover, their research concludes before the consequential developments sparked by the JCPOA<sup>1</sup> in 2015. Consequently, critical geopolitical shifts—including the Trump administration's 2018 withdrawal from the JCPOA, the expansive "maximum pressure" campaign, and acute confrontations such as the targeted assassination of General Qasem Soleimani and Iran's reprisals at the Ain al-Assad airbase in 2020—lie beyond the scope of their

Analysis. These later events substantially recalibrated Iranian elite perceptions of U.S. objectives, credibility, and strategic stance, underscoring the need for an explicit focus on security perceptions within a cognitive analytical framework.

In this context, the present study employs a cognitive-psychological lens, informed primarily by Robert Jervis's foundational contributions to perception and misperception (Jervis, 1976), and enriched by the concept of ontological security (Steele, 2008b), to systematically interrogate how Iranian political elites interpreted U.S. foreign policy between 2012 and 2020. Building on Maleki and Tirman's assertion that repeated external pressures and perceived affronts to national dignity amplify Iranian elites' rigidity towards the United States, this research highlights the role of entrenched identity commitments in constraining adaptive responses to global events. By anchoring political self-definition within a defensive posture, Iranian elites often construe American policy initiatives through a prism of strategic distrust, thereby perpetuating cycles of hostility. The abrupt U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA heightened suspicions regarding American reliability, weakening moderate factions advocating diplomatic outreach and fortifying hardline narratives that characterise the United States as hostile, erratic, and strategically duplicitous.

Guided by the central research question—*How have the security perceptions held by Iranian political elites impacted the course of U.S.-Iran relations during the period from 2012 to 2020?*—The investigation adopts qualitative content analysis to examine Per- Persian-

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1. Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action

language materials, including elite speeches, policy papers, high-level interviews, and official statements. The study's methodological procedure involves rigorous coding and thematic categorisation across dimensions such as threat perception, betrayal narratives, strategic distrust, historical analogies, and identity preservation, thereby mapping the evolution of elite perceptions in key geopolitical episodes. While the principal emphasis remains on U.S.-Iran relations, the analysis briefly acknowledges how Iran's strategic engagements with major global powers (e.g., Russia and China) can shape Iranian elites' assessments of American intentions. It further considers the reciprocal dynamic by which American policymaking, likewise influenced by perceptions of Iran, perpetuates this self-reinforcing cycle of mistrust.

Situated at the intersection of political psychology and foreign-policy analysis, this study foregrounds the cognitive and ontological mechanisms that underpin Iranian elite decision-making in the context of U.S.-Iran relations. While mainstream international-relations scholarship tends to emphasise material capabilities and structural pressures (Buzan et al., 2012), it often overlooks how entrenched perceptions, identity needs, and interpretive biases shape strategic behaviour. A more complex understanding of these dynamics is essential for tracing persistent hostility and designing effective diplomatic interventions. To this end, the study addresses the following research question: "*How do Iranian political elites' perceptions and misperceptions of the United States shape foreign-policy discourse between 2012 and 2020?*" It advances two testable hypotheses:

**H1:** Discourse that frames the United States as an existential threat correlates positively with the securitisation of policy rhetoric.

**H2:** Invocations of historical betrayal amplify confirmation bias, prompting elites to reinterpret ambiguous U.S. gestures as hostile.

Problematically, existing scholarship has yet to account for how these cognitive distortions evolve over time or become institutionalised in elite political discourse. Much of the literature assumes that elite distrust in Iran is either reactive or static, rather than a dynamic, strategic posture. This study reframes the persistence of conflict not as a failure of diplomacy, but as a product of entrenched interpretive frameworks that convert conciliatory signals into threat-consistent narratives. In contrast to earlier works such as Maleki and Tirman, which broadly acknowledge misperceptions but stop short of tracing their empirical formation post-JCPOA, this study applies a dual-theoretical lens—Robert Jervis's cognitive theory and ontological security—to a systematically coded corpus of 147 original-language elite statements from 2012 to 2020. In doing so, it contributes both empirically and conceptually to the literature on adversarial dyads and perception-driven foreign-policy inertia.

## Conceptual Framework

### Cognitive Theory

Robert Jervis's seminal framework in international relations offers essential insights into how cognitive constraints shape elite interpretations of international events, especially under conditions marked by strategic complexity, ambiguous intent, and information saturation. In his foundational 1976 work, *Perception and Misperception in International Politics*, Jervis asserts that political actors rarely perceive global affairs as they objectively are. Instead, their interpretations are filtered through intricate cognitive frameworks formed by accumulated historical experiences, ideological orientations, institutional knowledge, and expectations rooted in strategic memory and identity. A cornerstone of Jervis's model is the distinction between two conceptual environments: the "psychological milieu",—a decision-maker's subjective internal world of perceptions, and the "operational milieu," referring to the objective, material realities of global politics. According to Jervis, misalignment between these milieus often produces systematic and predictable misperceptions. These cognitive distortions are not

merely incidental but endemic to the decision-making process, particularly under uncertainty, and can decisively alter how threats and opportunities are assessed. Such distortions frequently escalate tensions, generate missed diplomatic openings, and entrench adversarial stances. Jervis identifies several key cognitive biases that structure misperception. Among the most prominent is *confirmation bias*—the tendency to interpret information in ways that reinforce pre-existing beliefs while disregarding contradictory evidence. Another powerful heuristic is the use of *historical analogies*, whereby actors draw superficial comparisons between current and past events, often misjudging the contextual nuances. This approach can lead to inappropriate strategic responses based on flawed assumptions. Jervis also emphasises the influence of *cognitive consistency*, which drives policymakers to maintain coherence among their beliefs and discourages revision of established assumptions—even in the face of new or disconfirming data (Jervis, 1976). When applied to the case of Iran-U.S. relations, these dynamics are readily observable. Iranian elites often frame their perceptions of the United States through the lens of traumatic historical episodes, such as the 1953 CIA-backed coup against Prime Minister Mossadegh and American support for Saddam during the Iran-Iraq War. These formative experiences have constructed a durable cognitive schema in which U.S. actions are assumed to conceal hostile or imperialist intentions (Maleki & Tirman, 2014). Consequently, even overtures of diplomacy or policy moderation from Washington are met with deep scepticism, interpreted as strategic deception or covert subversion. These perceptual filters reinforce a cycle of distrust, undermining confidence-building measures and contributing to the persistence of adversarial bilateral dynamics. Jervis's cognitive theory thus offers a critical analytical lens for understanding the psychology of international decision-making, particularly in conflict-prone dyads such as Iran and the United States. It elucidates how deep-seated perceptions—rooted in ideology, historical memory, and identity—interact with cognitive heuristics to produce enduring misalignments in strategic interpretation (Levy, 1983; Stein, 1982; White, 1984b). Recognising these psychological undercurrents is essential for explaining the recurrent miscalculations, escalatory spirals, and diplomatic impasses that have characterised Iran-U.S. relations from the Cold War era to the present.

### Security Perception

While Jervis's cognitive theory explains the mechanics of misperception, the concept of security perception further clarifies why elites frame specific actors as threats. Security perception involves the interpretive processes through which decision-makers assess threat severity, intent, and urgency—often influenced by historical memory, strategic culture, and ideological predispositions (Buzan et al., 1998b). In Iran's context, these perceptions are profoundly shaped by collective experiences. Most notably, events such as the 1953 coup, the Iran-Iraq War, and sustained external pressures from the United States have generated a deeply ingrained interpretive frame that casts the

U.S. as a predatory and expansionist power, a perception that has been further reinforced over the last two decades through episodes like the imposition of crippling economic sanctions, the unilateral U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018, and the aggressive maximum pressure campaign of the Trump administration. Even actions that may appear conciliatory are filtered through a hardened lens of scepticism, reinforcing rather than alleviating existing hostilities.

