Analysis of Misperception in U.S. Foreign Policy Toward Iran: Roots and Legal and Political Consequences

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the central role of misperception in shaping U.S. foreign policy toward Iran and the enduring legal and political consequences that emerge from this distorted interpretive framework. Moving beyond materialist explanations of conflict, the study demonstrates that persistent tensions are driven primarily by cognitive bias, cultural misrepresentation, and institutionalized patterns of misunderstanding. Drawing upon an integrated theoretical framework that combines cognitive approaches to misperception with interpretive analysis of political meaning, the research traces how U.S. policymakers have repeatedly constructed Iran through fixed narratives of threat, irrationality, and hostility. These representations have structured strategic assessments, restricted diplomatic imagination, and legitimized coercive policies whose outcomes consistently contradict their stated objectives. The article further shows how such misperceptions have produced significant consequences within Iran, including the consolidation of a resistance-based national identity, the legal-political justification of defense and regional strategies, and the institutionalization of economic self-reliance. Rather than weakening Iranian resolve, U.S. pressure has strengthened internal cohesion and expanded Iran's regional influence through the Axis of Resistance. At the international level, misperception has contributed to the failure of major diplomatic initiatives, most notably the collapse of the JCPOA, while accelerating regional instability and eroding U.S. credibility. The findings reveal that misperception functions as a self-reinforcing structure embedded within policymaking institutions and political discourse, rendering strategic learning extremely difficult. The study concludes that sustainable conflict management between Iran and the United States is unattainable without a fundamental reassessment of the cognitive and cultural foundations of policy interpretation.

Keywords: *Misperception; U.S. Foreign Policy; Iran–U.S. Relations; Strategic Failure; Resistance Discourse; Orientalism; Regional Stability*

Introduction

The relationship between Iran and the United States represents one of the most complex, protracted, and crisis-laden bilateral interactions in contemporary international politics. From its earliest phases of engagement in the nineteenth century to its present condition of sustained hostility, the evolution of this relationship reveals not merely a sequence of policy disagreements but a deepening structure of mistrust, misunderstanding, and mutual antagonism. In the early period, American involvement in Iran was characterized by limited commercial and

missionary presence, followed by growing political and strategic engagement in the mid-twentieth century as Iran became a critical pillar of U.S. regional strategy during the Cold War (1). This partnership, however, rested on fragile foundations. The U.S.-backed overthrow of Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh in 1953 not only entrenched authoritarian rule under the Shah but also implanted a durable perception within Iranian political consciousness that American power was willing to sacrifice Iranian sovereignty for geopolitical advantage (1). The subsequent decades of close alliance masked this unresolved trauma until the 1979 Islamic Revolution fundamentally restructured the bilateral relationship, transforming it from strategic partnership into ideological confrontation. The revolution reframed the United States from ally into principal antagonist, a shift grounded in a broader rejection of external domination and the articulation of a new political identity rooted in independence and resistance (2).

In the post-revolutionary era, relations entered a prolonged phase of antagonism in which crises became the dominant mode of interaction. The hostage crisis of 1979–1981 hardened mutual suspicion and established a template of reciprocal demonization that has endured for more than four decades. Subsequent events, including U.S. support for Iraq during the Iran-Iraq War, the downing of Iran Air Flight 655, successive rounds of economic sanctions, and recurrent military confrontations in the Persian Gulf, progressively institutionalized distrust as the organizing principle of bilateral engagement (3). Rather than functioning as episodic disputes within a broader diplomatic framework, these crises became self-reinforcing mechanisms through which each side interpreted the other's actions as confirmation of hostile intent. Over time, this crisis-driven interaction produced a stable adversarial relationship in which policy choices on both sides were increasingly detached from immediate circumstances and anchored instead in entrenched historical narratives and identity-based assumptions (4). The institutionalization of hostility thus transformed misperception from an occasional error of judgment into a structural feature of the relationship.

