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Iran's Post-Arab Spring Foreign Policy Shifts towards Regional States

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Abstract

Iran's foreign policy has shifted significantly over the years, especially towards regional states – but one thing remained constant: its importance as a strategic and regional power in the Middle East. The Iranian Revolution saw the rise of modern Islamic governance in the region, further leading to an imposition of sanctions – isolating the country diplomatically. But Iran emerged gradually, with its development in nuclear energy and a shift in support towards militias in the Arab world, notably Yemen, Syria, and Lebanon. While this has led to nuanced views of Iran in the eyes of other regional states, the end of the Arab Spring also served to be a focal point for the country, giving it a position, once again, in the regional spotlight and highlighting that it was still important. Taking into view current circumstances, as Iran and Israel face a stand-off with one another, the Western world has been caught up in a rift where the United States wants to strike at Iran but Europe wants to settle matters diplomatically. The Arab Spring (2010–2011) acted as a decisive inflection point that redefined Iran's regional calculus. The uprisings exposed the fragility of pro-Western regimes and opened power vacuums that Iran sought to fill through ideological and strategic instruments. Hence, the Arab Spring served not merely as a background event but as a catalyst for Iran's eastward pivot and reassertion of its influence in a reconfigured Middle East.

Keywords: *Iran, Foreign Policy, Middle East, U.S. Sanctions, Arab Spring*

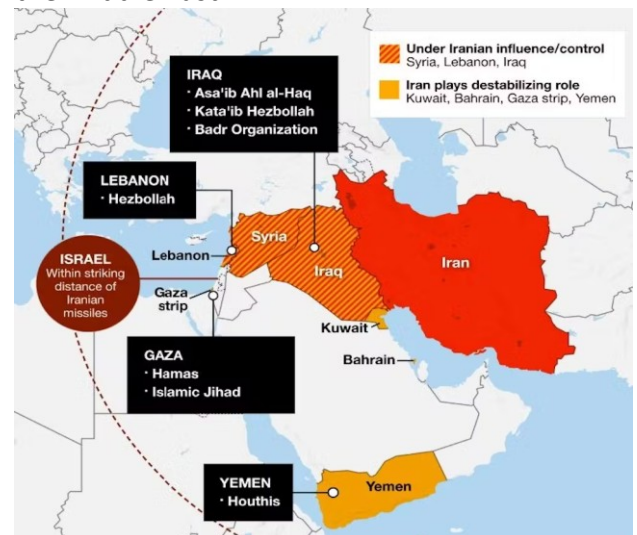
Introduction

The Islamic Revolution, or the Iranian Revolution, brought about by the Supreme Leader, Ruhollah Khomeini, of Iran in 1979, left a significant impact on the regional dynamics of the Middle East. It created an image of Iran that was more inclined towards a religious rhetoric and a show of hard power, establishing its own stronghold in the Arab region. Iran was once known as the Blue-Eyed Boy of the United States of America (USA), and was the most sought-after country during former Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh's era. The legacy was then continued by the Shah of Iran, Reza Shah Pahlavi, who had positioned the country at the top of the Middle East, moving swiftly towards *Westernization*. Internally, the Islamic Republic underwent significant transformations following Khomeini's death, as Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and President Ali Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani jointly influenced the trajectory of governance. Externally, events such as the collapse of the USSR, the end of the Cold War, and the Gulf War of 1991 all shaped Iran's evolving regional strategy. The Revolution thus became both a domestic turning point and a foreign policy watershed.

One of the most notable shifts in Iranian foreign policy was the transformation from Khomeini's principle of *"Neither East nor West"* to a more flexible approach termed *"Both North and South"* (Ramazani, 1992). The ideological rigidity of the Revolution was eventually tempered by pragmatic considerations, though its confrontational posture toward both superpowers persisted. Before the Revolution, Iran was also known as the **"Policeman of the Gulf"** under the Shah of Iran, supported by the Eisenhower Doctrine, which aimed to protect U.S. oil interests in the region. This privileged military and political role, however, was swiftly dismantled by the revolutionary upheaval.

U.S. President Jimmy Carter's 1977 speech praising Iran as "an island of stability" under the Shah's leadership proved ironically short-lived, as within a year the Shah was overthrown and sent into exile (Carter, 1977, *Toasts of the President*).