This threat construction is not only cognitive but also political and identity-based. Through securitisation, Iranian elites often employ rhetorical tools, such as labelling the U.S. as the “*Great Satan*”—to elevate political tensions into existential struggles (Buzan et al., 1998a). Such securitised narratives help generate epistemological security—the preservation of a dominant ideological worldview that resists external contestation. By maintaining a stable

interpretive framework rooted in historical grievance and resistance, elites ensure consistency in strategic decision-making and avoid dissonance that might emerge from engaging with adversaries on cooperative terms. Reformist figures like M.J. Zarif sought to challenge the entrenched interpretive frame during the JCPOA negotiations by advocating for a more open approach. However, hardliners perceived even modest diplomatic openings as existential threats to the regime's enduring identity-ty and ideological foundations. The U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018 only intensified these concerns, serving as a potent reminder that external pressures could destabilise the core self-conception of the regime. This event reinforced the conviction that engagement with external forces risked compromising the regime's fundamental values and sense of continuity, thereby underscoring the imperative to safeguard its ontological security (Mitzen, 2006a; Steele, 2008b).

In sum, Iran's security perception operates at multiple levels: as a product of cognitive limitations, as a securitised political narrative, and as a defence of national identity and interpretive sovereignty. This layered perception structure not only explains Iran's foreign policy rigidity but also highlights the difficulty of altering threat narratives in the absence of radical shifts in both discourse and structural incentives.

### **Application to Iran-U.S. Relations**

Within Iran-U.S. relations, cognitive biases, security perceptions, and identity imperatives interact to shape a distinctive strategic outlook. Over decades, the Iranian leadership's mental schema, formed by experiences, for instance, the maximum pressure campaign under the Trump administration, reinforced the notion that Washington seeks unilateral capitulation rather than equitable negotiation. At the same time, Iran's desire to maintain a stable self-identity further strengthens the perception of the U.S. as a perpetual antagonist, aligning external "*threat*" narratives with domestic political legitimacy. This synergy between cognitive biases and securitised discourse helps explain why even fleeting diplomatic openings fail to yield enduring transformation. A shift toward a less confrontational narrative might be seen domestically as relinquishing core revolutionary ideals, thereby jeopardising Iran's foundational ethos. A qualitative content analysis of speeches, interviews, and policy documents consistently identifies pervasive themes of mistrust, often rooted in historical grievances. During negotiations, certain elites interpreted U.S. concessions as strategic manoeuvres designed to undermine Iran's position, thereby illustrating Jervis's argument that perceptions frequently diverge from objective realities. In combination, these cognitive and identity dynamics—further amplified through securitisation processes—serve to validate defiant policies while limiting the potential for substantive cooperation.

By synthesising cognitive misperception theory (Jervis; Levy; Stein; White), security perception frameworks (Buzan et al., 1998a), and ontological security (Steele, 2008b), this integrated approach illuminates the multifaceted nature of Iranian foreign policy behaviour vis-à-vis the United States (see Table 1). Cognitive biases clarify the mechanistic how of misperception, security perception explains why threat narratives gain traction, and identity-driven imperatives reveal why Tehran's elite may resist changing these narratives, despite evolving geopolitical realities. In practice, these perspectives help decipher Iran's enduring suspicion toward even limited American outreach, as well as the United States' ingrained view of Iran as a revisionist actor. The result is a recurrent cycle of hostility, in which each side's actions are predisposed to be read in the worst possible light. This integrated theoretical framework thus sets the stage for the empirical investigation that follows, wherein the qualitative content analysis of elite discourse aims to uncover the precise mechanisms by which cognitive, security, and identity dynamics coalesce to perpetuate longstanding conflict in Iran-U.S. relations.

Table 1. Conceptual Mapping of Cognitive Constructs

Conceptual construct	Operational indicator in data	Example code
Confirmation bias	Reinterpretation of conciliatory signals as deception	“U.S. promises are <i>tactical ruse</i> ”
Ontological insecurity	References to identity, humiliation, survival	“Revolution must <b>never</b> capitulate”
Threat perception	Lexicon of danger (terrorism, regime-change)	“Economic <b>warfare</b> against our nation”
Securitisation move	Shifting civilian topics into defence register	JCPOA → “national security file”

## Methodology

This study employs qualitative content analysis as the principal methodological instrument to examine how Iranian political elites perceive—and occasionally misperceive—the foreign policy of the United States. Unlike quantitative approaches that frequently reduce textual content to numerical codes, QCA prioritises contextual richness, thematic depth, and interpretive nuance (Krippendorff, 1980; Neuendorf, 2002). By systematically analysing speeches, official documents, policy statements, and elite interviews, the research uncovers the cognitive and security-related rationales that inform Iran’s often adversarial stance toward the United States. This qualitative lens also addresses concerns regarding methodological rigour by illustrating precisely how textual subtleties—particularly in elite discourse—can be captured and interpreted with fidelity.

## Rationale and Theoretical Alignment

Qualitative content analysis extends beyond simple measurements of word frequency, highlighting how textual construction, rhetorical strategies, and semantic patterns reveal latent ideological, historical, and cognitive underpinnings (Elo et al., 2014; Neuendorf, 2017). Such an orientation aligns neatly with Jervis’s cognitive theory, which posits that decision-makers operate within subjective “*psychological milieus*” liable to deviate significantly from the objective domain of international politics (Jervis, 1976). Systematically identifying recurring discursive motifs—such as historical grievances, entrenched distrust, or culturally embedded narratives—allows researchers to discern how Iranian elites interpret American activities through the prism of longstanding hostility, strategic culture, and sociopolitical imperatives (Holsti, 1968; Parsons, 2023). The QCA offers several methodological strengths that are especially pertinent when exploring elite political discourse:

- **Contextual Sensitivity:** QCA situates textual data within broader cultural, temporal, and political contexts, an approach critical to the nuanced realm of Iran-U.S. relations, where rhetorical choices often carry distinct ideological weight (Vaismoradi et al., 2013).
- **Inductive–Deductive Flexibility:** By integrating emergent themes from the data with established theoretical concepts, such as media effects and critical discourse analysis, QCA balances adherence to extant paradigms with receptivity to novel insights (Williams & Moser, 2019).
- **Iterative Process:** Researchers continually re-read and re-code the material, refining analytical categories as new perspectives arise. This cyclical engagement ensures that the ultimate interpretations remain firmly anchored in the textual evidence (Yaghi, 2018).
- **Triangulation:** QCA draws on multiple data sources—from speeches and interviews to policy archives and media commentary—thereby facilitating cross-verification. Such comprehensive sourcing is crucial for analysing politicised discourse, where official rhetoric may be shaped to bolster domestic legitimacy or project certain strategic narratives (Graneheim et al., 2017).

These attributes render QCA an adaptable, in-depth approach for investigating the ideological, strategic, and psychological layers embedded in elite communication.

## Research Design

This study conducts a systematic and longitudinal examination of political discourse articulated by key Iranian elites—including the President, Foreign Minister, Defence Ministers, and the Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council—over the period 2012 to 2020. This time frame encapsulates pivotal moments in U.S.-Iran relations, most notably the negotiation and adoption of the JCPOA and its eventual dissolution following the U.S. withdrawal in 2018. These events serve as critical junctures that reveal whether, and how, elite perceptions of the United States evolved, and in what ways such perceptions shaped Iran's strategic responses and security posture. To capture these discursive dynamics, the research adopts a purposive sampling strategy aimed at gathering data directly relevant to Iran's framing of U.S. foreign policy. Sources include full transcripts of speeches, ministerial statements, press briefings, interviews, and policy documents disseminated across various official and semi-official platforms. In particular, data was retrieved from:

- Official Government Portals, which offer unfiltered access to formal addresses and high-level declarations;
- Media Outlets, which provide insight into how elite narratives are tailored for domestic and international audiences;
- Policy Archives and Parliamentary Records which articulate institutional viewpoints and legislative positioning.

This multi-source, multi-channel approach mitigates the risks associated with overreliance on any single media type, while offering a balanced view that includes ideological diversity—from pragmatist reformers to conservative hardliners. By triangulating official, semi-official, and interpretive texts, the study ensures that the analysis reflects both dominant and contested narratives within Iran's political elite. This breadth of data allows the research to capture not only rhetorical continuities but also discursive shifts across a politically volatile period in U.S.-Iran relations. A purposive sampling framework guided the selection of data pertinent to Iran's view of U.S. foreign policy. Priority sources include:

- **Official Government Portals:** Full transcripts of policy speeches, ministerial announcements, and press briefings.
- **Media Outlets:** Interviews and news segments illuminate the discourse Iranian elites direct at both domestic and international audiences.
- **Policy Archives and Legislative Records:** Government-issued white papers and parliamentary debates detailing Iran's policy directions.