Within this context, misperception emerges as a central analytical concept for understanding the persistence and escalation of conflict in Iran–U.S. relations. In international politics, misperception refers to systematic distortions in the interpretation of another actor's intentions, capabilities, and behavior, arising not from incomplete information alone but from the cognitive frameworks through which information is processed (5). States do not respond to objective reality as such; rather, they respond to their perceptions of reality, which are shaped by historical experience, ideological commitments, cultural representations, and institutional incentives. When these perceptions diverge significantly from the opponent's actual motives or strategic logic, misperception becomes a powerful driver of policy failure, crisis escalation, and missed opportunities for cooperation (6). The U.S.–Iran case provides a particularly vivid illustration of this phenomenon. American policymakers have frequently interpreted Iranian actions primarily through security lenses emphasizing threat, expansionism, and ideological hostility, while Iranian leaders have framed U.S. behavior as evidence of imperial ambition and hegemonic domination (7). Each side's perception reinforces the other's, creating a self-sustaining cycle in which mistrust becomes both cause and consequence of policy choices.

The practical consequences of misperception are profound. Policies built upon distorted assumptions often generate outcomes that contradict their stated objectives, producing what has been described as strategic blowback. The U.S. reliance on coercive instruments, particularly economic sanctions and military signaling, has repeatedly failed to produce the desired behavioral change in Iran and has instead strengthened domestic political forces committed to resistance and self-reliance (8). Similarly, Iranian efforts to deter external pressure through regional influence and asymmetric capabilities have reinforced U.S. threat perceptions, legitimizing further coercive

measures (9). In such an environment, even initiatives explicitly designed to reduce tensions, such as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, remain vulnerable to collapse because the underlying perceptual frameworks that shape policy interpretation remain unaltered (10). Misperception thus not only contributes to immediate policy failure but also constrains the long-term capacity of both states to escape cycles of confrontation.

Against this backdrop, the central research problem of this article is to explain why misperception has become so deeply embedded in U.S. foreign policy toward Iran and how these misperceptions have produced enduring legal and political consequences for both bilateral relations and the broader regional order. The core research question asks: what are the principal forms of misperception shaping U.S. policy toward Iran, and how have these misperceptions influenced the evolution of legal doctrines, political strategies, and patterns of conflict? This inquiry is further developed through subsidiary questions addressing the roots of these misperceptions in historical experience, ideological assumptions, and cultural representation; the mechanisms through which misperceptions are generated and reproduced within policymaking institutions; and the consequences of these distortions for diplomatic engagement, regional stability, and international law. By situating misperception at the center of analysis, the article seeks to move beyond explanations that reduce Iran–U.S. tensions to material power struggles or irreconcilable interests and instead illuminate the cognitive and interpretive dimensions of foreign policy behavior.

The theoretical and methodological framework of this study is constructed at the intersection of cognitive psychology and interpretive sociology. The analysis draws on Robert Jervis's theory of misperception, which demonstrates that political leaders process information through cognitive filters shaped by prior beliefs, stereotypes, and organizational routines, leading to persistent errors in judgment even in the presence of contrary evidence (5). Jervis's insights help explain why policymakers often remain committed to failing strategies and why corrective information is frequently discounted or ignored. In the context of U.S. policy toward Iran, such cognitive dynamics are visible in the enduring reliance on coercive pressure despite extensive evidence of its counterproductive effects (3). At the same time, the study incorporates Max Weber's concept of Verstehen, or interpretive understanding, which emphasizes the necessity of grasping the subjective meanings that actors attach to their actions in order to comprehend social and political behavior (11). From this perspective, Iranian foreign policy cannot be adequately understood through Western instrumental rationality alone; it must be interpreted within the historical, cultural, and identity-based frameworks that give meaning to concepts such as independence, justice, and resistance (12).

The integration of Jervis's cognitive approach with Weber's interpretive sociology provides a powerful analytical lens for examining misperception in Iran–U.S. relations. Cognitive theory illuminates the internal processes through which policymakers form distorted perceptions, while Verstehen enables the analyst to reconstruct the logic of action as it appears from within the actor's own worldview. This combined framework makes it possible to identify not only where U.S. perceptions of Iran diverge from Iranian intentions but also why these divergences persist despite repeated empirical disconfirmation (4). Moreover, this approach highlights the role of cultural representation and identity politics in shaping strategic interpretation. Western discourses have frequently portrayed Iran through Orientalist tropes that depict it as irrational, emotional, and inherently hostile, a pattern that continues to influence contemporary policy debates (13). Such representations contribute to a systematic misreading of Iranian behavior and constrain the range of policy options considered legitimate or feasible.

