

Misperceiving Iran through a Weberian Lens and the United States' Interpretive Failure in Foreign Policy

Faridaddin. Habibian¹, Seyed Farshid. Jafari Pabandi^{1*}, Malek. Zolqadr¹, Asghar. Partovi¹

¹ Department of Political Science and International Relations, Za.C., Islamic Azad University, Zanjan, Iran

* Corresponding author email address: Farshid_Jafari@iau.ac.ir

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This article examines the enduring conflict between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States as a case of structural misperception rooted in incompatible systems of meaning rather than merely competing interests. It argues that conventional materialist and strategic explanations are insufficient to account for the persistence and depth of this confrontation. Drawing on Weber's interpretive sociology and contemporary international order theory, the study conceptualizes misperception as an epistemological condition produced by the interaction of two distinct rationalities: the Westphalian, instrumental rationality embedded in U.S. foreign policy institutions and the post-Westphalian, value-rational logic that structures Iran's foreign policy identity. The article demonstrates how the 1979 Islamic Revolution constituted a civilizational rupture that redefined Iran's conception of legitimacy, security, and diplomacy, transforming foreign policy into a form of moral-mission agency grounded in divine sovereignty, resistance, independence, transnational solidarity, and justice. In contrast, the United States continues to interpret global politics through secular, state-centric, and institutional assumptions that systematically distort its understanding of Iran's motivations and intentions. Through an interpretive qualitative analysis of political discourse, doctrinal texts, and strategic narratives, the study shows how U.S. foreign policy cognition reproduces misperception over time, stabilizing conflict through self-reinforcing cycles of threat perception, coercive response, and ideological mistrust. The findings suggest that sustainable engagement between Tehran and Washington cannot be achieved through technical agreements or coercive instruments alone but requires a fundamental transformation in the cognitive and interpretive foundations of policy. By highlighting the role of identity, meaning, and rationality in shaping international conflict, the article contributes to a broader rethinking of foreign policy analysis in an era of post-Westphalian transformation.

Keywords: *Iran–U.S. relations; misperception; Weberian Verstehen; post-Westphalian order; foreign policy cognition; identity and rationality; international conflict*

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1. Introduction

The relationship between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States constitutes one of the most enduring and structurally complex conflicts in contemporary international politics. More than four decades after the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the bilateral

relationship remains characterized by deep mistrust, recurring crises, and an almost continuous reproduction of antagonistic perceptions. What makes this conflict analytically distinctive is not merely the persistence of political hostility, but the consistency with which each side appears to misunderstand the foundational logic of the other's foreign policy behavior. While strategic



rivalry, security dilemmas, and regional competition certainly play visible roles, these conventional explanations remain insufficient to account for the magnitude and durability of misalignment in perception. As numerous scholars of Iranian foreign policy have noted, Iran's post-revolutionary diplomacy cannot be reduced to calculations of material power or short-term interests, but reflects a complex fusion of identity, ideology, historical memory, and moral purpose (Ahmadi, 2019; Mottaghi, 2016). At the same time, the United States has repeatedly interpreted Iranian behavior through paradigms grounded in strategic containment, deterrence, and threat management (Byman, 2019; Maloney, 2020). The consequence has been a persistent interpretive failure that continues to shape policy choices, escalate tensions, and obstruct meaningful engagement.

A growing body of scholarship demonstrates that this conflict cannot be adequately understood through materialist frameworks that dominate mainstream international relations theory. Approaches centered on power distribution, balance of threat, or institutional bargaining struggle to explain why diplomatic openings such as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action ultimately collapsed despite apparent convergence of interests (Hajiyousefi, 2020b; Parsi, 2017). Nor can these approaches fully account for the deep moral and ideological language that permeates Iranian foreign policy discourse, from the principle of resistance to the centrality of justice and independence (Dehghani Firoozabadi, 2018; Seyed Jalali, 2020). The limitations of materialist analysis become particularly evident when American policy elites interpret Iran's value-driven commitments as tactical maneuvers or destabilizing strategies rather than as expressions of a coherent normative worldview. Such misreadings, in turn, reinforce policy prescriptions centered on coercion and containment, thereby deepening the cycle of mutual suspicion (The White, 2018; Walt, 2018).

