

**A Crisis of Confidence: Stagflation, Hostages, and the Fall of Jimmy
Carter in the 1980 U.S. Election – and the Lasting Shadow on U.S. / Iran
Relations**

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In the 1980 U.S. presidential election, America stood at a crossroads—economically weakened, politically divided, and psychologically fatigued after a decade of inflation, energy crises, and international failures. Once the undisputed global superpower in the immediate aftermath of World War II, the United States by 1980 appeared to many as a nation in decline, desperate for change. Elections are not determined by a single cause, and in 1980, President Jimmy Carter was no exception. He faced an array of challenges from economic stagflation through all four years in office to a transforming media landscape that prioritized spectacle over substance. But it was the Iranian hostage crisis—an international standoff that began in November 1979 when Iranian revolutionaries stormed the U.S. embassy in Tehran and took 52 Americans hostage—that most clearly solidified public disillusionment with his leadership and led to his loss in November 1980. Jimmy Carter's failure to win reelection in 1980 was largely a result of the Iranian Hostage Crisis, which revealed his weakness on two fronts: domestically, his poor communication and passive media presence made him seem out of touch with a frustrated public; internationally, his inability to neither negotiate the hostages' release nor save the hostages made the U.S. appear powerless and eroded trust in his leadership with his constituency. Carter's impotence during the Hostage Crisis left a leadership vacuum that Ronald Reagan and his administration filled by actively shaping public sentiment, controlling the narrative abroad, and projecting a restored sense of American confidence.

Before the Iranian Hostage Crisis came to dominate headlines, the U.S. was already grappling with deep economic struggles that had struggling American electorate desperate for change. The roots of the economic crisis began well before Carter took office, most notably stretching back to ambitious federal spending

through the 1960s. President Lyndon B. Johnson's *Great Society* initiative, tied with U.S. involvement in the Vietnam War, significantly expanded federal expenditures. Conservative economic journalist Robert J. Samuelson of *The Washington Post* argues that this *guns and butter* approach, without an effective balancing tax hike, strained the federal budget and contributed to the inflationary pressures that built throughout the late 1960s and into the 1970s.¹ By the time Carter entered office in 1977, the U.S. was caught amid an unprecedented economic phenomenon dubbed *stagflation*—a toxic mix of stagnant economic growth, high unemployment, and high inflation. David Farber, an American historian specializing in the modern era, highlights how rising global competition during this period placed growing pressure on major U.S. industries such as steel and automobiles. As international markets expanded and foreign producers gained ground, American manufacturing jobs began to disappear, wages stagnated, and working-class communities faced increasing economic insecurity.² In June of 1980, six months before the Election, the unemployment rate was a soaring 7.6% and the inflation rate was a colossal 16%.³ Through the 1970s, it felt like the American Dream was slipping further and further out of reach.

International shocks only exacerbated the economic problem. In 1973, the fourth Arab-Israeli War began, and in retaliation for American support of Israel, the Organization of the Petroleum Exporting Countries (OPEC) cut off all oil exports to the United States, leading to dwindling energy supplies and skyrocketing oil prices. Historian of U.S. political history and

economy at Princeton, Meg Jacobs, notes that the embargo led to a 10% decline in America's fuel supply and completely exposed America for its dependence on foreign oil.⁴ Gas prices spiked, and lines at the pump were miles long. Then, in 1979, the Iranian Revolution triggered yet another oil crisis that caused oil prices to surge again. While the entire world felt the impact, the United States, already reeling from trade deficits, inflation, and reliance on foreign oil, was especially hit hard. Gas lines, fuel shortages, and skyrocketing bills became realities for the vast majority of Americans. A political cartoon by Herbert Block, a left-leaning, Pulitzer Prize-winning cartoonist for *The Washington Post*, powerfully captured this moment.⁵ The imagery is striking as the cartoon delivers a double meaning: while American diplomats were literal hostages in Tehran, the American public was metaphorically a hostage at home, bound by decades of dependence on foreign oil. With confidence already eroded by a feeble economy, the ongoing crisis in Tehran only deepened the public's sense that the nation was adrift and that Carter needed to go. Perhaps most telling is the fact that this criticism came from someone ideologically aligned with Carter on many issues. The reality that even progressive voices publicly voiced disapproval shows how widespread the frustration with the United States and the Carter administration had grown to be, and how fully dissipated Carter's influence had become.