The Revolutionaries, meanwhile, strongly rejected both the U.S. and the Soviet Union, reinforcing the rhetoric of independence. This ideological stance was also reflected in Iran's growing support for Shi'a communities and militias in Yemen, Syria, and Lebanon—patterns that would resurface decades later during the Arab Spring. The Iranian Revolution did not remain a contained national event. Its implications reverberated across the Middle East, intensifying Sunni-Shia divides, straining Iran's ties with neighbouring Arab states, and setting the stage for decades of contentious U.S.-Iran relations marked by sanctions, proxy wars, and diplomatic isolation. Over time, the Revolution's legacy shaped Iran's foreign policy not only through ideological underpinnings but also through pragmatic adaptations to regional upheavals, especially after 2011. This research aims to analyze Iran's post-1979 foreign policy within the broader context of Middle Eastern politics, with a particular focus on the post-Arab Spring era. It explores how Iran's revolutionary identity, grounded in Khomeini's philosophy of governance and resistance, has influenced its relations with regional states. By examining both continuities and shifts in Iran's approach, the research offers insight into the complex interplay of ideology, pragmatism, and power politics in one of the most influential states of the Middle East.



The Conversation (2024) *Iran's Influence in the Middle East/Axis of Resistance*

Research Objectives:

1. This study is vital in understanding the power structure of the Middle East and the Balance of Power theory, or the lack thereof, as Iran's foreign policy has taken a constructive approach in the post-Arab Spring era, establishing a strong foothold by remaining steadfast to its initial policies by promoting the Axis of Resistance in the region to be rid of external influences.
2. It will further shed light on how Saudi-Iran relations have also evolved in the changing political environment, showcasing that ideological reasons are not the only ones that should be taken into consideration when studying the discourse of Iran's foreign policy, irrespective of its Shi'ite dominant population

Research Questions:

1. How does the integration of realism and constructivist theories explain Iran's strategic decisions in the Middle East?
2. How have regional states reacted to the strategic shifts in Iran's foreign policy after the Arab Spring?
3. What patterns of change and continuity can be observed in Iran's foreign policy under different Presidents since 2012?

Methodology and Scope:

This paper adopts a qualitative, comparative case study approach to examine Iran's foreign policy across three key regional contexts—Saudi Arabia, Iraq, and Syria. The analysis covers the period from 1979 to 2024, with particular emphasis on the post-Arab Spring era (2011–2024). The research design integrates both Realist and Constructivist perspectives to provide a multidimensional understanding of Iran's behaviour. Using process-tracing as a guiding method, the study explores how material power calculations and identity-driven narratives interact in shaping Tehran's foreign policy decisions. Primary and secondary sources form the evidentiary base of this research article.

Theoretical Framework***Offensive Realism and Its Assumptions***

John Mearsheimer's theory of **Offensive**

Realism rests on five core assumptions that illuminate the competitive and conflict-prone nature of international politics (Steinsson, 2014). First, the international system is anarchic, meaning no overarching authority exists to regulate state behaviour—an idea often linked to the balance of power. This anarchy ensures that states operate in self-help conditions, limiting cooperation. Second, all great powers possess offensive military capabilities, which can potentially be used against others. Third, states can never be certain about the intentions of others; even defensive measures are often interpreted as threats, creating security dilemmas—as exemplified by the Iran-Israel standoff. Fourth, states' ultimate goal is survival, including preserving territorial integrity and autonomy, without which other objectives cannot be achieved. Lastly, states are rational actors: they weigh costs and benefits strategically to ensure long-term survival.

For Mearsheimer, the tragic outcome of these assumptions is that states, seeking security, are compelled to maximize power. Great powers aspire to regional or global hegemony, resulting in perpetual rivalry and insecurity. This phenomenon—***The Tragedy of Great Power Politics***—explains why conflict remains inherent in international relations.

Offensive Realism in the Context of Iran

Iran's foreign policy reflects many dimensions of **offensive realism**. Following the 1979 Revolution and Ayatollah Khomeini's death, Iran entered a prolonged phase of sanctions, geopolitical pressures, and shifting alignments. Rafsanjani's pragmatic outreach to GCC states signalled early attempts to counterbalance Western hostility, while later administrations oscillated between reformist and hardline stances.

In the context of Iran, ***The Tragedy of Great Power Politics*** can be observed through the Islamic Republic's strategic pursuit of regional influence and its efforts to secure its position against both external and internal challenges. As a regional power, Iran seeks to expand its

influence across the Middle East, often clashing with other regional and global powers that strive for dominance, particularly in the MENA (Middle East North Africa) region. This, however, results in a security dilemma, where Iran, driven by its need to protect its sovereignty and maintain its influence, engages in actions that could most likely provoke rival wars, leading to an ongoing cycle of competition and conflict. Iran's support to proxy militias in countries like Syria, Iraq, Yemen and Lebanon is an effort to expand its regional influence while simultaneously ensuring its security by establishing a network of allies that can counterbalance rival powers, particularly the U.S. and its allies in the region – Saudi Arabia and Israel. But these actions often aggravate tensions, leading to a greater position of insecurity for Iran and its adversaries, thus reinforcing the cycle of confrontation and conflict typical of great power politics. The result is a constant balancing act where, in striving to secure its own survival and strategic goals, Iran's actions can inadvertently heighten the risks of broader regional instability. Reverting to Mersheimer's Offensive Realism theory, Iran could potentially use its power and influence to become a hegemony in de facto control in the Middle East, enriching itself in the oil exploits and natural gas reserves.