This persistent pattern of misunderstanding reflects a deeper epistemological problem. Misperception in this context is not simply the product of faulty intelligence or miscalculation, but the outcome of incompatible systems of meaning through which political reality is constructed. Iranian political identity is rooted in revolutionary memory, religious legitimacy, and civilizational mission, elements that shape the very definition of interests and

threats (Hajiyousefi, 2021; Khosrokhavar, 2019). American foreign policy cognition, by contrast, is embedded in the normative structure of the liberal international order, where rationality is defined instrumentally and legitimacy is grounded in secular sovereignty and institutionalized rules (Strategy, 2022; Walt, 2018). When these two meaning systems interact, each side interprets the other's behavior through its own cognitive filters, generating systematic distortions that are remarkably resistant to correction.

Conceptually, misperception must therefore be treated as an epistemological phenomenon rather than merely a strategic error. Iranian foreign policy behavior derives its coherence from historically embedded narratives of resistance, independence, and justice that function as organizing principles of national identity (Mahmoodi Kia, 2023; Seyed Jalali, 2020). These narratives are not rhetorical ornaments; they shape policy priorities, define acceptable compromises, and delimit the boundaries of political legitimacy. Yet within the dominant American discourse, such normative commitments are frequently dismissed as ideological posturing or instrumental manipulation, reinforcing the perception of Iran as an irrational or revisionist actor (Byman, 2019; Maloney, 2020). This interpretive asymmetry explains why similar Iranian actions are repeatedly perceived as destabilizing regardless of context, while U.S. actions framed as defensive are viewed in Tehran as manifestations of structural hostility and hegemonic domination (Adib-Moghaddam, 2018; Hajiyousefi, 2020a).

At the core of this interpretive failure lies a clash of rationalities. Western foreign policy analysis remains largely anchored in what Max Weber defined as instrumental rationality, in which political action is evaluated through calculations of efficiency, cost, and expected outcomes. By contrast, Iran's post-revolutionary foreign policy reflects a predominance of value rationality, where action is oriented toward the realization of normative commitments that are pursued regardless of material cost (Baeidi Nejad, 2018; Dehghani Firoozabadi, 2018). This distinction is not merely philosophical; it has concrete consequences for how policies are formulated, justified, and sustained. When Washington expects Iranian concessions to follow shifts in sanctions or security incentives, it assumes that Iranian decision-makers prioritize material optimization. Yet empirical studies consistently show

that normative imperatives such as resistance to domination, preservation of revolutionary identity, and commitment to justice operate as primary constraints on policy flexibility (Fathollahi, 2025; Seyed Jalali, 2020). The failure to recognize this rationality gap produces recurring cycles of frustration and escalation.

Weber's concept of *Verstehen* offers a powerful theoretical tool for addressing this problem. By insisting that social action must be interpreted through the subjective meanings actors attach to their behavior, Weber challenges the positivist assumption that political phenomena can be explained solely through external observation and causal modeling. Applied to foreign policy, this approach requires analysts to reconstruct the internal logic of actors' belief systems, historical narratives, and normative commitments. For Iran, this entails understanding how revolutionary ideology, Shi'i political theology, and anti-imperialist memory interact to produce a distinctive conception of world politics (Adib-Moghaddam, 2018; Khosrokhavar, 2019). Without such interpretive engagement, American policy remains trapped within analytical frameworks that systematically misread Iranian intentions and motivations.

The theoretical significance of this study therefore lies in its effort to move beyond conventional strategic analysis toward an interpretive understanding of foreign policy behavior. While previous research has documented specific instances of miscommunication and policy failure (Maloney, 2020; Parsi, 2017), few studies have examined the deeper epistemological roots of misperception. By integrating Weberian interpretive sociology with contemporary analyses of Iranian identity and U.S. foreign policy cognition, this research seeks to illuminate the structural sources of interpretive failure that underlie recurring diplomatic breakdowns (Hajiyousefi, 2021; Shani, 2021).