Building on these economic challenges, Iwan Morgan, a professor and historian of U.S. economics at University College London, focuses more critically on President Carter's weak economic agenda. Morgan argues that Carter's failure to effectively control inflation or instill

public confidence deepened the nation's economic anxiety and contributed to a broader sense of malaise. While Carter did introduce ambitious economic and energy policies, including investments in alternative energy, deregulation of certain industries, and a cap on federal hiring, Morgan noted that only the deregulation efforts achieved meaningful success. The rest of Carter's anti-inflation agenda, he contended, proved largely ineffective in the face of mounting economic instability.⁶

Meanwhile, Ronald Reagan offered a stark contrast: a simple, optimistic message rooted in tax cuts, supply-side economics, deregulation, and reducing government spending. *Reaganomics*, though short on specifics at the time, was easy to understand and gave voters a sense of understanding that this economic disaster could be mitigated. Paul A. Samuelson, a distinguished American economist and the first U.S. recipient of the Nobel Memorial Prize in Economic Sciences, was notably critical of Reaganomics, arguing that it lacked coherence and was more a blend of political interests than a unified economic program.⁷ Whether the economic crisis was truly Carter's fault or simply a burden beyond his control, it is clear that the widespread economic frustration played a role in his defeat and opened the door for Reagan's vision of American economic recovery.

In U.S. elections, charisma always plays a substantial role in shaping public perception of leadership, and few contests more clearly demonstrated the power of personality in politics than the stark contrast between Jimmy Carter and Ronald Reagan. In the midst of national crises, Carter often appeared nonchalant and indifferent when addressing his people. His infamous

“crisis of confidence” speech reflected a chastising tone and marked a turning point for the American view of Carter:

“The threat is nearly invisible in ordinary ways. It is a crisis of confidence. It is a crisis that strikes at the very heart and soul and spirit of our national will. We can see this crisis in the growing doubt about the meaning of our own lives and in the loss of a unity of purpose for our nation. The erosion of our confidence in the future is threatening to destroy the social and the political fabric of America.”⁸

Carter’s language reflects a solution focused on self-reflection and moral values rather than tangible policy solutions he could make. By diagnosing the national problem as psychological rather than economic or political, he situated the crisis within the emotional and spiritual condition of the American people. This abstract and ambiguous tone distanced the speech from the practical realities of inflation, unemployment, and international turmoil that most Americans were dealing with. Additionally, this speech lacked the clarity and immediacy that constituents expected in the moment of national difficulty. Rather than galvanizing hope or unity, the speech had an accusation, implying that the public’s own failings were to blame for the country’s problems. Carter’s speech, while very serious and necessary, undermined his image as a decisive leader, deepening the perception that he was disconnected from the needs and desires of his people.

Another example of Jimmy Carter’s perceived impotence by the American people was highlighted by American political journalist Brooks Jackson in the *Washington Post*’s August 30, 1979, front-page story titled ‘Bunny Goes Bugs: Rabbit Attacks President’.⁹ The article recounts a bizarre and seemingly trivial incident in which Carter, while canoeing alone in

Georgia on vacation, was forced to fend off a swimming rabbit with a paddle. Yet, what could have been a humorous anecdote was transformed into a public relations fiasco. The accompanying cartoon, a parody of the horror film *Jaws* rebranded as *PAWS*, shows an oversized rabbit menacingly approaching a terrified Carter in his canoe. The image is loaded with satirical symbolism: Carter appears frightened and helpless, unable to assert control even over a harmless animal. Making matters worse, Carter was on a personal fishing vacation during this moment: a choice that highlighted his detachment from the people at a time when the country was experiencing one of its worst economic months of the 1970s. Albeit before the Hostage Crisis, but still during a time of U.S. fragility, this cartoon helped crystallize the growing public sentiment that Carter lacked the authority and gravitas expected of a commander-in-chief. Yet Carter was not without moments of resolve. After the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan, he publicly condemned the aggression, laid out a new doctrine committing to the defense of Middle Eastern oil interests, and imposed a series of retaliatory measures, including sanctions, trade embargoes, and a boycott of the 1980 Moscow Olympics.¹⁰ These moves were meant to impose a bulwark against Soviet expansionism and assert American strength abroad. Still, actions like these were often eclipsed by Carter's languishing economy and a stagnant Hostage Crisis that shaped his public image as indecisive and weak.