Defensive Realism and Iran's Strategy

In contrast, **Defensive Realism**, as theorized by Kenneth Waltz in *Theory of International Politics*, argues that states seek to maximize security, not power. States tend to adopt measured, defensive postures to preserve sovereignty rather than aggressively expand. Iran's foreign policy exhibits defensive realist characteristics, particularly in its responses to perceived threats. Post-Arab Spring brought a significant change in Iran's foreign policy as there were Arab uprisings, and Iran was facing a growing threat from Sunni jihadist groups like ISIS (*Arabic acronym Daesh*) and Al Qaeda. The authorities in Iraq and Syria had collapsed, bringing the Gulf states into power. Iran's interventions in Iraq and Syria, such as providing support to the Assad regime, were driven

primarily by defensive logic; securing its own borders, and curbing the spread of ISIS while also ensuring that neighbouring states do not fall under hostile influence (*Iran's ISIS Challenge in Afghanistan*, n.d.). However, this defence tactic became more prominent in April of 2024 when Israel launched an attack on the Iranian consulate in Damascus, which killed Revolutionary Guards leader General Mohammad Reza Zahedi. The assassination of Hezbollah leader, Ismail Haniyeh, in Tehran on a state visit also sparked an uproar, inclining Iran to adopt a defensive approach, tightening security, and launching strikes in return (*Gadzo, 2024*).

The assassination of General Qassem Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force (a branch of the IRGC), in Baghdad in 2020 was the first trigger. President Hassan Rouhani, who had previously been trying to stabilize relations with the U.S., after signing the Iran Nuclear Deal 2015, was outraged when General Soleimani was assassinated, threatening the U.S. with "harsh punishment".

Constructivism and Identity Formation

Alexander Wendt famously argued that "identities are the basis of interests," highlighting that state behaviour is not dictated solely by material capabilities but also by how states construct their identities in relation to others. The theory of constructivism negates all realist/rational theories and takes a turn towards ideational and normative structures; the perceived identity of states, as mentioned by Yucel Bozdaglioglu in his book ***Constructivism and Identity Formation: An Interactive Approach***. According to Jon Alster, "Rational choice is instrumental and is guided by the outcome of action" – states try to do the "right thing", driving away from material interests or optimization of opportunities.

For Iran, constructivism offers vital insights. The 1979 Revolution was not only a political upheaval but also a profound redefinition of identity: from a pro-Western monarchy under the Shah to an anti-Western Islamic Republic with ideological commitments. This

transformation positioned Iran as a self-styled defender of Islam and oppressed peoples. Article 152 of the Iranian Constitution enshrined this identity, committing the Republic to reject domination, preserve independence, and defend Muslim rights worldwide.

Iran's foreign policy since then has been deeply ideational, guided by revolutionary values rather than purely material calculations. Its anti-Zionist stance, advocacy for Palestinian liberation, and support for Shi'a communities across the region are less about immediate strategic advantage than about sustaining its ideological mission. Through this lens, Iran views itself as the leader of the **Axis of Resistance**, countering U.S. hegemony, Western imperialism, and Israeli expansionism.

Integrating Realism and Constructivism

The two theories mentioned above, in combination, provide a more comprehensive view of Iran's strategic shifts in foreign policy in the region. Realism explains the security measures as well as power dynamics at play, while Constructivism highlights the ideological motives that drive Iran's foreign policy decisions, which can also be analyzed through its retaliation against Israel using specialized drones and a threat to revert to the use of nuclear weapons.

This integrated approach allows for a nuanced understanding of Iran's actions, where security considerations (both defensive and offensive) intersect with ideological motivations, explaining why Iran continues to assert itself in a region defined by shifting power dynamics and deep ideological divides.

Integration of Realist and Constructivist Perspectives

- ❖ Saudi Arabia: Realism explains Tehran's pursuit of détente as stabilizing the regional environment, while Constructivism frames rapprochement as Islamic solidarity and resistance to Western hegemony.
- ❖ Iraq: Realism sees Iran securing strategic depth; Constructivism highlights shared Shi'a identity and narratives of martyrdom and resistance.