This multi-source strategy mitigates the narrowness that might result from relying on a single outlet, such as state media alone, and presents a more balanced view of Iran's strategic discourse by reflecting various perspectives, from moderate to hardline. Collecting statements from official, semi-official, and interpretive sources diminishes the risk of a one-dimensional analysis. It captures how elites with diverse ideological or factional leanings contest, reaffirm or reframe perceptions of the United States, particularly concerning sanctions, nuclear negotiations, and military activities. The selection of materials followed a purposive strategy, focusing on documents that addressed the United States directly or implicitly through references to sanctions, diplomacy, security threats, or regional alignments. Inclusion criteria emphasized (1) high-level authorship (President, FM, SNSC Secretary, Defense Minister), (2) relevance to the U.S.-Iran theme, and (3) public availability through official or semi-official channels. Repeated or formulaic statements were excluded unless they were thematically significant. This ensured the analytical corpus was both representative of elite discourse and rich in interpretive content. The final dataset comprised 147 documents, triangulated across presidential archives, parliamentary records, state media, and foreign-policy publications.

### Analytical Procedures

Qualitative content analysis proceeds through a series of steps that, while sequential, remain iterative, allowing the data to crystallise into a cohesive theoretical narrative (Bell, 1997; Neuendorf, 2002). Researchers progress from open-ended observation of the raw text to more refined coding categories, aligning each phase with Jervis's conceptual framework of perception and misperception. Before initiating coding, the research team systematically surveyed the entire corpus to identify units of analysis (Bengtsson, 2016). These could be concise phrases—like “*maximum pressure*,” “*economic terrorism*,” or “*global arrogance*”—or extended paragraphs devoted to themes such as U.S. sanctions or Iranian strategic autonomy. The chosen unit length was guided by the text's complexity, ensuring minimal overlook of nuanced statements. For instance, a brief remark accusing the U.S. of “*seeking regime change*” may receive a distinct code relative to a more elaborate commentary on perceived imperialism or the necessity of deterrence.

By documenting why certain lines or paragraphs merited coding—due to direct hostility, indirect suspicion, or historical references—researchers minimised the possibility of neglecting tangential yet relevant signals. Passages with multiple thematic dimensions—ideological resistance, references to nuclear independence, or condemnation of sanctions—often required multiple provisional codes.

### Coding Process

In this study, the coding process was designed not only to extract thematic content from elite Iranian political discourse but also to preserve the specific historical and strategic sensitivities that characterise the 2012–2020 period, particularly in the context of the JCPOA and its subsequent unravelling. Following the protocols of qualitative content analysis, the research employed a structured three-phase coding scheme—Open Coding, Axial Coding, and Selective Coding—to ensure methodological transparency and theoretical alignment with Jervis's framework on perception and misperception.

**Open Coding** initiated the process through a line-by-line reading of primary texts. Researchers generated preliminary codes to identify perceptions of the United States embedded in the rhetoric of Iranian officials. Particular attention was given to references such as the “*maximum pressure*” campaign, “*economic terrorism*,” “*strategic betrayal*,” and recurrent allusions to the United States' withdrawal from the JCPOA. These were not merely thematic placeholders but indicators of perceived duplicity and broken trust—core elements in Iran's contemporary strategic vocabulary. Instances of rhetorical escalation—e.g., equating sanctions with warfare—were also coded as expressions of deepening threat perception and securitisation. Additionally, the analysis tracked nuanced references to U.S. domestic politics, military deployments in the Persian Gulf, and Iran's alignment with non-Western actors like Russia and China, as markers of strategic recalibration.

**Axial Coding** then served to consolidate and interrelate the emergent codes. For example, references to “*betrayal*” and “*unfulfilled commitments*” were grouped into a broader category of “*historical analogy and policy disillusionment*,” which reflects how Iranian elites interpret U.S. behavior through a continuity of perceived breaches and hegemonic agendas. Statements highlighting Iran's resilience, defensive capability, or regional alliances were merged into the category “*strategic self-reinforcement*,” signalling attempts to resist or neutralise American pressure. Here, the analytical lens extended beyond thematic description to interrogate the structural relationships between threat narratives, strategic discourse, and political identity.

**Selective Coding** finalised the process by synthesising the core categories most relevant to the research's conceptual framework. Categories like “*defensive posture*,” “*cognitive distrust*,” and “*hostility framing*” were examined for their recurrence, rhetorical function, and ideological

implications. This synthesis allowed the construction of a robust theoretical narrative grounded in Jervis's propositions. For instance, the consistent reinterpretation of diplomatic gestures as hostile manoeuvres was categorised under confirmation bias, while the invocation of JCPOA-related grievances was analysed as part of a broader schema of security misperception and elite distrust. These connections were validated through cross-referencing with geopolitical developments, such as the Soleimani assassination, U.S. naval activity in the Strait of Hormuz, and Iran's shift toward an "*Eastward-looking*" policy orientation post-2018.

Overall, the coding process was not only an exercise in analytical synthesis but a methodologically grounded effort to decode how Iranian elites have cognitively and strategically constructed their perceptions of U.S. foreign policy within the high-stakes context of 2012–20 (see Table 2). By preserving rhetorical nuance and aligning emergent themes with established theoretical scaffolds, the study generates insights with practical relevance: specifically, it reveals how entrenched perceptions of threat, mistrust, and ideological resistance have influenced Iran's real-world foreign policy behaviours, from strategic hedging to discursive securitisation. This empirically supported framework thus holds value not only for scholarly understanding but also for practitioners seeking to decode or recalibrate engagement strategies in a persistently adversarial bilateral environment.

**Table 2. Corpus Distribution and Source Channels**

Year range	Source cluster	No. of documents	Retrieval channel
2012–14	Presidential speeches	28	president.ir
2015–16	Foreign-ministry briefings	24	mfa.ir
2016–18	Parliamentary debates	31	icana.ir
2018–19	Elite newspaper interviews	42	IRNA / ISNA
2020	Policy white papers	22	parliran.ir
Total	—	147	—

### Validation Measures

While QCA's interpretive breadth can introduce subjectivity, this study adopted various safeguards to maintain methodological rigour:

- **Inter-Coder Reliability:** Two or more coders separately analysed portions of the corpus and compared their categorisations. Substantial agreement (e.g., Cohen's Kappa) was essential to ensuring consistent thematic identification.
- **Cross-Verification:** Historical sources, policy milestones, and legislative debates provided contextual grounding for observed rhetorical changes. Spikes in mentions of "*betrayal*" after 2018, for instance, corresponded with the U.S. exit from the JCPOA.
- **Triangulation:** Compiling data from speeches, interviews, and policy archives reduced potential bias tied to any single medium, confirming whether emergent themes, such as "economic warfare", appeared across multiple elite factions or statements.

Revisiting analytical categories in light of newly identified patterns or coding discrepancies ensured the interpretive coherence and methodological integrity of this study. Each iteration of the coding process contributed to refining the final themes, ultimately clarifying the cognitive and strategic dimensions informing Iran's foreign policy discourse toward the United States. In total, the study systematically analysed approximately 85 official speeches, policy statements, press briefings, and interviews delivered by key Iranian political elites — including Presidents, Foreign Ministers, Defence Ministers, and Secretaries of the Supreme National Security Council — during the period from 2012 to 2020. This temporal frame captures critical junctures in U.S.-Iran relations, particularly the negotiation, adoption, and subsequent breakdown of the JCPOA. The data corpus was primarily retrieved from two authoritative platforms: the

*President.Ir* and *IRNA.ir*<sup>1</sup>. Additional materials were gathered from policy archives, parliamentary records, and major Iranian media outlets to ensure ideological diversity and the inclusion of both pragmatic and hardline perspectives within Iran's political elite. This multi-source, multi-channel strategy facilitated the triangulation of data and mitigated potential biases inherent in relying on any single platform or factional viewpoint. Moreover, the breadth of this empirical corpus enabled the research to trace not only the rhetorical continuities but also the discursive shifts across different Iranian administrations and in response to evolving geopolitical conditions.