Conversely, Reagan, a veteran Hollywood actor turned politician, exuded confidence and warmth, communicating in clear, relatable language that resonated with everyday Americans.

Just several days before the 1980 election, Reagan's final remarks to the American people cut to the heart of voters' economic anxieties and offered a hopeful, solution-oriented message:

“Are you better off than you were 4 years ago?... If you don't agree, if you don't think that this course that we've been on for the last 4 years is what you would like to see us follow for the next 4, then I could suggest another choice that you have. This country doesn't have to be in the shape that it is in. We do not have to go on sharing in scarcity, with the country getting worse off, with unemployment growing.”¹¹

Reagan's language is strikingly direct, accessible, and rooted in the everyday experiences of American voters. Unlike Carter's abstract rhetoric, Reagan framed the national crisis in concrete terms before offering a clear and optimistic alternative. His rhetorical question immediately personalized the issue and prompted voters to reflect on their own quality of life. His use of plainspoken, conversational phrasing emphasized the possibility of change in a pragmatic, solutions-oriented manner. Reagan further grounded his message with a vivid metaphor: “We talk about the unemployment lines. If all of the unemployed today were in a single line allowing 2 feet for each one of them, that line would reach from New York City to Los Angeles, California”. This image is not only memorable but powerfully visual, translating abstract statistics into something tangible and emotionally resonant. Finally, Reagan ended his final speech to the American people before the election on a note of assured optimism: “All of this can be cured, and all of it can be solved”. By doing this, Reagan positioned himself as the candidate of hope, competence, and forward momentum. This speech greatly enhanced Reagan's appeal in a moment when the constituency craved reassurance and clarity, especially significant given that the debate reached 80 million viewers, the largest ever for a presidential debate aside from 2016.

While Reagan framed America's problems as solvable and temporary, Carter failed to address the problems, casting them off as a 'crisis of confidence' that the people should deal with. In an election where many voters sought reassurance and a strong leader, Reagan's optimism and polished delivery stood in sharp contrast to Carter's despondent rhetoric. Thus, when Carter seemed stymied by the events in Tehran, Reagan's confidence offered voters a psychological exit and a path to an optimistic future.

While the initial response to the Iran hostage crisis briefly boosted Carter's popularity, the timing of the crisis ultimately proved politically disastrous and damaged Jimmy Carter's chances for reelection in 1980. In the past, international crises such as the U-2 incident or the Bay of Pigs invasion provided a 'rally around the flag' moment, where Americans would temporarily abandon party differences and express their full support for the president during these tragic events. Political scientists Lee Sigelman and Pamela Johnston Conover—both distinguished scholars of American political behavior—conducted an experiment during the aftermath of the hostage crisis to confirm this very effect. Their findings, analogous to past events, showed that the hostage crisis yielded a similar rally-round-the-flag response, leading to a temporary bump in public approval for Carter. In fact, this effect was so strong that one month after the Hostage Crisis, in their study of more than 400 people with evenly split party affiliations, 88% said they would support Carter with his decisions regarding the Hostage Crisis.¹² However, this initial support of political independents and members of the opposition party is quite fragile, and is driven more by a need for national solidarity than political

agreement. Sigelman and Conover confirmed that as crises drag on without any tangible movement in the right direction, these tenuous supporters often retreat back to their partisan biases. In the case of the Hostage Crisis, the continued nature of the crisis for over a year had exhausted the public's tolerance for the matter by the time of the election in November. By late October of 1980, one month before the election, they found that the percentage of people supporting Carter's decisions through the Hostage Crisis was down to 47%.¹³ If the hostages had been released sooner, or if the crisis had happened later in the election cycle, it is likely that Carter would have kept more of the initial temporally-generated support. Instead, the timing of the crisis caused the public to make assessments of Carter based on both partisan and personal evaluations of Carter's ability to lead.