By applying this integrated theoretical framework, the article seeks to demonstrate that the enduring conflict between Iran and the United States is not simply the product of incompatible interests or regional power competition, but the outcome of deeply embedded misperceptions rooted in cognitive biases, historical trauma, and cultural

misunderstanding. These misperceptions have become institutionalized within policy doctrines, legal regimes, and political narratives, shaping not only immediate policy choices but the very structure of bilateral interaction. Understanding this dynamic is essential for explaining why repeated diplomatic initiatives have failed to produce lasting détente and why crisis remains the dominant mode of engagement between the two states (6). The analysis thus provides a foundation for rethinking the possibilities of conflict management and diplomatic transformation in one of the most consequential relationships in contemporary international politics.

Theoretical Foundations and Research Design

Understanding the persistence of conflict between Iran and the United States requires moving beyond conventional explanations grounded solely in material power distribution or conflicting national interests. Robert Jervis's theory of perception and misperception provides a foundational analytical framework for examining how cognitive processes systematically distort foreign policy decision-making and produce enduring patterns of antagonism. Jervis demonstrates that political actors do not perceive external reality directly but instead filter incoming information through preexisting beliefs, stereotypes, and institutionalized expectations, which then shape their interpretation of the intentions and capabilities of others (5). These cognitive filters operate by privileging information that confirms existing assumptions while discounting contradictory evidence, thereby creating a closed interpretive loop that reinforces initial judgments. In the U.S. case, this process has repeatedly manifested in the portrayal of Iran as a uniquely dangerous and ideologically driven adversary, a perception that persists despite substantial variation in Iranian policy behavior across different administrations and geopolitical contexts (3).

Stereotyping further intensifies this distortion. Stereotypes function as simplified mental models that reduce complex political realities into easily recognizable categories, allowing policymakers to manage uncertainty but at the cost of analytical accuracy (6). Iran has long been categorized within U.S. strategic discourse as an inherently revisionist, irrational, and expansionist power, a representation that narrows the range of policy responses considered appropriate and renders conciliatory signals politically suspect (4). This stereotyping interacts with signaling problems that arise when states attempt to communicate intentions across cultural, ideological, and historical divides. Signals that are meant to convey restraint or deterrence may be interpreted as deception or weakness, while actions intended for domestic legitimacy may be misread as external aggression (5). In Iran–U.S. relations, diplomatic gestures such as temporary nuclear concessions or regional de-escalation initiatives have often been interpreted in Washington as tactical maneuvers designed to buy time, reinforcing mistrust rather than alleviating it (10).

Mirror-imaging further compounds misperception by encouraging policymakers to assume that adversaries reason and prioritize interests in the same manner as they do. U.S. officials frequently evaluate Iranian behavior through the lens of Western strategic rationality, presuming that Iran's actions are driven primarily by material cost-benefit calculations, while underestimating the role of historical memory, ideological commitment, and identity-based motivations in shaping Tehran's choices (12). This leads to systematic misjudgment of Iranian resolve, particularly regarding issues such as sanctions resistance and regional influence, where expectations of compliance repeatedly collide with Iran's demonstrated willingness to absorb substantial costs in pursuit of perceived sovereignty and dignity (8). Groupthink within policy institutions reinforces these errors by suppressing dissenting views and privileging consensus around dominant narratives, especially in highly securitized policy environments where questioning core assumptions risks political marginalization (3). As a result, misperception becomes

embedded not only in individual cognition but also in the organizational culture of decision-making bodies, enabling conflicts to persist even when objective interests might permit accommodation (6).

To complement Jervis's cognitive model, this study employs Max Weber's concept of Verstehen, or interpretive understanding, which emphasizes the necessity of grasping the subjective meanings that political actors attach to their own actions in order to comprehend social behavior (11). From a Weberian perspective, foreign policy analysis must reconstruct the internal logic through which states define their interests, rather than imposing external evaluative frameworks that obscure indigenous rationalities. This is particularly relevant in the Iranian case, where political decision-making is deeply embedded in a historical narrative shaped by experiences of foreign intervention, colonial manipulation, revolution, and war. Iranian strategic behavior cannot be fully understood without acknowledging how concepts such as independence, justice, resistance, and anti-hegemony function as core elements of national identity and political legitimacy (2). These values constitute a form of "specific rationality" that organizes policy choices according to criteria that differ fundamentally from Western instrumental calculations of power and utility (12).