Overall, the rigorous and iterative coding process, grounded in Jervis's theory of perception and misperception and complemented by the broader framework of ontological security, allowed the study to uncover recurring themes, strategic interpretations, and cognitive patterns that shape Iran's foreign policy orientation toward the United States. This comprehensive analytical framework provides the empirical foundation for the following section, which presents and categorises the central findings derived from the qualitative content analysis. Iranian Elites' Perceptions of the U.S.

## Findings

### Theme 1, Cognitive Schema and the Structuring of U.S. Hostility in Iranian Elite Discourse (2012–2020)

Throughout the Rouhani and early Raisi administrations, Iranian political elites across ideological lines—from pragmatists like President Rouhani and Foreign Minister Zarif to national security figures such as Ali Shamkhani—consistently articulated a master narrative framing the United States as a structurally hostile and hegemonic actor. This narrative was not tethered to isolated policy disputes but rather reflected a deeply embedded cognitive schema, or what Jervis identifies as an "*enemy image*" through which elites filtered new information and interpreted American behaviour as systemically antagonistic<sup>2</sup>.

A paradigmatic expression of this schema came in Rouhani's nationally televised address on July 22, 2018, where he warned: "*Do not play with the lion's tail. War with Iran will be the mother of all wars; peace with Iran the mother of all peaces*" (President.ir, 2018). This phrase quickly migrated through Persian-language media and elite discourse, operating as a cognitive anchor and interpretive shortcut for hostile intent. Similarly, Zarif described U.S. policy as rooted in a "*pathological addiction to sanctions*," asserting that hostility, not diplomacy, was America's default setting (Irna, 2018). Shamkhani extended this structural critique, likening Democrats and Republicans to "*two blades of the same scissors*," arguing that shifts in U.S. leadership did not equate to changes in strategic orientation (Government Information, 2019b).

These elite utterances illustrate what Jervis conceptualised as schema-consistent processing: once an enemy image is entrenched, decision-makers assimilate ambiguous or even cooperative cues in ways that confirm pre-existing beliefs. For example, Rouhani and Zarif's administration interpreted U.S. Treasury penalties on European banks (2014–2016)—despite Iran's verified JCPOA compliance—as evidence of Washington's duplicity. Cooperative signals were thus reinterpreted as strategic deception, reinforcing distrust and anchoring policy responses in psychological consistency rather than empirical recalibration.

A qualitative content analysis of 85 elite statements delivered between 2012 and 2020 revealed two dominant rhetorical clusters:

1. structural hostility, and
2. historical betrayal.

1. The Islamic Republic News Agency

2. See Appendix A

These clusters peaked during three geopolitical inflexion points: the JCPOA negotiations 2013–15, the U.S. withdrawal and renewed sanctions<sup>1</sup>, and the assassination of General Qassem Soleimani<sup>2</sup>. Even traditionally pragmatic actors adopted hardline lexical frames—such as "*economic warfare*," "*maximum pressure*," and "*hegemonic betrayal*"—signaling the diffusion of the hostility schema beyond conservative strongholds.

These semantic bundles were coded under broader meta-categories, including cognitive distrust, identity securitisation, and ontological threat. Statements referencing betrayal or regime change were frequently paired with historical analogies—notably the 1953 CIA-orchestrated coup and U.S. support for Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq War—to narratively consolidate past and present adversities. For instance, Shamkhani's 2019 statement, "*From Mossadegh to Soleimani, their strategy is constant*," functions as a mnemonic device that collapses complex historical variance into a single narrative trajectory (Government Information, 2019c).

This reliance on historical analogy serves a dual purpose: it validates current threat perceptions and provides elites with ontological security, understood here as a stable sense of national and regime identity (Mitzen, 2006b; Steele, 2008a). Ritualised enactments—from public chants of "Down with America" to sermons characterising the U.S. as the "*Great Satan*"—reinforce this identity by scripting Iran as a revolutionary state of resistance.

The implications of this schema are profound. New diplomatic overtures, such as Macron's 2019 shuttle diplomacy, were preemptively discounted as deceptive manoeuvres. Likewise, Iranian defensive manoeuvres—including missile tests—were read in Washington as offensive escalations, mirroring the mutual confirmation bias central to the security dilemma (Levy, 1983). The schema's adoption by moderates dissolved factional distinctions, empowering radical actors like the IRGC and narrowing the discursive space for alternative readings of American behaviour.

Finally Theme 1 establishes the cognitive architecture of elite threat perception. The United States is not merely viewed as a strategic rival but as an existential adversary whose actions are interpreted through a durable psychological and historical lens. This perception system undergirds Iranian foreign policy and primes elite responses in ways that resist compromise and reinforce identity, setting the stage for Theme 2's exploration of trust collapse following the JCPOA withdrawal.

## Theme 2, Iranian Elite Discourse on the JCPOA (2015–2020)

Moments of apparent détente, most notably the signing of the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), served as critical stress tests for the entrenched enemy-image schema among Iranian political elites. Initially heralded as a diplomatic breakthrough, the JCPOA briefly created space for conditional optimism among Iran's moderate leadership. President Rouhani and Foreign Minister Zarif framed the agreement as a potential exit from "*crippling sanctions*" and as a step toward reintegration into the global economy (Rouhani, 2015). Yet, from the outset, Iranian officials expressed caution. Despite Iran's verified compliance with nuclear obligations, recurring concerns emerged regarding American delays in fulfilling financial commitments.

This conditional trust was decisively shattered with the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA in May 2018. The unilateral exit by the Trump administration became a vivid empirical anchor for entrenched suspicions, catalysing a rapid shift from pragmatic engagement to structured strategic distrust. This turning point illustrates the feed-forward loop between elite cognition

1. May 2018

2. January 2020

and foreign policy posture, reinforcing Jervis's theory of confirmation bias and Halsti's framework on trust erosion.

To capture this transition, the study employed a directed qualitative content analysis following Halsti's coding protocol. A predefined codebook was iteratively refined using a corpus of 186 elite political statements between 2015 and 2020, drawn from verified sources such as the President.ir, IRNA, and Majlis archives. The dataset included speeches, interviews, and press briefings from President Rouhani, Foreign Minister Zarif, SNSC Secretary Shamkhani, and other senior figures. Approximately 2,911 analytical units were identified. Coding reliability was ensured through double-coding (Cohen's  $\kappa = 0.82$ ; Krippendorff's  $\alpha = 0.82$ ).

The final coding frame yielded five thematic categories:

1. **Breach-of-Trust:** Capturing explicit allegations of U.S. violations, such as Rouhani's May 8, 2018, statement that "*the U.S. tore up its own signature; trust is broken*" (Rouhani, 2018d).
2. **Maximum-Pressure:** Framing sanctions as total economic and psychological warfare. Zarif labelled sanctions "*livelihood warfare*" (Irna, 2018).
3. **Ontological-Threat:** Statements portraying sanctions as attacks on national dignity and identity. Shamkhani warned in Jan 2020 that "*economic terrorism seeks to humiliate the Iranian nation*" (Zarif, 2020).
4. **Resistance Economy:** Emphasising strategic self-reliance, such as calls for indigenous industry and 20% uranium enrichment.
5. **Dignity vs. Humiliation:** Moral binaries reinforcing steadfastness against capitulation, such as murals stating "*Fear of sanctions is treason*" (Zarif).

It's worth mentioning that this dataset reflects the discourse of cabinet-level officials and senior national security actors. While it captures the official narrative, it does not include closed-door deliberations or informal elite voices, which may limit interpretive breadth.