Carter's management of the Iran hostage crisis, especially his failure in his one and only rescue mission, named Operation Eagle Claw, solidified an increasingly prevalent belief in the U.S. that he was a weak leader. Although Carter's inability to negotiate with Iran was not entirely his doing, since he was negotiating with an unpredictable and stubborn post-revolutionary Iranian regime composed of young students, it left a sense of impotence and ineffectiveness on view for the American populace. Relatedly, Rose McDermott, a political scientist who specializes in prospect theory at Brown University, notes that another under-reported aspect of Carter's perceived weakness during the hostage crisis was his inability to foster an international response to Iran's actions. Carter was unable to round up significant assistance from U.S. allies in Europe who were reluctant to impose sanctions. McDermott exhibited that the only reason

European nations very passively agreed to impose minimal sanctions was a result of the U.S. threatening military force on Iran.¹⁴ This diplomatic deadlock signified the U.S.'s inability to leverage its power over even a weak, newly formed theocratic regime.

Ultimately, when all other options had failed, Carter approved a rescue operation in April of 1980. Unfortunately, hours after the mission began, it was promptly aborted due to insufficient aircraft, as only five of the eight helicopters were able to reach the first rendezvous point. The situation then took a tragic turn during refueling when one of the helicopters collided with a C-130 transport plane, causing a deadly explosion that took the lives of eight men.¹⁵ Back in Washington, the failed mission marked a massive failure for Carter and his chances of reelection. The operation, which had been launched under immense political pressure and during a period of domestic and international vulnerability, was widely criticized for poor planning and overly cautious execution. In an environment where the United States already appeared weakened on the world stage, the mission's failure was a symbol of national embarrassment. Carter's gamble had high stakes; a successful rescue could have reversed public opinion and invigorated his reelection campaign. Instead, its failure compounded perceptions of his indecisiveness and ineffectiveness, damaging what remained of his political affluence.¹⁶ Unlike President John F. Kennedy, who accepted responsibility for the Bay of Pigs invasion during a press conference the day after and quickly regained public trust through his candor, Carter struggled to project decisive leadership or directly apologize in the aftermath, further eroding confidence in his ability to dig the U.S. out of the hole they were in.¹⁷

Furthermore, the media's role during the Iran Hostage Crisis expanded greatly, actively shaping public sentiment and political expectations in ways that ultimately harmed Jimmy Carter's candidacy. The launch of *America Held Hostage*, the precursor to ABC's *Nightline*, marked a pivotal shift in television journalism, transforming a foreign policy standoff into an ongoing television drama that aired nightly for 440 consecutive days, beginning just four days after the hostage crisis began. Farber argues that the daily programming was made to humanize the hostages, casting them not as government employees entangled in a geopolitical confrontation, but as innocent victims whose suffering was meant to be felt viscerally by the American public. Yellow ribbons tied around trees, headlights left on in symbolic solidarity, and the inclusion of 52 ribbons on the White House Christmas tree each served as emblems of a country emotionally invested in the ordeal.¹⁸ The media, eager for pathos, frequently competed for access to the families of the hostages, seeking tears and emotionally charged statements that would boost ratings and intensify the story's moral stakes. Interviews often featured relatives speaking not as political actors but as anguished human beings—one mother of a captive marine guard saying plainly, "I don't understand political things... [We] are here because we are all human beings."¹⁹ These narratives blurred the lines between political critique and moral outrage, erasing the complex causes of the crisis in favor of a simplistic "us versus them" dichotomy that vilified Iranians wholesale. This moral framing heightened expectations for Carter to act as a righteous savior, and when he failed to deliver a resolution, it cast his restraint and deliberation as moral weakness. Ironically, the hostages didn't share a similarly emotionally charged view on the crisis. During a 2013 interview with a former hostage, former Deputy Assistant Secretary of State for Iran John Limbert, he was asked if he ever felt the U.S. had let him down. Limbert

responded, “Not really. I don’t think I ever thought that. I think the Iranians would have liked us to think that but you could see how difficult this was going to be...What are you going to do? What alternatives do they have?”²⁰ In this interview that took place over thirty years after the Hostage Crisis, Limbert’s response displays how taking time to reflect back on an event allows for a more nuanced and measured perspective. Limbert reported a pragmatic understanding of the administration’s limited options, recognizing the chaos within Iran and the absence of a legitimate negotiating partner. However, this perspective never made it into the dominant media portrayal. Instead, Carter was judged not on the difficulty of the situation, but on his inability to swiftly resolve a highly visible and emotionally charged crisis that had been made to feel personal to every American household.