The central research question guiding this inquiry asks: why does the United States systematically misperceive the foundational logic of Iran's foreign policy? The working hypothesis advanced here is that misperception results from the clash between Westphalian instrumental rationality embedded in U.S. foreign policy institutions and Iran's post-Westphalian value rationality grounded in religious, ideological, and civilizational commitments. This clash produces incompatible expectations, distorted threat assessments,

and self-reinforcing policy cycles that inhibit sustainable conflict management.

Methodologically, the study adopts an interpretive qualitative design grounded in textual analysis of political discourse, doctrinal documents, leadership statements, and policy narratives from both sides. Iranian official texts, speeches, and constitutional principles are examined to reconstruct the internal meaning structures that guide foreign policy behavior (Ahmadi, 2019; Boroujerdi & Tehrani, 2021). Parallel analysis of U.S. national security strategies, policy statements, and academic commentary reveals the dominant cognitive frameworks through which Iran is interpreted (Strategy, 2022; The White, 2018; Walt, 2018). By comparing these discursive formations, the study identifies the precise points at which interpretive divergence emerges and becomes institutionalized.

The significance of this inquiry extends beyond the Iran-U.S. case. As the international system undergoes increasing normative fragmentation, conflicts rooted in incompatible meaning systems are likely to intensify. Understanding how misperception is produced, stabilized, and reproduced is therefore essential not only for improving bilateral relations but for advancing the broader study of international conflict in a post-Western global order (Shani, 2021; Stachoń, 2024). By demonstrating how interpretive failure can become structurally embedded in foreign policy practice, this study contributes to a deeper understanding of why some conflicts persist despite repeated efforts at negotiation and compromise.

2. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework

Understanding the persistent tension between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States requires an analytical framework capable of moving beyond surface-level strategic explanations and into the cognitive and epistemological foundations of foreign policy behavior. At the heart of this inquiry lies the phenomenon of misperception, which in international relations constitutes not merely an error of judgment, but a deeply structured form of knowledge production shaped by historical memory, ideological commitments, institutional culture, and normative worldviews. Contemporary scholarship increasingly recognizes that conflicts endure not only because of objective clashes of interest, but because actors interpret reality through

incompatible cognitive lenses (Hajiyousefi, 2020b; Shani, 2021). In this context, misperception functions as a stabilizing mechanism of conflict, reproducing hostility even when strategic incentives for cooperation appear to exist.

Within the field of international relations, misperception has been conceptualized most systematically through cognitive and psychological approaches to decision-making. Scholars emphasize that policymakers do not respond directly to external reality but to subjective interpretations of that reality, shaped by prior beliefs, expectations, and institutionalized narratives (Walt, 2018). The durability of the Iran–U.S. confrontation reflects this dynamic: American elites continue to interpret Iranian actions as inherently threatening even when empirical evidence suggests defensive or symbolic motives, while Iranian leaders consistently perceive U.S. behavior as structurally hostile regardless of diplomatic overtures (Byman, 2019; Maloney, 2020). These reciprocal misreadings reveal that misperception is embedded within the cognitive architecture of policy systems rather than arising from isolated analytical failures.

The epistemological nature of this conflict becomes especially clear when examining how each side constructs the meaning of security, legitimacy, and threat. For U.S. policymakers, security is defined primarily in geopolitical and institutional terms, grounded in the maintenance of a rules-based international order and the protection of national interests (Strategy, 2022; The White, 2018). Iranian leaders, by contrast, articulate security through a moral and civilizational vocabulary in which independence, resistance, and justice are inseparable from national survival (Khosrokhavar, 2019; Seyed Jalali, 2020). These divergent conceptions produce parallel realities that coexist but rarely intersect, ensuring that each side consistently misinterprets the intentions and priorities of the other.