❖ Yemen: Under Raisi, Realism interprets support for the Houthis as countering Saudi Arabia, whereas Constructivism views it as fulfilling revolutionary duty within the Axis of Resistance.

❖ Syria: Realism explains support for Assad as preserving regional influence; Constructivism shows defence of the resistance front and Islamic legitimacy.

Presidential Foreign Policy Approaches Discussion

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013)

President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's tenure marked a period of intense ideological revival in Iran's foreign policy, characterized by confrontational rhetoric, anti-Western narratives, and the expansion of Iran's regional alliances through militant and ideological proxies. Though the Arab Spring started towards the end of his tenure, his policy proved vital in shaping the future of Iran's placement in the region against U.S. hegemony. His hard-line policy mirrored that of Ayatollah Khamenei's resistance identity, which led them to openly embrace the Arab uprisings as they were viewed as an extension of the '79 Revolution and termed as the Islamic Awakenings, after which the World Assembly of Islamic Awakening was also formed.

Iran's Regional Strategy

Ahmadinejad prioritized strengthening Iran's regional depth through proxies. His alliance with Assad's Syria grew dramatically as the Syrian civil war also continued to escalate. The Iranian administration feared that a collapse of Assad's government would come as a threat to the Islamic Republic, which would in turn weaken the Axis of Resistance. While in Yemen, Iranian involvement remained limited, but Ahmadinejad extended moral support to the Houthis, framing their uprising as a legitimate struggle against Western oppression. With an inclination towards a hard power and anti-West stance, he increased his support and funding to groups such as the IRGC and the Quds Force; his dismissal of diplomacy and unwillingness to engage with the GCC countries

was also noted through his policies and anti-West rhetoric. Guided by the principle of resistance to Western imperialism, his administration strengthened ties not only with Yemen, Iraq and Syria but also with Lebanon's Hezbollah. The emerging Shi'a movements in Iraq and Yemen helped in positioning Iran as the centre point in the Middle East against the U.S.-aligned Gulf states and Israel.

Impact of the Arab Spring

Ahmadinejad's administration celebrated the Arab Spring and the Arab uprisings as they viewed them as an extension of Khomeini's revolution, which sought to fight against Western imperialism in the Middle East. Ahmadinejad termed these uprisings as the Islamic Awakening against pro-Western dictatorships. Iranian officials drew parallels between the toppling of regimes in Egypt, Tunisia, and Libya and the overthrow of the Shah in 1979. Yet contradictions emerged, especially since Iran was supporting Assad's authoritarian regime in Syria, which undermined the democratic aspect of the uprisings. Rhetorically, Iran embraced the revolutions, and its response was selective and strategic—following a constructive style of policy where the administration was reading the environment and taking charge accordingly. This led Iran to provide overt support to Shi'a groups in Bahrain and the Houthis in Yemen, but condemned uprisings when they threatened allies like Assad—revealing a geopolitical calculus marked by ideological solidarity. Ahmadinejad's era thus marked the start of Iran's complex role as both a promoter of revolution and a protector of the regional status quo where its interests were served.

Relations with the West and the Nuclear Issue

Ahmadinejad's era was marked staunchly by the intensification of Iran's nuclear ambitions and its confrontational approach towards the Western powers. During his presidency, he framed the nuclear program as a symbol of national sovereignty and self-sufficiency, claiming that Iran had every right to enrich uranium and produce nuclear weapons independent of Western interference. His

approach to the West was far from sugar-coated.

His pursuit of nuclear capability—real or perceived—was not only about deterrence but also about enhancing Iran's regional leverage, especially against Israel and Saudi Arabia. However, this strategy led to a significant security dilemma in the region, with the GCC states ramping up their defences out of fear of Iran's nuclear capabilities while also strengthening military ties with the U.S. As a result of this, the U.S. military deployed armed personnel in the Persian Gulf, stationing troops in Bahrain as talks of preemptive strikes on Iranian nuclear facilities became more common during the Bush and Obama administrations. Ahmadinejad's foreign policy legacy is therefore one of confrontation, proxy expansion, and ideological radicalism.

From a constructivist standpoint, Ahmadinejad's narrative of resistance and "Islamic awakening" was central to shaping Iran's identity as the vanguard of anti-imperial struggle. His use of religious symbolism and messianic language ("Mahdism") reinforced an image of Iran as a divinely guided actor confronting Western oppression—a hallmark of identity politics in Constructivist theory.