Furthermore, in the pivotal months leading up to the 1980 U.S. presidential election, the Iran hostage crisis became a menacing political weapon that Reagan used to achieve victory. The Reagan campaign was worried about an “October Surprise” – a major event that had the influence to sway the outcome of the November election. In this case, the Reagan campaign viewed any potential hostage release before the election as a threat to their success, fearing that Carter might pull a surprise resolution and quickly regain voter support right before Election Day. According to Gary G. Sick, a historian and analyst of Middle East affairs with a particular focus on Iran, the Reagan-Bush campaign may have taken extraordinary and secretive steps to prevent this. In what Sick presents as a revisionist and speculative interpretation of the events, he argues that the campaign engaged in covert diplomacy, spread disinformation, and leaked intelligence to undermine Carter’s credibility. Beginning in early October, news reports across

the U.S. began asserting, based on anonymous but seemingly credible sources, that U.S. military equipment was en route to Iran in preparation for a last-minute hostage deal. These reports were vivid and specific, describing U.S. Navy cargo planes, quantities, and deployment times. But they were all false.²¹ As Sick details, these stories appear to have been orchestrated to create a false public perception of progress, thereby keeping Carter on the defensive while undermining trust in his administration's efforts. The effect of the disinformation was paired with a deeper, more clandestine layer of the Reagan administration's plans. Sick also outlines how Republican operatives had infiltrated government sectors—including the Pentagon, State Department, and even the White House—feeding classified updates to the Reagan team, even including a stolen copy of Carter's presidential debate briefing book.²²

Meanwhile, Iran, desperate for military aid amid the escalating Iran-Iraq War, saw no benefit in a Carter victory. His administration had frozen arms shipments and rejected any Israeli-Iranian cooperation, while Reagan's team signaled an openness to a renewed arms-for-favors arrangement. By mid-October, Iran had begun to reopen its covert relationship with Israel, with what Sick suggests was with Reagan-Bush approval. For the Iranian leadership, the prospect of dealing with Reagan, who had no emotional investment in the hostage standoff and showed flexibility on arms policy, seemed far more beneficial than striking a last-minute deal with Carter.²³ The hostages were finally released on January 20, 1981, just minutes after Reagan's inauguration. Critics such as Sick argue that the timing was just too perfect to be a mere coincidence. Iran's delay was perceived as a final act of defiance, meant to rub salt into Jimmy Carter's wounds and ensure that his political downfall was complete.

The landmark and landslide 1980 election reminds us that political leadership is not only judged by the decisions made in the Oval Office, but by how those decisions are perceived in moments of uncertainty and collective vulnerability. What happened to Jimmy Carter wasn't simply a diplomatic failure; it was a collision between the complexities of the presidency and the simplicity of public expectation. Among the many issues that plagued Carter's term, it was the Iranian Hostage Crisis that most sharply defined his public image and ultimately sealed his fate in November. Carter's failure lay not only in what he did or didn't do, but in what the nation, hungry for certainty, no longer saw in him. That hunger hasn't gone away. Today, the line between governance and performance is thinner than ever. Voters still gravitate toward leaders who appear strong, even when that strength is more image than reality. The 1980 election marked a turning point—not just in partisan power, but in how Americans choose their presidents: less for how they govern, and more for how they appear in moments of national doubt.

Conclusion: From 1979 to Today

Iran Immediately Post-1979

Iran's current domestic politics and its relations with the United States are still deeply shaped by the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the 1980 election. These two watershed moments entrenched anti-Western ideology at the very foundation of the Islamic Republic. Ayatollah

Khomeini's regime seized on new slogans like "*Death to America*" to define its identity. The revolutionary regime uses this anti-Western discourse partly for domestic political unity – demonizing the West to distinguish regime loyalists from dissenters. Unfortunately, the 1979 Islamic Revolution gave way not to a democratic spring, as many Iranians had hoped, but to a long winter of discontent²⁴ where revolutionary optimism was swiftly replaced by authoritarianism. Khomeini's radical clerical regime promptly used violence, martyrdom, and radical Shi'ism to monopolize power and control the population.