Iran's foreign policy orientation reflects this culturally and historically grounded rationality. The emphasis on strategic autonomy, resistance to external domination, and preservation of sovereignty has remained remarkably consistent across political factions and administrations, even as tactical approaches have varied (14). This continuity suggests that Iranian behavior is not erratic or irrational but is governed by a coherent internal logic rooted in collective memory and ideological self-conception. The pursuit of regional influence, for example, is framed domestically not as expansionism but as a defensive strategy designed to deter external threats and prevent strategic encirclement (9). Similarly, resistance to economic sanctions is justified as a moral and political obligation to preserve national dignity and independence, reinforcing domestic cohesion in the face of external pressure (15). When U.S. policymakers interpret these actions exclusively through Western strategic paradigms, they overlook the subjective meanings that make Iranian policy choices intelligible within their own sociopolitical context, thereby deepening misperception and intensifying conflict (4).

Orientalism provides an additional critical lens for analyzing how these misperceptions are produced and sustained. Edward Said's theory of Orientalism describes a system of representation through which Western discourse constructs the "Orient" as fundamentally different, inferior, and threatening, thereby legitimizing policies of control and intervention (4). Within U.S. political and cultural narratives, Iran has frequently been portrayed as an irrational, fanatical, and emotionally driven society, incapable of responsible participation in the international order. Such representations are not merely rhetorical but actively shape strategic assessment by predisposing policymakers to interpret Iranian actions as inherently deceptive or aggressive (13). This construction of Iran as the "irrational Other" obscures the internal coherence of Iranian policy and reduces complex strategic behavior to cultural caricature.

The influence of Orientalist discourse becomes particularly evident in the persistent tendency to dismiss Iranian diplomatic initiatives as insincere while interpreting coercive measures as necessary responses to an inherently hostile regime (3). Media portrayals, political speeches, and policy documents frequently reproduce these assumptions, reinforcing public support for confrontational policies and narrowing the scope for alternative approaches (5). The resulting strategic distortion is self-reinforcing: misrepresentation of Iranian intentions legitimizes coercive policy, which then provokes defensive reactions from Iran that appear to confirm the original

stereotypes (6). Over time, this feedback loop transforms Orientalist assumptions into operational doctrines, embedding cultural misperception within institutional practice (7).

Building upon these theoretical foundations, the research design of this study adopts a qualitative approach centered on document analysis and interpretive inquiry. Qualitative document analysis enables systematic examination of official U.S. foreign policy texts, including National Security Strategies, congressional reports, presidential speeches, and policy statements, in order to identify recurring patterns of representation, framing, and strategic interpretation (16). Directed content analysis is employed using Jervis's theoretical framework as the primary coding guide, allowing for the classification of textual evidence according to categories such as stereotyping, selective attention, misjudgment of intentions and capabilities, signaling failure, and cognitive rigidity (5). This approach ensures theoretical coherence while permitting the emergence of context-specific themes grounded in empirical material.

In addition, discourse analysis is utilized to explore how language constructs and reproduces dominant narratives about Iran within U.S. policy discourse. By examining metaphors, labels, and narrative structures, the analysis reveals how representations of Iran as a threat, an aggressor, or an unreliable actor become normalized within political communication and institutionalized within policy frameworks (13). The integration of discourse analysis with content coding allows for a comprehensive examination of both the cognitive and cultural dimensions of misperception.

Case selection focuses on critical episodes between 2013 and 2023, a period marked by significant diplomatic engagement, renewed confrontation, and strategic realignment. This timeframe encompasses the negotiation and implementation of the JCPOA, the U.S. withdrawal from the agreement, the escalation of economic sanctions, and subsequent regional crises. These cases provide a rich empirical foundation for examining how misperceptions are generated, contested, and reproduced across different administrations and shifting geopolitical contexts (10). Data sources include official U.S. policy documents, public statements by senior officials, congressional testimony, strategic assessments, and relevant academic and policy literature, allowing for triangulation and enhanced analytical reliability (6).

Through this combined theoretical and methodological framework, the study seeks to illuminate the deep structural roots of misperception in U.S. foreign policy toward Iran and to demonstrate how cognitive bias, interpretive failure, and cultural representation converge to sustain one of the most enduring conflicts in modern international relations.