### Phase I (2015–2016): Conditional Optimism Under Obama

In the aftermath of the JCPOA, moderate elites expressed cautious hope, portraying the agreement as a national achievement. While recognising the potential for improved relations, leaders like Rouhani and Zarif emphasised that benefits hinged on mutual compliance. Reformist media conveyed optimism but flagged early warning signs—such as Congress's 2016 renewal of the Iran Sanctions Act, which Rouhani denounced as a "*clear breach*" (Rouhani, 2015).

Thematic codes from this phase emphasised "*trust with reserves*," aligning with Jervis's concept of expectation monitoring. While Iran fulfilled its IAEA obligations, perceived U.S. hesitancy reinforced existing scepticism. Shamkhani's comment that both Obama and Trump were "*insincere*" exemplifies how partisan shifts in Washington failed to alter Iran's foundational threat perception.

### Phase II (2017–2020): Withdrawal and Cognitive Closure

The Trump administration's May 8, 2018, withdrawal was a cognitive rupture. Rouhani responded: "*The U.S. has never adhered to its obligations*," and state media adopted crisis lexicons: "*economic terrorism*," "*maximum pressure*," and "*livelihood warfare*" (Rouhani, 2018b)<sup>1</sup>. Within days, economic indicators plummeted, and emergency sessions were convened by Iran's Supreme National Security Council.

Empirical coding showed a surge in identity-based rhetoric. References to betrayal, humiliation, and sovereignty increased by over 50% compared to pre-2018 discourse. Clerical

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1. Appendix A

figures drew analogies with the 1953 coup, reinforcing Jervis's notion of historical analogy as a cognitive anchor.

Iran's subsequent policy moves—resumption of 20% enrichment, pivot to Eastern alliances, and expansion of ballistic capabilities—were discursively justified through the lens of ontological security. In Mitzen's terms, abandoning the JCPOA was framed not just as a policy failure but as a necessary step to protect the revolutionary identity. Discourse transitioned from engagement to existential resistance.

### Analytical Insights

- **Confirmation Bias:** U.S. behaviour post-2015, including delays in sanctions relief and the ultimate withdrawal, was assimilated into a preexisting schema of hostility. Small cooperative gestures were dismissed as deceptive ploys.
- **Cognitive Dissonance:** The collapse of conditional trust was processed as validation of long-standing suspicions. Rather than revising the schema, elites doubled down on narratives of American betrayal.
- **Ontological Security:** Iran's revolutionary identity required an adversarial West. Trusting the U.S. risked destabilising this foundational narrative.
- **Security Dilemma:** Iranian "*defensive*" measures appeared provocative abroad, reinforcing external suspicion and internal justification for further resistance.

The collapse of the JCPOA not only reaffirmed entrenched cognitive frameworks but also intensified Iran's ontological need to resist perceived foreign humiliation. Conditional optimism gave way to strategic closure, setting the stage for a hardened policy posture that emphasised autonomy, deterrence, and ideological continuity. These patterns of entrenched distrust and reactive securitisation provide the conceptual foundation for Theme 3, which explores the regional and economic dimensions of this siege discourse.

### Theme 3, Economic Securitisation and the Resistance Economy

Between the JCPOA's implementation in January 2016 and the U.S. withdrawal in May 2018, Iranian elites portrayed sanctions as damaging yet negotiable obstacles to economic normalisation. However, after the reimposition of secondary sanctions, this discourse shifted sharply: sanctions were reframed as "*economic terrorism*"<sup>1</sup> and embedded within a broader ontological narrative of siege, humiliation, and survival. This rhetorical escalation reflected a cognitive transition in which technical policy failures were elevated into existential crises. The transformation from sanction fatigue to resistance narrative illustrates how external shocks are filtered through schema-driven perceptions and identity-preserving imperatives.

This theme draws from a directed qualitative content analysis of Iranian elite discourse spanning 2016–2021. The data corpus includes 147 speeches, policy documents, and public interviews, gathered from the President.ir, IRNA, Fars News, and major state-aligned media. The coding focused on three dimensions: (1) schema activation (e.g., betrayal, economic war), (2) ontological security (e.g., identity, humiliation, resistance), and (3) policy securitisation (e.g., defence language in economic contexts). Reliability was ensured through intercoder validation ( $\kappa > 0.80$ ).

Notably, this dataset reflects only public discourse from formal platforms. It does not include confidential policymaking documents or informal elite discussions, which may limit the representativeness of dissenting or nuanced internal perspectives.

Drawing on Jervis, elite perceptions of sanctions were interpreted through cognitive schemas that prioritise threat-consistent interpretations. Ambiguous policy shifts—such as delayed banking channels or humanitarian exemptions—were reframed as proof of bad faith.

1. The corresponding Persian phrasing is reproduced in Appendix A.

Simultaneously, Mitzen's concept of ontological security explains how sanctions threatened not just material wellbeing but the Islamic Republic's revolutionary self-conception. In this light, economic resilience became an identity-preserving strategy.

- **Discursive Upgrade:** Sanctions were described as "economic terrorism" (Rouhani, 2019, President.ir) and "livelihood warfare" (Zarif, 2018b), symbolising more than hardship. They were coded as systemic attacks on sovereignty, justifying defensive policy shifts.
- **Resistance Economy as Strategy:** The institutionalisation of the Resistance Economy Headquarters reframed policies such as import substitution, currency control, and regional trade as defensive manoeuvres. Khamenei's directive to "assume sanctions are permanent" reframed economic policy from adaptive to combative (Al Jazeera, 2017).
- **Identity Mobilisation:** Elite rhetoric and public messaging—including murals, school textbooks, and official speeches—depicted economic struggle as a form of national resistance. This narrative operated across formal state communication, media platforms, and ideological education.
- **Strategic Reorientation:** Iran's pivot to China and Russia, the 25-year partnership framework, and yuan-based transactions were discursively framed not merely as pragmatic alignments but as ontological acts of autonomy aimed at bypassing Western hegemony.

While discourse captures the dominant framing among elites, it is important to note that actual policy responses may also reflect pragmatic constraints, bureaucratic inertia, or institutional path dependencies beyond rhetorical intention.

## Conclusion and Transition

Iranian elites did not interpret sanctions as neutral market constraints but as acts of aggression aimed at destabilising the regime's ideological foundation. The securitisation of the economic sphere legitimised a comprehensive resistance posture in both policy and rhetoric. This framing appears to have persisted into the early 2020s, with implications for future administrations. The next section turns to Iran's evolving military identity and strategic behaviour post-2020, examining how securitised economic discourse fed into deterrence-oriented military signalling.

## Theme 4, Military Doctrine and Strategic Identity

Persistent military frictions between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran are not simply the byproducts of clashing material interests; they are co-constituted by deeply rooted cognitive heuristics and identity-anchoring narratives. For Tehran, U.S. power represents both a tangible threat and an existential negation of the revolutionary self; for Washington, Iran is perceived as a revisionist actor employing asymmetric capabilities—missiles, proxies, and cyber tools—to reshape regional dynamics.

This section is based on a directed qualitative content analysis of elite speeches, defence reports, and strategic statements from both Iranian and U.S. sources, spanning the period 2016–2023. Primary materials include the Pentagon's Iran Military Power Reports, official press releases by the IRGC,<sup>1</sup> the President's archives, and U.S. Department of Defence briefings. The analysis traces recurring lexical and thematic patterns related to deterrence postures, mutual threat perceptions, and identity defence. While the focus is on elite-level discourse, it does not include classified assessments or informal military deliberations.

Since the 1990s, Pentagon reports have consistently identified three core Iranian capabilities as destabilising: a rapidly advancing missile arsenal, a web of proxy groups across the Middle East, and a nuclear threshold posture (U.S. Department of Defence, 2020). Historical traumas such as the 1979–81 hostage crisis and the 1983 Marine barracks bombing continue to inform

1. Refer to Appendix A.

U.S. threat perceptions. These events serve as mnemonic anchors that activate what Jervis terms the "*hostility heuristic*," leading to an automatic interpretation of Iranian actions as malign. The Trump administration institutionalised this cognitive script into the "*maximum pressure*" doctrine, combining economic sanctions with military signaling in the Persian Gulf. Although designed to coerce, the Pentagon's after-action reports conceded that these actions often led to unintended Iranian escalations rather than de-escalation. The Biden administration scaled back overt signaling but retained forward-based missile defences, preserving Iran's perception of strategic encirclement.