Hassan Rouhani (2013-2021)

President Hassan Rouhani's approach was more diplomatic and pragmatic towards the West and relied solely on rebuilding Iran's image on a more diplomatic front. Rouhani's foreign policy legacy is most closely associated with the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), signed in 2015 between Iran and the P5+1 (China, France, Russia, the United Kingdom, the United States, and Germany). His adoption of a constructivist foreign policy led to discontent from some but also praise from the international community, as his tenure marked the rise and fall of the Iran Nuclear Deal.

JCPOA and Nuclear Diplomacy

Rouhani's foreign policy was driven by the vision of *constructive interaction*—a term he frequently used to signal Iran's willingness to re-engage diplomatically with the global

community (Xinhua, 2017). This approach was primarily rooted in constructivist logic: Rouhani aimed to reshape Iran's identity in the international system, not just as a revolutionary power, but as a responsible, rational actor capable of negotiation, moderation, and cooperation. His administration de-emphasized ideological confrontation and sought to project an image of Iran as a peace-seeking nation committed to regional stability. This notion became clearer in the 2015 signing of the JCPOA, which became a landmark agreement negotiated with the P5+1 countries and was emblematic of Rouhani's constructivist and diplomatic turn, prioritizing dialogue and economic reintegration over ideological resistance. It temporarily improved Iran's international standing and opened pathways for renewed engagement with both Western and Arab states.

Managing Sectarian Influence

Despite these efforts, Rouhani's administration continued Iran's strategic commitments in Syria, Iraq, and Yemen, albeit with a more cautious tone. While Iran's support to Assad, Shi'a militias, and the Houthis remained consistent, Rouhani reframed these interventions defensively, arguing they were necessary to combat terrorism and prevent the collapse of friendly governments. This rhetorical shift allowed Rouhani to blend realist security concerns with constructivist narratives of resistance, sovereignty, and regional self-determination.

Unlike Ahmadinejad, Hassan Rouhani toned down the ideological rhetoric in an attempt to moderate Iran's role in the Shia-Sunni divide. In Iraq, Rouhani maintained military cooperation against ISIS but emphasized state-to-state diplomacy with Baghdad. While in Yemen, his support to the Houthis continued; it was termed as political and humanitarian as opposed to sectarian sponsorship, which was the most commonly perceived notion. With Bahrain and Lebanon, Rouhani used cultural diplomacy and backchannel negotiations while carefully avoiding direct military entanglement. This nuanced approach fits into constructivist logic:

Rouhani tried to reshape Iran's identity in the region not just as a Shi'a vanguard, but as a pragmatic power capable of dialogue with Sunni-majority states.

Iran's Regional Influence

Rouhani sought to de-escalate tensions with GCC states while criticizing Washington's hostility. During the 2017 GCC crisis, Tehran capitalized on Qatar's isolation by strengthening bilateral ties, reinforcing Iran's role as a balancing actor. Backchannel talks with Saudi Arabia were also attempted, though they collapsed after the execution of cleric Nimr al-Nimr in 2016. Rouhani maintained Iran's core regional commitments but rebranded them as stabilizing forces rather than expansionist ventures. In Syria, Tehran remained supportive of Assad but pursued multilateral initiatives such as the **Astana Peace Process** alongside Russia and Turkey. In the Gulf, Rouhani advanced diplomatic outreach through Oman, Kuwait, and the UAE, and proposed the **Hormuz Peace Endeavour (HOPE)** to promote collective security and cooperation.

In essence, Rouhani's foreign policy tools centered on soft power projection and multilateral diplomacy. However, setbacks such as the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA under President Trump and the assassination of General Qassem Soleimani in 2020 undermined Rouhani's legacy and gave way to a reassertion of securitized, hardline postures under his successor, Ebrahim Raisi.

Ebrahim Raisi (2021-2024)

President Raisi's tenure marked a return to Iran's traditional hardline and conservative foreign policy, having suffered under the crippling sanctions imposed by the United States after the failure of the Iran Nuclear Deal. As a hardliner, Raisi was more concerned with securing the Iranian regime as opposed to the economic outlook of the Islamic Republic, which led to even more sanctions on Iran than before, with the added pressure of the COVID-19 pandemic. He showed almost little to no enthusiasm when it came to renewing the Nuclear Deal, shifting his strategic focus

elsewhere to strengthening ties with the Eastern superpower while also strengthening the Axis of Resistance to establish a sphere of power in the Middle East.

Iran's Regional Strategy

A close analysis of Raisi's foreign policy also indicates that there was a strategic dependence on the diplomatic infrastructure developed by his predecessors rather than taking a fresh path in foreign relations. His tenure witnessed a resurgence of the "good neighbour" approach towards the Gulf states – a policy initially put in place by former President Hashemi Rafsanjani – along with a reinvigoration of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's Latin American policy. His approach reflected a reformation of traditional policies rather than a strategic shift, as many say. Doctrinally, Raisi's foreign policy can be described as "pragmatic revolutionism." Policy-wise, Raisi – following Khamenei's edict – is embracing the "Iranian pivot to Asia," both geopolitically and geo-economically.