Manifestations of Misperception in U.S. Policy Toward Iran

The practical operation of misperception in U.S. foreign policy toward Iran is most visible in the durable set of stereotypes and prior beliefs that structure American strategic thinking. Among the most influential of these is the terrorism narrative, which frames Iran primarily as the world's leading state sponsor of terrorism. This label, repeatedly embedded in official policy documents and public discourse, functions less as a descriptive category and more as an organizing principle for policy formulation (6). Through this lens, Iran's regional activities are interpreted almost exclusively in security terms, with little attention to the political, historical, or defensive rationales that Iranian policymakers articulate. Support for non-state actors in Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq, and Yemen is thus reduced to an undifferentiated terrorist strategy, rather than understood as a multi-layered approach to deterrence and regional influence shaped by Iran's experiences of war, isolation, and perceived encirclement (14). This

reductionist framing stabilizes threat perceptions in Washington and narrows the space for alternative interpretations, even when empirical developments challenge the coherence of the terrorism narrative (3).

Closely linked to the terrorism narrative is the persistent expansionism label applied to Iranian foreign policy. U.S. officials and analysts frequently depict Iran as a revisionist power pursuing hegemonic dominance in the Middle East, an assumption that positions Iranian behavior as inherently aggressive and destabilizing (5). This interpretation ignores the extent to which Iran's regional strategy is shaped by defensive calculations and historical memory, particularly the experience of invasion, prolonged war, and repeated external intervention (12). Iranian engagement in Iraq and Syria following the rise of ISIS, for example, was widely characterized in Washington as evidence of expansionist ambition, despite substantial evidence that Tehran perceived the collapse of neighboring states as an existential security threat requiring preemptive containment (15). The expansionism label thus functions as a cognitive shortcut that simplifies complex strategic behavior into a single threatening narrative, reinforcing policy preferences for containment and coercion (6).

Nuclear threat inflation constitutes a third pillar of stereotyping within U.S. perceptions of Iran. Although international inspections and intelligence assessments have repeatedly indicated that Iran's nuclear activities remain within civilian parameters under existing agreements, U.S. political discourse has persistently framed Iran as an imminent nuclear weapons threat (10). This framing elevates worst-case assumptions to the level of policy orthodoxy, rendering diplomatic compromise politically hazardous and perpetuating a climate of urgency that favors coercive solutions (3). Nuclear threat inflation also interacts with domestic political incentives in the United States, where portraying Iran as a near-nuclear adversary serves to mobilize public support for sanctions, military preparedness, and regional military commitments (5). Over time, this inflationary dynamic distorts strategic assessment by prioritizing speculative dangers over verified developments, deepening misperception and undermining the credibility of diplomatic engagement (6).

Selective attention and information filtering further entrench these misperceptions. U.S. policymakers exhibit a consistent tendency to privilege information that reinforces established threat narratives while marginalizing contradictory evidence. A prominent illustration of this pattern is the widespread neglect of Iran's cooperation against ISIS during the height of the group's territorial expansion. Iranian military advisors and allied forces played a central role in halting ISIS advances in Iraq and Syria, contributing materially to the preservation of regional stability (8). Yet U.S. policy discourse largely omitted these contributions, focusing instead on Iran's presence in these theaters as confirmation of its destabilizing intentions (14). This selective attention prevented recognition of overlapping security interests and foreclosed opportunities for pragmatic coordination, reinforcing a zero-sum interpretation of regional dynamics (3).

The overemphasis on regime-change rhetoric represents another dimension of information filtering. Despite extensive historical evidence demonstrating the counterproductive consequences of externally imposed regime change, segments of the U.S. political establishment continue to frame transformation of Iran's political system as a feasible and desirable policy objective (1). This rhetorical fixation persists even as Iranian domestic politics display resilience and institutional continuity across periods of intense external pressure (7). The regime-change narrative diverts analytical attention from the structural drivers of Iranian behavior and encourages policymakers to interpret internal social developments as imminent signs of systemic collapse, reinforcing unrealistic expectations and flawed policy projections (3).

Misperception is further sustained by systematic misjudgment of Iran's intentions and capabilities. U.S. policy has repeatedly underestimated Iran's capacity for resilience in the face of economic, diplomatic, and military pressure. The assumption that sanctions would rapidly coerce Iran into strategic capitulation has proven persistently inaccurate, as Iranian political institutions have adapted through economic diversification, regional partnerships, and domestic mobilization around narratives of resistance and sovereignty (15). This misjudgment reflects a failure to appreciate the depth of Iran's political culture of endurance, shaped by revolution, war, and prolonged confrontation with external powers (12). Underestimating this resilience has led U.S. policymakers to overestimate the coercive leverage of sanctions, investing in pressure-based strategies whose structural limitations were evident from their earliest stages (3).