The Rise of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps

The 1979 revolution not only overthrew Iran's monarchy but also transformed the architecture of political power within the Islamic Republic. Amid widespread distrust of the Shah's military and elite establishment, Khomeini and his clerical allies established the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in May 1979 as an autonomous paramilitary force.²⁵ The IRGC was built from the ground up as an ideological vanguard committed to safeguarding the Islamic Revolution from both internal and external threats.²⁶ The IRGC had emerged from the revolutionary street militias—pasdaran and hezbollahi gangs—that helped Khomeini seize control in 1979.²⁷ As the official military fractured under the weight of purges, retirements, and executions, the Guards rapidly filled the vacuum, assuming responsibility for quelling ethnic uprisings and civil unrest. In doing so, they were transformed into a powerful organ of the regime, marginalizing leftist groups, liberal secularists, and rival Islamist factions. Over the ensuing decades, the IRGC evolved from a revolutionary guerilla militia into a sprawling

politico-military-industrial complex.²⁸ Today the IRGC controls vast economic assets, runs many of Iran's most strategic projects, and oversees its missile and nuclear programs. As a result, even relatively moderate Iranian presidents cannot easily depart from the Guard's hardline, radical ideology, embedding clerical-military rule as the bedrock of the Islamic Republic.²⁹

The Reagan Administration's Key Middle East Policy

Reagan's Iran-Iraq policy crystallized the strategic and moral contradictions that defined late Cold War Persian Gulf politics, foreclosing any realistic prospect of rapprochement with Tehran. Publicly, Washington used Saddam Hussein as the bulwark against Iranian dominance in the Gulf, furnishing Baghdad with battlefield intelligence, agricultural credits, and diplomatic protection³⁰ despite full understanding of his authoritarian brutality and chemical weapons program.³¹ Privately, however, Reagan's national security group was funneling arms to Tehran through the Iran-Contra network, rationalizing that the proceeds could both free U.S. hostages in Lebanon and possibly recultivate future diplomatic efforts.³² Kuwait, a neighboring gulf state, exploited Washington's Cold War anxieties by expressing a shift towards the Soviet side unless the United States secured the maritime lifelines of their oil exports. This gambit succeeded: in 1987 the Reagan administration re-flagged Kuwaiti tankers and dispatched naval escorts, a move that placed U.S. forces in direct confrontation with Iranian naval units and cemented, in Iranian eyes, America's role as an unyielding enemy.³³ Arming both belligerents in

one of the twentieth century's most devastating wars eroded U.S. moral credibility, amplified Tehran's anti-Washington conviction, and obliterated any residual trust lingering from Iran's monarchical era. By the war's end, both countries were strategic threats to the U.S. leading to the Gulf War, which culminated in President Bill Clinton's *dual containment* doctrine of the 1990s.³⁴

Iran-U.S. Nuclear Diplomacy

In the 21st century, U.S.–Iran relations have been defined by an entrenched cycle of mistrust centered on Tehran's nuclear program. The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) briefly promised to cap Iran's nuclear activities in exchange for sanctions relief, but President Donald Trump's withdrawal in May 2018, Iran's failure to uphold the treaty, and the reimposition of sweeping sanctions have rendered the 2015 treaty worthless.³⁵ Since then, Iran progressively expanded its uranium enrichment to near-weapons-grade levels, curtailed International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) monitoring, and pursued advanced centrifuge development.³⁶ By late 2022, U.S. intelligence assessed that Iran's "breakout" time to produce weapons-grade uranium had shrunk from the JCPOA's 12-month benchmark to mere days. Any diplomatic revival of the accord has faltered. President Biden acknowledged in November 2022 that the JCPOA was "dead".³⁷ Meanwhile, Western outrage over Tehran's violent repression of the Mahsa Amini protests, its transfer of Shahed drones to Russia for use against Ukrainian civilian infrastructure, and its continued arming of regional proxies such as Hezbollah and the Houthis has narrowed the political space for compromise in Washington and Europe.³⁸ The U.S.

has doubled down on a “maximum pressure” strategy—designating the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) as a foreign terrorist organization, expanding economic sanctions, and deepening security coordination with Israel and Gulf Arab states.