Regionally, Raisi intensified support to Syria's Assad regime, reinforcing Iran's presence through IRGC deployments and financial lifelines. This coincided with efforts to counter normalization trends between Arab states and Israel. In Iraq, Raisi maintained strong ties with Shi'a political factions and paramilitary groups. In Yemen, Raisi sustained and expanded Iran's support for the Houthis movement, framing it as part of a broader resistance against Saudi aggression and Western imperialism. Although diplomatic talks resumed between Tehran and Riyadh, particularly under Chinese mediation in 2023, Raisi approached these cautiously.

The Nuclear Issue and Relations with the West

Raisi inherited a collapsed Nuclear Deal after the U.S. withdrew from it in 2018, along with the failure to come up with negotiations in Vienna in 2021-2022. An article on **Al Jazeera** highlighted the significance of this conference in order to rebuild the deal and reach fair negotiations. In a statement following the talks, the Iranian foreign ministry said that Iran's top negotiator Ali Bagheri Kani emphasized to the participants that Iran is serious about reaching a "fair agreement"

that would secure Iran's legitimate interests (Motamedi, 2021).

Raisi took a stance that went on the offensive, redirecting energies towards nuclear enrichment and refusal to make concessions until and unless the West guaranteed to completely lift the sanctions that had been crippling Iran's economy. Diplomatic relations with the West under Raisi's administration remained minimal and transactional. The assassination of IRGC commanders, Israeli strikes on Iranian consulates in Syria, and continued sanctions reinforced Tehran's confrontational stance. Meanwhile, Raisi framed nuclear progress not only as a security imperative but also as a symbol of national resilience—a constructivist narrative that echoed the Islamic Republic's revolutionary ethos.

Similarly, Raisi's administration maintained a constructivist dimension by framing defiance against the West as a moral duty rather than a mere security imperative. His invocation of "revolutionary purity" and "resistance economy" reaffirmed Iran's self-perception as a righteous state resisting external domination, blending ideology with Realist survivalism.

Regional Realignment and Strategic Partnerships

Raisi's administration prioritized eastward diplomacy or the *Looking East* policy, which emphasized deepening ties with China, Russia, and the Central Asian Republics. In 2021, Iran was granted full membership of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO), enhancing its multilateral engagement with Eurasian powers. It then also strengthened ties and strategic cooperation with Russia, particularly in the Syrian context and in military personnel exchanges, including drones used in the conflict with Ukraine.

With China, a 25-Year Strategic Cooperation Agreement was signed during Rouhani's presidency, which received increased political backing under Raisi. Despite sanctions, Iran's oil trade with China continued, which was often disguised through third-party countries like

Malaysia and the UAE, and through "ghost fleets" of tankers (Reuters, 2022). Moreover, China has consistently defended Iran in diplomatic terms and key international areas, repeatedly blocking Western-led oil embargoes and sanctions that have led to economic stagnation in Iran. A most significant event was Iran's rapprochement with Saudi Arabia, which was also brokered by China in 2023. Raisi also prioritized economic diplomacy with neighbours like Iraq, Pakistan, Oman, and Qatar, advocating regional trade routes such as the North–South Transport Corridor and the Chabahar port.

Masoud Pezeshkian (2024-)

Masoud Pezeshkian's election in 2024 marks a potential turning point in Iranian foreign policy, particularly after the Raisi administration's securitization and confrontational posture. As a reformist and moderate figure, Pezeshkian is expected to revive diplomacy, improve strained regional ties, and redefine Iran's global image. As a reformist and moderate figure, Pezeshkian signalled an interest in reviving diplomacy, improving strained regional ties, and redefining Iran's global image. His presidency embodies the tension between reformist aspirations and entrenched institutional constraints, raising questions about how far he can reshape Iran's foreign policy direction.

Reconstructing Identity and Regional Diplomacy

From a constructivist perspective, Pezeshkian's approach seeks to rebuild Iran's identity as a responsible and stabilizing regional actor rather than an ideologically confrontational state. His administration has consistently emphasized dialogue, multilateralism, and peace-building in public statements. Early outreach to Arab neighbours, including the Gulf states, reflects an attempt to de-escalate regional rivalries. His foreign minister has underscored respect for sovereignty and economic cooperation, signalling continuity with Rouhani's diplomacy but in a more fragmented post-Arab Spring and post-Gaza conflict landscape. Nonetheless, these efforts face structural limitations. Iran's constitution vests ultimate authority in the Supreme Leader, while

the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) continues to dominate security policy, particularly in Syria and Lebanon. Thus, Pezeshkian's reformist agenda remains constrained, often confined to soft-power diplomacy, humanitarian initiatives, and rhetorical gestures rather than sweeping realignments.