At the same time, U.S. assessments frequently exaggerate Iran's military threat, particularly in the missile and regional domains. Iranian defensive capabilities, developed largely in response to historical vulnerability and conventional military imbalance, are portrayed as evidence of aggressive intent rather than deterrent necessity (9). This exaggeration reinforces arms racing and justifies expansive military deployments in the region, intensifying security dilemmas and increasing the risk of unintended escalation (6). Such inflated threat perceptions obscure the fundamentally defensive logic underlying much of Iran's military posture, further entrenching mutual suspicion (14).

Signaling failures and diplomatic misinterpretation compound these cognitive distortions. Profound cultural and linguistic differences shape how diplomatic messages are encoded and decoded, leading to persistent miscommunication. Iranian diplomatic discourse, rooted in concepts of dignity, historical grievance, and moral legitimacy, often emphasizes symbolic gestures and principled positions that do not map neatly onto Western pragmatic negotiation styles (2). U.S. officials, accustomed to transactional bargaining frameworks, frequently interpret such discourse as ideological rigidity or strategic deception (5). This misalignment of communicative norms creates fertile ground for misunderstanding, particularly during periods of heightened tension.

The JCPOA negotiations provide a vivid illustration of signaling breakdown. While the agreement itself represented a significant diplomatic achievement, its implementation was undermined by divergent interpretations of intent and obligation. Iranian officials viewed compliance as part of a reciprocal process grounded in mutual respect and gradual normalization, whereas many U.S. policymakers approached the agreement as a temporary tactical concession designed to constrain Iranian behavior pending broader strategic transformation (10). These incompatible expectations generated mutual frustration and facilitated the eventual collapse of the agreement, reinforcing perceptions of betrayal on both sides (3).

Misreading Iranian strategic patience and dignity politics further exacerbates misperception. Iran's willingness to absorb costs and avoid immediate retaliation is often misinterpreted in Washington as weakness or indecision, encouraging escalatory policies that ultimately provoke delayed but substantial responses (12). This dynamic reflects a fundamental failure to understand the temporal logic of Iranian strategy, which privileges long-term endurance and symbolic legitimacy over short-term tactical gain (14).

Underlying these manifestations of misperception are deep-rooted Orientalist representations that frame Iran as irrational, hostile, and inherently untrustworthy. Such representations permeate political rhetoric, media narratives, and policy analysis, shaping the assumptions that guide strategic assessment (4). By portraying Iranian decision-making as driven primarily by fanaticism or emotional impulse, U.S. discourse dismisses the coherence and internal consistency of Iran's strategic calculus, legitimizing policies of coercion and exclusion (13). These representations

distort policy design by narrowing the perceived range of Iranian behavior and reinforcing reliance on punitive instruments even when evidence suggests their inefficacy (6).

Through these intertwined mechanisms of stereotyping, selective attention, misjudgment, signaling failure, and Orientalist framing, misperception becomes a self-sustaining structure within U.S. foreign policy toward Iran. Rather than correcting errors through experience, the policy process reproduces them, ensuring the persistence of conflict despite repeated strategic failure.

Legal and Political Consequences of U.S. Misperception

The cumulative effect of persistent misperception in U.S. foreign policy toward Iran has been the systematic reinforcement of the Resistance discourse at the core of Iran's political identity and strategic behavior. Threat-driven identity formation has become a central feature of Iranian political life, as external pressure—particularly from the United States—has been repeatedly interpreted within domestic discourse as confirmation of long-standing historical grievances and existential vulnerability (12). U.S. actions such as economic sanctions, military threats, and diplomatic isolation are framed not merely as policy instruments but as manifestations of hegemonic hostility toward Iranian independence and sovereignty (2). This framing enables Iranian political elites to transform external pressure into internal legitimacy by presenting resistance as a moral, political, and historical obligation rooted in the nation's revolutionary identity (14). In this context, the very measures intended to weaken Iranian resolve instead consolidate domestic cohesion and reinforce the ideological foundations of state authority (15).

The transformation of pressure into legitimacy operates through a powerful narrative mechanism that links contemporary U.S. policy to a collective memory of foreign intervention, exploitation, and imposed dependency. Historical episodes such as the 1953 coup, the Iran–Iraq War, and prolonged sanctions regimes are invoked to situate present challenges within a continuous struggle for autonomy and dignity (1). This narrative construction allows Iranian leaders to portray resistance not as a policy choice but as an existential necessity dictated by the structure of international relations and the character of American power (12). Consequently, domestic political debates are reframed around the imperative of safeguarding national sovereignty, limiting the political space for accommodation with external adversaries and strengthening hardline positions (7).