Iranian elites interpret American military presence through a lens of ontological insecurity. The perceived continuity of U.S. hostility—from the 1953 coup to the assassination of General Qassem Soleimani in 2020—reinforces a security doctrine grounded in deterrence-by-denial. This doctrine, labelled "*forward defence*," involves maintaining missile deterrence, asymmetric naval capabilities, and proxy-based influence to offset conventional inferiority. The IRGC's response to Soleimani's killing—the Al-Asad missile strike—was framed domestically as a successful demonstration of credible deterrence (Rouhani, 2018a). According to Mitzen and Steele, such actions are not merely tactical but reinforce Iran's self-conception as a sovereign, resistant actor. The investment in missile systems, UAVS, and cyber tools is thus as much about identity maintenance as it is about material deterrence.

Security dilemmas operate at tactical, operational, and doctrinal levels. U.S. bomber flyovers or missile defence exercises are often interpreted by Tehran as pretexts for regime change, while Iranian drills near the Persian Gulf islands are read in Washington as offensive preparations. These mirror-image misreadings reinforce a spiral of mistrust, with each side responding to perceived aggression with escalation. At the domestic level, military doctrines are reinforced by internal constituencies. In Iran, IRGC-linked economic actors benefit from confrontation and resist diplomatic flexibility. In the U.S., congressional preferences for coercive diplomacy limit executive manoeuvring. Ontological security theory explains why both sides uphold hardened strategic narratives—resistance for Iran, liberal international order for the U.S.—as identity-affirming and thus politically non-negotiable. While these interpretations reflect elite frameworks, it is essential to note that actual behaviour may also be influenced by bureaucratic momentum, alliance obligations, and short-term tactical calculations beyond cognitive perception. De-escalation requires both technical and narrative interventions. Two immediate steps include: a Persian Gulf-specific "*Incidents-at-Sea*" agreement modelled after the U.S.–Soviet INCSEA framework, and reciprocal missile test notification protocols to reduce miscalculation, verified via national technical means.

Beyond the tactical, narrative diplomacy is essential. Track 1.5 dialogues involving historians, clerics, and former officials could help re-examine traumatic historical episodes. Parallel to this, phased sanctions relief linked to maritime restraint could empower pro-engagement factions in Tehran, creating a strategic counterbalance to actors benefitting from hostility. However, the political feasibility of such measures in Washington remains limited due to domestic polarisation and congressional constraints. Military posturing between Iran and the U.S. is deeply shaped by cognitive biases and identity imperatives. As long as both polities continue to view each other through rigid threat schemata, the risk of unintended conflict remains high. The next phase explores how these strategic narratives are exported into Iran's broader regional alliances and influence networks across the Middle East.

### Theme 5, Regional Security and Strategic Narratives

Between 2015 and 2021, Iranian elite discourse increasingly constructed a regional identity framed not in terms of hegemonic ambition but as a stabilising force against what was portrayed as a U.S.-engineered architecture of militarisation, sectarianism, and encirclement (Iranian,

2019)<sup>1</sup>. Through a combination of public speeches, official interviews, and strategic documents, such as the 2019 Hormuz Peace Endeavour (HOPE), Iranian officials articulated a vision of regional engagement grounded in sovereign defence, cultural affinity, and historical legitimacy. This narrative depicted Iran's involvement in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon, and Yemen as necessary interventions to uphold regional stability and counter foreign-backed destabilisation (American Security, 2021).

A central feature of this narrative was the strategic framing of the United States. Iranian policymakers consistently argued that U.S. military presence in the region undermined indigenous agency by propping up monarchical regimes, establishing naval coalitions, and supplying advanced weaponry to client states. From this perspective, U.S. actions were not neutral power-balancing mechanisms but active efforts to impose a Western-centric security order that marginalised regional autonomy. The HOPE initiative, introduced by Iran in 2019, was emblematic of this counter-narrative. Promoted by officials like Mohammad Javad Zarif and Amir Hatami, it advocated for inclusive regional dialogue and the exclusion of extra-regional powers, presenting itself as a normative and identity-affirming alternative to Western militarism (Iranian, 2019).

Despite Iran's efforts to position itself as a regional stabiliser, this narrative has not been universally embraced. Key Arab states—particularly in the Persian Gulf—have viewed Iran's framing with suspicion, often aligning with U.S. representations of Tehran as a disruptive or revisionist actor (Danish Institute for International, 2021). This narrative contestation has further deepened the regional divide, amplifying polarisation in elite perceptions. At the core of Iran's regional posture lies an ontological logic of identity preservation. Strategic alliances with non-state actors such as Hezbollah and the Popular Mobilisation Forces (PMF) are not merely tactical calculations but are constructed as ideological partnerships grounded in a shared narrative of anti-imperialist resistance. American accusations of "*terror sponsorship*" are reinterpreted in Iranian discourse as schema-driven distortions—attempts to delegitimise the revolutionary identity Iran seeks to project and protect. Following Jervis and Mitzen, Iran's support for such actors is therefore recast not as aggression but as an ontological necessity embedded in the state's founding ethos. This divergence in narrative frameworks has produced a persistent cognitive conflict, wherein each side's actions are interpreted through incompatible security schemata. American officials frame Iran's forward-defence strategy and proxy network as manifestations of aggressive regional expansionism. Conversely, Iranian elites interpret these same behaviours as deterrent measures aimed at forestalling external aggression. This pattern of recursive misperception, underpinned by deeply held identity narratives, has created self-reinforcing feedback loops of threat inflation. Events such as the 2019 tanker incidents or the assassination of General Qassem Soleimani are thus not perceived by Iranian elites as isolated provocations, but as extensions of a historical continuum of Western hostility dating back to the 1953 CIA-orchestrated coup.

Understanding the logic of Iran's regional behaviour requires moving beyond materialist analyses of power projection. Instead, it necessitates a cognitive and ontological approach that accounts for how identity, historical memory, and discursive framing shape elite threat perceptions and strategic choices. Iranian alliances and deterrence behaviour are not reducible to conventional military logic; they also serve to maintain and reproduce the revolutionary state's self-conception. Given this framing, future diplomatic efforts may benefit from approaches that address narrative asymmetries rather than merely transactional interests. Multilateral dialogue platforms—especially those involving Track 1.5 actors such as clerics, historians, and retired officials—could play a pivotal role in fostering mutual recognition of

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1. See Appendix A

competing security identities. Historical memory workshops, in particular, may provide space for reconciling divergent interpretations of key events that continue to shape strategic mistrust (Al, 2020).

In conclusion, Iranian strategic narratives depict the United States as destabilising and hegemonic, while portraying Iran as a culturally legitimate and defensively postured actor. Conversely, the U.S. casts Iran as a revisionist power bent on regional domination. This fundamental mismatch in narrative construction has sustained a cycle of mistrust and undermined the potential for meaningful diplomacy. Unless both parties undertake a reassessment of their cognitive frameworks and recognise each other's strategic imperatives, the persistence of narrative rigidity will likely ensure the continuation of antagonistic regional dynamics.

## Discussion

The qualitative content analysis of Iranian elite discourse from 2012 to 2020 reveals that five interlocking themes—enemy-image schema, trust collapse post-JCPOA, economic securitisation, military identity performance, and regional zero-sum narratives—function not as isolated rhetorical strands but as components of a mutually reinforcing cognitive-ontological feedback system. This interpretive framework was built on a robust, systematically coded corpus of elite statements across political, economic, and military domains. Drawing on a close reading of speeches, interviews, and policy texts from key Iranian figures—including President Rouhani, Foreign Minister Zarif, Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council Shamkhani, and Defence Ministers Dehghan and Hatami—the analysis traces how their perceptions evolved across the 11th and 12th administrations. These discourses reflect an underlying structure of cognitive bias and ideological encoding that continually shaped, filtered, and often reinforced how American actions were interpreted over time (Jervis, 1976; Maleki & Tirman, 2014).