Strategic Constraints and Nuclear Diplomacy

The nuclear file remains a defining challenge. Pezeshkian inherited a fragile legacy after the collapse of the JCPOA and the Trump administration's "maximum pressure" campaign. His government has expressed conditional openness to dialogue but refused unilateral concessions. Tensions escalated in June 2025 when Iran's parliament approved a bill suspending cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), effectively limiting inspections. This move reflected hardline pressure within Iran's legislature to assert sovereignty over its nuclear programme. At the same time, Iran faces renewed sanction threats under the U.N. snapback mechanism. Pezeshkian has publicly vowed that Iran can overcome any sanctions, a narrative aimed at maintaining domestic resilience while projecting defiance externally. His cautious balancing between negotiation and resistance demonstrates the delicate terrain he navigates between reformist rhetoric and hardline policy continuity.

Regional Realignment and Strategic Partnerships

Pezeshkian has also sought to recalibrate Iran's regional alliances. In January 2025, Tehran signed a **Comprehensive Strategic Partnership Treaty** with Russia, deepening cooperation in defence, energy, and technology. This underscores Iran's pivot towards Eastern partners as a counterbalance to Western pressure. Parallel to this, Iran has taken tentative steps toward financial reintegration. The Expediency Council conditionally approved joining the Convention for the Suppression of the Financing of Terrorism (CFT), a potential step toward compliance with the Financial Action Task Force (FATF) and eventual removal from its blacklist. Regionally, Pezeshkian faces turbulence. The fall of Bashar al-Assad's regime in Syria has destabilized one of Iran's central spheres of

influence, complicating its regional strategy. To manage these challenges, Iran established a **Supreme National Defence Council** under Pezeshkian's leadership to coordinate foreign and security policy following escalating Israeli and U.S. strikes. While this institution potentially expands presidential involvement in strategic decision-making, the balance of power remains tilted toward entrenched security elites.

Regional Case Studies

This section presents a comparative analysis of Iran's foreign policy in four key regional states—Saudi Arabia, Iraq, Syria, and Yemen from 2012 to 2024 under the four presidential administrations. While Iran's strategic goals remained broadly consistent across these contexts, this section will explore the specific approaches adopted by the Islamic Republic towards these states with regard to an imperative framework linking the policies to the theories of realism and constructivism.

Saudi Arabia: From Hostility to Rapprochement

After the Arab Spring, there were heightened tensions between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, mainly over the sectarian divide. This divide was further fuelled when Iran began to lend support to Shia-backed militias, which was termed as "sectarian sponsorship" by its rival. However, it must be noted that there have been several shifts and notable changes in the way Iran directed its foreign policy or foreign relations with Saudi Arabia under the four presidents mentioned above. This shift came in the form of confrontation under Presidents Ahmadinejad and Raisi and cautious diplomacy under Presidents Rouhani and Pezeshkian.

Under Ahmadinejad and Raisi, Iran adopted a confrontational stance, framing Saudi Arabia as a monarchy that was highly under the influence of the West. These tensions peaked significantly during regional proxy conflicts, especially in countries like Yemen, Bahrain, and Syria, where both countries supported opposing factions. A stark contrast of policy was marked when Hassan Rouhani was elected, where he attempted to work towards de-escalating tensions and

repositioning Iran as a diplomatic soft power, where he proposed regional dialogue frameworks like the **Hormuz Peace Endeavour (HOPE)** (Rouhani, 2019, UNGA). These initiatives helped in laying the groundwork for the China-brokered rapprochement between the two long-standing rivals in 2023. Constructivist themes were prominent during periods of escalation, while realist pragmatism drove the normalization efforts as Iran sought to escape isolation against the United States.

Iraq: Strategic Depth

Since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 and the elimination of Western forces from Iraq, Iran sought to strengthen its ties with its strategic ally in the region that was also serving as a gateway to the Levant. Under all four presidents, Iran maintained a consistent stance with Iraq, rendering support to Shi'a elites in the country and supporting paramilitary groups. While Ahmadinejad prioritized ideological solidarity, Rouhani focused on bilateral cooperation, framing Iran as a partner in post-ISIS stabilization. Under Ebrahim Raisi, support for military groups increased in the context of serving as a security partner for Iraq, as the anti-West rhetoric continued to heighten after General Qassem Soleimani's assassination in Baghdad in 2020.