Within this discursive environment, Iranian legal and political institutions develop frameworks that justify strategic policies as lawful and necessary expressions of national self-defense. Missile development constitutes a prominent example. Iranian officials consistently articulate missile capabilities as a defensive response to regional insecurity and historical vulnerability, particularly in light of the country's experience of invasion and sustained external pressure (9). From Tehran's perspective, these capabilities represent an indispensable deterrent in an environment where conventional military parity with regional adversaries and U.S. forces is unattainable (14). Legal justifications for missile development are grounded in claims of sovereign right to self-defense under international law and the absence of binding prohibitions against such programs, arguments that gain credibility as U.S. coercive measures intensify (8).

Similarly, Iran's regional security presence is framed as both strategically prudent and legally legitimate. Engagement in Iraq, Syria, and neighboring theaters is justified as a proactive effort to prevent the emergence of hostile regimes and extremist threats that could destabilize Iran's borders (15). This posture is reinforced by the perception that U.S. regional policies, including military deployments and alliance structures, aim to encircle and constrain Iran (6). As U.S. misperception exaggerates Iranian ambitions, Tehran interprets American actions as

validation of its security concerns, further entrenching regional involvement as a rational and lawful defense strategy (3).

The concept of a resistance economy constitutes another domain in which misperception-driven pressure produces unintended consequences. U.S. sanctions, designed to compel behavioral change by imposing economic hardship, have instead catalyzed a strategic reorientation toward domestic production, regional trade, and financial self-reliance (17). Iranian policymakers frame this economic transformation as an assertion of sovereignty and an institutionalization of independence within the economic sphere (18). The resistance economy thus becomes not merely a coping mechanism but a political project that redefines national development around the principles of autonomy and resilience (15). Over time, this institutionalization reduces Iran's vulnerability to external pressure and diminishes the effectiveness of future sanctions regimes (19).

These domestic legal and political developments are closely linked to broader processes of regional alignment and ideological consolidation. Anti-Americanism functions as an integrative political narrative that unites diverse social and political constituencies within Iran by framing the United States as the principal obstacle to national progress and justice (12). This narrative transcends factional divisions, allowing competing political groups to mobilize around a shared external adversary even amid internal disagreements (14). U.S. misperception, particularly when expressed through coercive rhetoric and punitive action, continuously replenishes the symbolic resources of this discourse, ensuring its persistence and political utility (1).

At the regional level, these dynamics contribute to the strengthening of the Axis of Resistance. Iran's confrontation with the United States enhances its legitimacy among non-state actors and regional movements that define their own struggles in opposition to Western and Israeli influence (6). As U.S. pressure intensifies, Iran's leadership role within this network gains symbolic and strategic significance, transforming American hostility into a source of regional authority (8). The resulting alignment reinforces Iran's strategic depth while simultaneously complicating U.S. efforts to isolate Tehran, illustrating the paradoxical effects of misperception-driven policy (3).

The phenomenon of strategic blowback becomes most evident in the failure of core U.S. policy instruments. Sanctions inefficiency stands as a primary example. Despite unprecedented economic pressure, Iran has neither abandoned its strategic priorities nor moderated its regional posture in accordance with U.S. expectations (17). Instead, sanctions have accelerated institutional adaptation, economic diversification, and political consolidation around resistance narratives (18). This outcome reflects a fundamental misreading of Iranian political culture and resilience, as U.S. policymakers continue to overestimate the coercive power of economic punishment while underestimating the capacity of Iranian institutions to absorb and redistribute costs (15).

The collapse of the JCPOA further illustrates the consequences of misperception. The U.S. withdrawal from the agreement, justified by claims of Iranian deception and strategic noncompliance, eroded diplomatic trust and eliminated one of the few functional channels of structured engagement between the two states (10). The aftermath produced accelerated nuclear activity, heightened regional tensions, and increased risk of military confrontation, outcomes that contradict the stated objectives of American policy (3). This collapse not only weakened international nonproliferation efforts but also signaled to Iranian policymakers that diplomatic compromise with the United States lacks durability and credibility, reinforcing resistance-oriented strategic calculations (7).