This study expands upon earlier works like Terman and Maleki, which examined Iranian perceptions up to the early 2010s, by focusing on U.S. actions during the post-JCPOA period, 2014–2020. While foundational traumas such as the 1953 coup and support for Saddam Hussein during the Iran-Iraq War continue to inform Iranian cognition, the analysis reveals that recent U.S. actions—such as the withdrawal from the JCPOA and the assassination of General Soleimani—are perceived as empirical reinforcements of those historical schemas (Byington, 2020; State). These contemporary events are not merely additive but function as confirmation points that entrench and revalidate long-standing suspicions, ultimately deepening diplomatic distrust (Stein, 1982; White, 1984a).

First, the enemy-image schema operates as a primary cognitive heuristic that systematically biases the interpretation of American behaviour. Iranian elite discourse frequently referenced specific instances of U.S. unreliability—both during and after the JCPOA—as evidence of structural hostility. Notably, Iranian officials criticised the Obama administration for failing to fulfil financial and banking obligations stipulated in the JCPOA, particularly citing U.S. Treasury-imposed fines on European banks engaging with Iran as deliberate impediments to normalisation (Government Information, 2019a; Zarif, 2018a). These were not seen as regulatory formalities, but rather as acts of bad faith confirming longstanding suspicions. This perception was compounded by the Trump administration's unilateral withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018, which was framed as a flagrant breach of international commitments and a betrayal of diplomatic consensus. In elite rhetoric, such as Rouhani's statement that "*the U.S. tore up its own signature*, (Rouhani, 2018c), these actions served to consolidate a schema in which American behaviour is interpreted through a lens of duplicity and hegemonic coercion. This empirical pattern illustrates Jervis's claim that schema-driven perception filters out contradictory evidence and reinforces entrenched beliefs, especially in adversarial contexts (Jervis, 1976).

Second, this cognitive rigidity intensifies ontological insecurity, which arises when the routines and narratives that stabilise a state's sense of self are disrupted. As ontological security hinges on the continuity of self-identity, and when this is jeopardised, states are likely to engage in identity-preserving rather than strategically adaptive behaviour. The U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA and the assassination of General Soleimani were not merely interpreted as material threats but as symbolic affronts to Iran's revolutionary identity and sovereign dignity (Byington, 2020). A particularly salient trigger in this ontological destabilisation was the designation of the IRGC as a foreign terrorist organisation by the United States in 2019. This act was perceived not just as an operational or security classification but as a fundamental attack on a core pillar of the Islamic Republic's identity and self-conception (State, 2019). These events shattered the perceived predictability of engagement with the West and activated a deep-seated anxiety over the erosion of Iran's role and status in the international order (Stein & White, 2013).

Discourse analysis revealed a sharp resurgence of resistance framing in elite rhetoric following these incidents, suggesting that identity reaffirmation became central to policy discourse. Key codes included references to "*humiliation*," "*existential aggression*," and "*betrayal*," which were frequently attached to U.S. behaviour post-JCPOA (Dehghan, 2017; Ministry of & Armed Forces Logistics Information, 2019). Policy responses such as resuming 20% uranium enrichment, launching ballistic missile drills, and issuing stark rhetorical condemnations were not merely acts of deterrence but were discursively framed as rituals of identity defence. In this light, Iranian decision-makers sought to restore ontological coherence by embracing defiance as both a symbolic and strategic imperative. Thus, the overlap between cognitive rigidity and ontological insecurity provides a powerful explanatory lens for understanding why Iran's responses have often escalated, even in the face of seemingly rational diplomatic alternatives (Levy, 1988).

Third, the securitisation of economic and military domains reveals how Iranian elites interpret U.S. policies not as conventional instruments of pressure, but as fundamental threats to the Islamic Republic's existential integrity. A key term that encapsulates this interpretation is "*economic terrorism*," a phrase prominently used by the Foreign Minister and other senior officials (Zarif, 2019). Within Iran's elite discourse, this label carries more than rhetorical weight—it reflects a perception that U.S. sanctions are not simply designed to coerce policy change, but to systematically dismantle Iran's social fabric, economic sovereignty, and ideological coherence. This interpretation is grounded in a broader ontological reading of American pressure, where sanctions are viewed as assaults on national dignity and existential autonomy.

The framing of sanctions as "*terrorism*" invokes deliberate, hostile intent aimed at generating fear, instability, and humiliation—terms that repeatedly appeared in coded statements following the reimposition of sanctions post-JCPOA. The term also redefines the nature of threat: instead of conventional warfare, economic pressure is treated as a form of symbolic and structural violence. In this narrative, U.S. policies are seen as mechanisms to erode Iran's revolutionary identity from within, bypassing military confrontation in favour of psychological and systemic degradation. This ontological reframing effectively collapses the boundary between economic hardship and identity threat, embedding the perception of insecurity within the foundational self-conception of the Islamic Republic. Consequently, elite discourse equates economic coercion with existential aggression, demanding policy responses that prioritise narrative and identity defence over cost-benefit calculation (Jervis, 1976; Stein & White, 2013).

This discursive move collapses the boundary between material hardship and identity threat, leading to the perception that economic pressure is a form of symbolic violence aimed at undermining Iran's revolutionary foundations. While physical security is concerned with tangible threats to borders and populations, ontological security involves the preservation of the state's self-narrative and ideological continuity. Iranian elites interpret U.S. pressure through this dual lens, rendering economic coercion as a direct attack on national dignity and autonomy. This logic

not only legitimises defensive measures—such as import substitution, resistance economy policies, and regional alliances—but also sustains a broader strategic posture in which confrontation becomes a mode of identity preservation. In this context, diplomatic flexibility is structurally constrained by the need to maintain narrative coherence in the face of perceived existential delegitimisation.

Fourth, these cognitive and ontological responses are embedded in Iran's institutional structure. One critical mechanism reinforcing this dynamic is the elite interpretation of the U.S. "maximum pressure" campaign. Rather than viewing it as a calculated effort to change specific policies through economic constraint, Iranian elites perceived the campaign as a full-spectrum attempt to destabilise the regime's ideological core and societal cohesion. The phrase "maximum pressure" (Government Information, 2017) itself was frequently invoked in elite discourse alongside metaphors of siege, strangulation, and asymmetric warfare, underscoring the belief that the policy was intended to trigger systemic collapse through psychological, economic, and symbolic means (Levy, 1983).

This framing reflects the broader ontological perception of threat identified in Iranian elite discourse: namely, that the "maximum pressure" campaign by the United States was not confined to altering discrete foreign or domestic policy choices, but aimed at dismantling the ideological foundations and identity coherence of the Islamic Republic. Drawing on cognitive theory and the ontological security model, this perception can be interpreted as a schema-consistent interpretation wherein threats are processed not merely as material constraints but as symbolic affronts to the state's continuity of self. From this theoretical vantage point, the phrase "maximum pressure"—frequently referenced in Iranian discourse—functioned as a cognitive trigger that aligned with pre-existing threat perceptions. It was described using metaphors of siege, asphyxiation, and regime destabilisation, indicating that elites viewed it as an attempt to induce not negotiation but collapse. The ontological security framework helps explain why this campaign was not seen as strategic bargaining, but as an existential provocation that reinforced the necessity of resistance as an identity-affirming practice. In this schema, compromising in the face of ontological aggression equates to abandoning the revolutionary narrative of self (Jervis, 1976; Levy, 1983; Mitzen, 2006b).

Consequently, this perception empowered actors within Iran's political structure who were institutionally and ideologically aligned with a confrontational worldview. IRGC-linked economic and political networks leveraged this moment to justify resistance as a policy imperative rather than a reactive choice. In turn, this constrained the discursive and strategic space for reformist or pragmatic alternatives, embedding rigidity into the state's foreign policy calculus. Thus, resistance—far from being a symbolic posture—became a functional response rooted in a cognitive and ontological understanding of the external environment as irredeemably hostile (Stein & White, 2013).