From a realist perspective, Iran continued to offer consistent support and maintain ties to secure its own position in this strategically important location with Iraq, which was serving as a gateway to the Levant and acting as a buffer. In light of constructivism, cultural diplomacy would be a more accurate term to use for the way the two countries have pursued their discourse in light of Shiite pilgrimages to the holy sites of Najaf and Karbala, along with shared narratives of martyrdom, sustaining soft power legitimacy.

Syria: Anchor of the Axis of Resistance

Syria has represented itself as the most loyal ally of Iran in the region and a key strategic partner in the Axis of Resistance. Iran's steadfast support for the Bashar regime has been rather remarkable and unflinching, as well

as noted to maintain consistency through all presidential administrations. This support reflects Iran's calculation that losing Syria would undermine its influence in Lebanon, threaten access to the East Mediterranean, and embolden Israeli and U.S.-aligned actors. Ahmadinejad framed the Syrian war as a Western plot and deployed IRGC forces early on during the war in Damascus. While Hassan Rouhani dialled down aggressive dialogue and took a calculated stance publicly, he continued to provide military and economic support as well as political support through the **Astana Peace Process**. Raisi, inclined towards deterrence, increased military support to fend off Israeli forces in the region (Al Jazeera, 2022; International Crisis Group, 2023). While there were indications of realist imperatives through the support that was lent to Syria by Iran, a constructivist discourse also went hand in hand, where resistance against Zionist and oppressive Western regimes was in question.

Conclusion

The Arab Spring marked a pivotal moment in the history of the Middle East, which prompted Iran to take its own steps towards a strategically significant foreign policy shift. The Islamic Republic saw the uprisings as a leverage to expand its influence in the Middle East region while also taking cautious steps to maintain regional allies and pursue an anti-West rhetoric that would set the tone for Iran's future. While ideology does play a significant role, the Islamic Republic has also demonstrated pragmatic flexibility in its foreign policy engagements.

Mainstream international discourse, particularly in Western media and policymaking circles, often frames Iran as an inherently aggressive, destabilizing force in the Middle East. As Wendt stated in his theory of constructivism, "*Anarchy is what states make of it*," which supports the foreign policy goals that Iran has pursued. While some may incline towards portraying it as a hard power, solely confrontationalist, many fail to understand that Iran's foreign policy cannot be reduced to one single lens of realism or constructivism, but it is rather a combination of both these theories.

Since the Islamic Revolution, the Islamic Republic has pursued an anti-West rhetoric; it has challenged the oppressive norms and the hegemony that the West had primarily established in the Middle East—something other states in the region failed to do or were too weak to pursue. Once again, keeping in view Wendt's theory, a state's identity is shaped through its narratives and historical experiences, and Iran has been the only country that has been free from Western colonialism and occupation, so the policy that is deemed aggressive or termed as a narrative of power maximization is much different than that. Iran's deployment of military personnel in Syria and its support for Houthis is commonly depicted as an aggressive expansionist policy; its enrichment program is seen as a threat in the region. Yet, when assessed through Iran's own ideological lens, such actions reflect a deeply internalized sense of duty to protect Islamic governance structures and marginalized Shi'a communities. The West's inability—due to its own state-driven narratives—to recognize this worldview contributes to an epistemic misreading of Iran's posture. Iranian discourse is merely shaped or constructed by the West in a way that depicts it as an aggressive hard power to maintain its own illegitimate hegemony in the Middle East. Iranian foreign policy, in its true essence, cannot be studied under a single theory, but to understand the entirety of it, one must consider the external influencing factors that shape the nation's foreign policy discourse. Iran's foreign policy post-Arab Spring is often mischaracterized by realist assumptions of aggression. A constructivist interpretation—grounded in Iran's revolutionary identity, religious duty, and resistance ideology—offers a more refined and comprehensive understanding. This challenges not only the strategic narratives imposed by adversaries but also the dominant knowledge structures within international relations scholarship. The Arab Spring, therefore, did not transform Iran's ideological foundations but reactivated them under new strategic realities.

By blending realist survival instincts with constructivist identity narratives, Iran adapted to a fragmented regional order while maintaining continuity in its revolutionary mission. This synthesis best explains Iran's enduring relevance in the Middle East's post-Arab Spring landscape.

This study demonstrates that Iranian foreign policy cannot be adequately understood through either Realism or Constructivism alone. The integrated approach reveals how strategic pragmatism and ideational commitments operate in tandem, challenging Western-centric interpretations and broadening theoretical discourse on Middle Eastern politics.

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