Over the long term, these dynamics inflict substantial damage on regional stability and U.S. credibility. Persistent confrontation fuels arms proliferation, exacerbates proxy conflicts, and undermines cooperative security frameworks across the Middle East (6). Simultaneously, repeated policy reversals and unfulfilled commitments diminish U.S.

reliability as a negotiating partner, weakening its influence among both adversaries and allies (5). The entrenchment of misperception thus transforms tactical policy failures into structural strategic decline, constraining the prospects for sustainable conflict resolution and reinforcing the very threats that American policy seeks to contain.

Conclusion

The analysis presented in this study demonstrates that misperception is not a peripheral or episodic feature of U.S. foreign policy toward Iran, but rather a foundational and enduring driver of conflict. Over decades of interaction, misperception has become embedded within institutional practices, political narratives, and strategic doctrines, shaping how each side interprets the intentions, capabilities, and legitimacy of the other. This deep structural distortion has transformed what might otherwise be manageable political disagreements into a self-perpetuating cycle of hostility, mistrust, and strategic escalation.

At the core of this dynamic lies the persistent failure to distinguish between objective behavior and subjective interpretation. American policymakers have repeatedly approached Iran through a framework of preconceived threat narratives, ideological assumptions, and cultural stereotypes. These frameworks, once institutionalized, function as cognitive boundaries that restrict the range of acceptable policy options and discourage the reassessment of flawed strategies. As a result, policies that repeatedly fail to achieve their stated objectives—particularly coercive instruments such as sanctions and military pressure—are not abandoned but instead intensified, producing outcomes directly opposite to those intended.

The study also illustrates that misperception does not operate solely at the level of elite cognition but interacts powerfully with broader cultural and political structures. Orientalist representations of Iran as irrational, hostile, and untrustworthy have reinforced policy choices that privilege coercion over engagement and confrontation over accommodation. These representations simplify complex realities, marginalize alternative interpretations, and create a strategic environment in which compromise is equated with weakness and understanding is perceived as appeasement. Such discursive patterns ensure that even moments of diplomatic opportunity are interpreted through the prism of suspicion.

On the Iranian side, U.S. misperception and the policies it generates have produced profound legal and political consequences. External pressure has been internalized as an existential threat, accelerating the consolidation of a resistance-based national identity. Policies related to defense development, regional engagement, and economic self-reliance have been reframed as not merely strategic choices but moral imperatives rooted in sovereignty and historical memory. Rather than weakening Iran's political system, these pressures have enhanced its internal coherence and strengthened its ideological foundations.

The international consequences of this cycle extend far beyond bilateral relations. The failure of coercive strategies has undermined regional stability, contributed to the proliferation of armed conflict, and intensified geopolitical fragmentation across the Middle East. Simultaneously, repeated diplomatic breakdowns and policy reversals have weakened the credibility of U.S. leadership and reduced confidence in international agreements as durable instruments of conflict management. In this sense, misperception has become not only a cause of U.S.–Iran tensions but a structural force shaping broader patterns of disorder in the international system.

Perhaps the most consequential finding of this study is that misperception persists not despite evidence of failure, but in part because institutional, political, and ideological mechanisms continuously reinforce it. Cognitive biases are protected by organizational incentives, electoral pressures, and entrenched strategic cultures. Corrective

information is filtered out, dissenting perspectives are marginalized, and alternative interpretations are treated as threats to policy consensus. The result is a closed system of interpretation in which learning becomes nearly impossible.

Breaking this cycle requires more than tactical policy adjustments. It demands a fundamental transformation in how policymakers conceptualize both Iran and the nature of international conflict itself. Without a willingness to confront deeply rooted assumptions, reassess dominant narratives, and engage with the internal logic of Iranian political behavior, no sustainable change in the relationship can occur. Dialogue cannot succeed when one side remains imprisoned by its own misrepresentations of the other.

Ultimately, this study underscores that the most dangerous feature of the U.S.–Iran conflict is not the distribution of power, the balance of arms, or the scope of economic confrontation, but the durability of distorted perception. As long as misperception remains unchallenged, each crisis will merely reproduce the conditions for the next, and every failed policy will lay the foundation for an even more destructive future conflict. The path toward stability therefore begins not with new weapons, sanctions, or threats, but with the difficult and necessary work of re-examining how reality itself is interpreted.

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Authors' Contributions

All authors equally contributed to this study.

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The authors of this article declared no conflict of interest.

Ethical Considerations

All ethical principles were adhered in conducting and writing this article.

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