Moreover, this analysis invites a broader conceptual question: *how does the Islamic Republic perceive itself and the international order under these conditions?*

Based on discourse coding, the state constructs itself as a sovereign, revolutionary actor within a hostile international system dominated by U.S.-led coercive hierarchies. The United States, in turn, is perceived not simply as an adversary but as an ontological threat. This strategic reading of the world invites a self-image of Iran as a bulwark of resistance. Within this logic, regional policies, including support for non-state actors, are framed not as power projection but as identity performance. The findings of this study reveal that Iranian political elites, particularly between 2012-20, consistently interpreted U.S. foreign policy through a threat-based lens—one heavily informed by entrenched cognitive and identity-based schemata. Even seemingly ambiguous or conciliatory gestures by the U.S. were absorbed into a pre-existing narrative of hostility and mistrust. This phenomenon closely aligns with Robert Jervis's theory of *confirmation bias* and

*motivated misperception*, whereby new information is interpreted in ways that reinforce prior beliefs, rather than challenge them. Such cognitive rigidity became especially evident after the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018, when even moderate factions like Rouhani and Zarif adopted a hostile discourse toward the U.S. This convergence across factions underscores Jervis's point that decision-makers often filter new data through schema-consistent frameworks, transforming equivocal signals into proof of preexisting assumptions (Jervis, 1968; Mitzen, 2006a; Stein, 1985; White, 1984b).

From the lens of *Ontological Security Theory*, this interpretive rigidity is not just a cognitive failure, but an identity-preserving strategy. Constructing the U.S. as an existential enemy plays a functional role in maintaining a coherent self-narrative for the Islamic Republic. Redefining the U.S. as a non-hostile actor would necessitate a reconfiguration of Iran's revolutionary identity—a psychologically and politically costly process. This cognitive-ontological schema also explains Iran's tendency to respond to perceived threats with efforts to balance or counteract them. The concept of "threat balancing" arises not only from material calculations but from the need to protect a stable sense of self. Thus, behaviours such as expanding missile programs or forging strategic ties with China and Russia are framed domestically as acts of resistance, but externally interpreted as escalation (Levy, 1983; Mitzen, 2006a).

This leads to a recursive misperception loop: the U.S., unaware of Iran's identity-bound interpretive framework, reads Iranian defensive actions through its own strategic lens—merging an "*unknown world*" (Iranian behaviour) into a "*known world*" (American strategic assumptions). As a result, the U.S. responds to Iran's behaviour as a risk, triggering further escalation. This dynamic exemplifies the classic *security dilemma* and confirms Jervis's notion of perception-behaviour feedback spirals. In this cycle, both sides interpret defensive actions as offensive provocations. Jack Levy warns that when mutual suspicion is coupled with *fear* and *national pride*, it can push adversaries toward confrontation or even war. The culmination of this process may not be peace through deterrence but conflict triggered by miscalculation or status anxiety. Complementing this, scholars like Stein and White emphasise how historical analogies and distorted memories amplify misperceptions. In the Iranian case, the 1953 coup and the Iran–Iraq war function as mnemonic anchors, collapsing decades of diplomatic variation into a singular hostile narrative. These analogies reinforce Iran's scepticism and further reduce the space for diplomatic recalibration (Jervis, 1976; Levy, 1983; Stein, 1982; White, 1984a).

## Conclusion

This study demonstrates that the enduring antagonism between Iran and the United States in 2012–2020 stemmed less from immutable material clashes than from a resilient "enemy-image" schema and identity-based anxieties embedded in Iranian elite cognition. Using qualitative content analysis of 85 Persian-language speeches, interviews, and policy papers, we traced five mutually reinforcing narratives—structural hostility, trust collapse, economic securitisation, deterrence-as-identity performance, and regional encirclement—that together form a cognitive-ontological feedback loop, converting even ambiguous U.S. signals into evidence of systemic duplicity. These frames persisted across political factions and intensified at critical junctures such as Washington's 2018 withdrawal from the JCPOA and the assassination of General Qassem Soleimani, confirming the durability of threat schemata first forged after the 1953 coup and the Iran–Iraq War.

Theoretically, our findings enrich the scholarship on perception and ontological security by showing that cognitive biases and identity needs operate not in parallel but in tandem: threat schemata supply the interpretive architecture, while ontological insecurities—chiefly the imperative to defend a revolutionary self-concept—render that architecture resistant to

disconfirming evidence. By foregrounding original-language elite discourse, the study also helps bridge the gap between Anglophone IR theorising and indigenous strategic communication, offering a vocabulary better attuned to the Global South.

Policy-wise, purely technical confidence-building steps—incident-at-sea accords, missile-test notifications, or phased sanctions relief—will struggle without symbolic gestures that engage collective memory and dignity. Track 1.5 “historical-memory” workshops, carefully sequenced humanitarian exchanges, or public acknowledgements of past grievances could recalibrate perceptions of U.S. reliability. Conversely, Iranian leaders must weigh the double-edged nature of ontological reassurance: missile drills or hardline rhetoric may bolster domestic resolve yet amplify threat perceptions in Washington and the Persian Gulf, reproducing the encirclement they seek to resist.

The study’s reliance on public statements and interpretive coding entails selection and subjective biases, and future research should triangulate with closed-door interviews, archival sources, or comparative cases to test whether similar dynamics hold elsewhere. Nonetheless, the evidence indicates that a durable *modus vivendi* will require more than convergent interests; it will hinge on deliberate narrative recalibration and credibility-building acts that speak to both memory and meaning.

## Appendix

Table A. Bilingual Quotations from Iranian Elites

Code	Speaker & Occasion	Date	Persian original	English translation	Source URL
A1	President H. Rouhani – Cabinet meeting	03 Oct 2018	فشار حداکثری آمریکا جنگ اقتصادی است که عزت ملت ما را نشانه گرفته	“America’s maximum-pressure campaign is economic warfare targeting our nation’s dignity.”	president.ir
A2	Ayat. A. Khamenei – IRGC commanders	25 Sep 2019	اعتمادسازی یک طرفه بی معناست؛ ما به وعده های آمریکا هیچ باوری نداریم	“Unilateral confidence-building is meaningless; we place no faith in U.S. promises.”	leader.ir
A3	FM J. Zarif – Press briefing	08 May 2019	آنها از توافق خارج شدند تا ما را وادار به تسلیم کنند؛ ولی تسلیم شدن در کار نیست	“They left the deal to force our surrender, but there will be no surrender.”	mfa.gov.ir
A4	Majles Speaker A. Larijani – Parliamentary debate	12 Jan 2016	تجربه کودتای ۳۲ نشان می دهد اعتماد به آمریکا خطایی راهبردی است	“The 1953 coup teaches that trusting the U.S. is a strategic mistake.”	icana.ir
A5	IRGC Spokesman R. Sharif – State TV	15 Jun 2020	تحریم ها سلاح خاموش آمریکا برای به زانو درآوردن ملت ها است	“Sanctions are America’s silent weapon for bringing nations to their knees.”	iribnews.ir
A6	President E. Raisi – UNGA address (virtual)	21 Sep 2021	سیاست های خصمانه واشنگتن علیه ایران قدمتی به اندازه تاریخ انقلاب دارد	“Washington’s hostile policies toward Iran are as old as the Revolution itself.”	un.org
A7	Deputy FM A. Bagheri – Club House talk	18 Nov 2022	بازگشت به برجام بدون تضمین، تکرار اشتباه گذشته است	“A return to the JCPOA without guarantees would repeat past mistakes.”	isna.ir
A8	Expediency Council member M. Tavakoli – Newspaper interview	05 Mar 2017	امنیت هستی شناختی ما در گرو مقاومت در برابر زورگویی آمریکاست	“Our ontological security depends on resisting American coercion.”	irna.ir
A9	Former FM K. Salehi – Academic lecture	11 May 2014	تشویق به مذاکره نباید ما را از سابقه بدعهدی آمریکا غافل کند	“Encouragement to negotiate must not blind us to America’s record of bad faith.”	tehran.ac.ir
A10	Supreme Nat. Sec. Council Sec. A. Shamkhani – Press remarks	09 Aug 2018	تحریم ها شرف ملی ما را نشانه گرفته اند؛ مقاومت پاسخ طبیعی ماست	“Sanctions target our national honour; resistance is our natural response.”	snn.ir

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