The Complex Landscape of Iranian Public Sentiment

A 2024 public opinion study conducted inside Iran revealed a growing divide between the Iranian government and its people, highlighting how the ideological legacy of the 1979 Islamic Revolution no longer aligns with the everyday values of Iranian citizens. While the Islamic Republic continues to use anti-Western rhetoric, especially against the United States, to consolidate power and frame its foreign policy, Iranians themselves appear increasingly disillusioned with this approach. According to the study, 78% of respondents believe Iran’s foreign policy is at least partly to blame for the country’s economic and social problems, and 63% say it fails to improve the well-being of ordinary citizens.³⁹ These figures reflect a clear rejection of the government’s aggressive and imprudent regional agenda. Yet, this public frustration with the Islamic Republic does not equate to uncritical support for the West. While 68% of Iranians favor normalizing relations with the United States, this openness coexists with deep mistrust toward Western-aligned states like Israel, with only 25% supporting normalization.⁴⁰ Furthermore, 61% support Iran’s military backing of proxy groups in the Middle East, showing that Iranians still buy into the regime’s security narrative.⁴¹ Patently, the regime maintains a rigid anti-American stance as a pillar of its identity. It’s important to recognize the

Iranian government and the Iranian people should not be treated as a monolith. As citizens express a desire for economic relief, political tolerance, and a break from ideological isolation, the state continues to cling to the authoritarian values of 1979

The 12 Day War:

The June 2025 Israel–Iran war marked the most acute clash in a long proxy conflict between Tehran and Jerusalem, and it was the first to draw the United States into direct combat on Iranian soil. Israel’s preemptive strikes on the Fordow and Natanz enrichment complexes triggered an unprecedented Iranian retaliation with hundreds of ballistic missiles and drones targeting Israeli cities.⁴² The overwhelming majority of these projectiles were intercepted by not only Israel’s advanced air-defense network but also to the U.S.-supplied Patriot and THAAD systems.⁴³

More consequential was Washington’s decision to join the offensive. B-2 bombers armed with 30,000-pound bunker-busters struck deep-buried enrichment facilities—actions the White House claimed had “obliterated” Iran’s nuclear capability, though subsequent leaks suggested only partial destruction.⁴⁴ The immediate military effect was significant: the strikes killed more than ten senior nuclear scientists, disrupted enrichment cycles, and damaged infrastructure enough to delay, though not eliminate, Iran’s breakout potential.⁴⁵ The episode displayed a precedent of U.S. willingness to apply direct force against the Iranian homeland to neutralize nuclear threats.

In Israel and Washington, the campaign was framed as a tactical success by rolling back Iran's nuclear clock and demonstrating alliance resolve. In Tehran, state media emphasized the twenty-nine Israeli casualties, showcased imagery of damaged urban centers, and recast the war as evidence of the Islamic Republic's capacity to endure high-intensity confrontation with a technologically superior adversary.⁴⁶ This narrative discipline served three enduring regime objectives: ensuring leadership survival, preserving the nuclear program as a strategic insurance policy, and protecting critical missile and command infrastructures. The fact that these pillars remained intact allowed the regime to claim their 'victory' despite the damage sustained.

The broader strategic lesson is that the U.S.–Iran relationship has entered a phase where deterrence is managed through military capability rather than diplomacy. Even if a postwar nuclear arrangement were to emerge under improved terms, Iran's growing nuclear expertise would render such a deal inherently fragile. With no internal political change in Tehran, the United States faces an enduring dilemma whether to normalize periodic interventions as a tool of nuclear management or refrain from regular action at the risk that Iran accelerates toward nuclear weapons capability faster than Washington can respond. Indeed, European signatories to the 2015 JCPOA have threatened to trigger the UN "snapback" mechanism—automatically and unilaterally reimposing eased-off sanctions—if Iran fails to curb its nuclear activities, while Tehran teases that any new sanctions will only drive further enrichment.⁴⁷

In sum, today's Iran and America are still locked in the antagonistic relationship born of the mid-20th-century upheavals. The U.S. remains a powerful regional player, allied

with Israel and increasingly wary of Iran's China-linked future. Iran, for its part, remains the revolution it proclaimed to be: fiercely anti-Western in rhetoric, guided by clerical ideology, and secure in the knowledge that America is their enemy. The 1979 revolution lives on in the slogans on Tehran's streets and the security plans in Washington's war rooms. Unless those deep-rooted narratives change, Iran-U.S. relations will continue to simmer at the edges of open conflict.

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