Max Weber's interpretive sociology provides the methodological foundation necessary to penetrate this epistemological divide. Weber's insistence on *Verstehen*, or interpretive understanding, requires analysts to reconstruct the subjective meanings that guide social action rather than imposing external explanatory categories upon it. In Weberian terms, social behavior cannot be explained solely through observable outcomes

or material incentives; it must be understood within the internal worldview of the actor (Adib-Moghaddam, 2018). Applied to foreign policy, this approach demands careful attention to the historical narratives, ideological commitments, and normative principles that shape decision-making. For Iran, these include revolutionary memory, Shi'i political theology, and a deeply embedded anti-imperialist identity (Ahmadi, 2019; Khosrokhavar, 2019). Without engaging these internal reference points, any analysis of Iranian foreign policy remains fundamentally incomplete.

Central to Weber's theoretical contribution is the distinction between instrumental rationality and value rationality. Instrumental rationality evaluates action according to efficiency, cost-benefit calculation, and the optimization of material outcomes, a mode of reasoning that dominates Western policy institutions (Walt, 2018). Value rationality, by contrast, orients action toward the realization of normative commitments and moral imperatives regardless of material cost. Iranian foreign policy behavior exhibits a persistent dominance of value rationality, as seen in its prioritization of resistance, justice, and independence even under severe economic and political pressure (Baeidi Nejad, 2018; Dehghani Firoozabadi, 2018). The failure of U.S. policymakers to recognize this rationality gap leads to recurring miscalculations, as Washington consistently expects behavioral change in response to material incentives that do not address Iran's normative constraints (Fathollahi, 2025; Hajiyousefi, 2020b).

These cognitive patterns are not merely individual; they are embedded within the broader structure of the Westphalian international order. The Westphalian system, which emerged from the seventeenth-century European settlement, institutionalized a political ontology grounded in state sovereignty, territorial integrity, secular authority, and the legal equality of states. Within this framework, political legitimacy is derived from the state, and religion is relegated to the private sphere (Shani, 2021). The modern international system thus privileges state-centrism and instrumental rationality as the default modes of political reasoning. The United States, as the principal architect and guardian of the contemporary liberal order, embodies these Westphalian principles in both its institutions and strategic culture (Strategy, 2022; The White, 2018).

U.S. foreign policy behavior reflects this Westphalian rationality through its consistent emphasis on sovereignty, deterrence, alliance structures, and legal-institutional frameworks for managing conflict. When confronted with actors that operate outside this logic, American policymakers interpret deviation as either irrationality or revisionism. Iran's integration of religion, morality, and transnational identity into foreign policy therefore appears anomalous within the dominant Western worldview (Adib-Moghaddam, 2018; Maloney, 2020). This perception of anomaly becomes self-reinforcing: once categorized as an abnormal actor, all subsequent Iranian behavior is interpreted through a lens of suspicion, regardless of context (Byman, 2019). The concept of a post-Westphalian order challenges this inherited political ontology. Contemporary global politics increasingly reflects the erosion of strict state-centrism as non-state actors, transnational identities, and normative movements reshape the boundaries of political authority (Shani, 2021). In this emerging environment, legitimacy is no longer derived exclusively from state sovereignty but from diverse sources including religion, culture, historical memory, and moral narratives. Iran represents one of the most pronounced embodiments of this transformation. Its foreign policy is explicitly grounded in a civilizational identity that transcends territorial boundaries and prioritizes the defense of oppressed communities across the Muslim world (Mahmoodi Kia, 2023; Seyed Jalali, 2020). This orientation positions Iran as a post-Westphalian actor whose strategic behavior cannot be adequately captured by conventional realist or liberal paradigms. Iran's post-Westphalian identity is institutionalized within its constitutional principles, political discourse, and strategic doctrines. The centrality of resistance, the rejection of hegemonic domination, and the moral framing of international engagement constitute enduring elements of its diplomatic practice (Boroujerdi & Tehrani, 2021; Dehghani Firoozabadi, 2018). These features explain why Iran maintains policy positions that appear economically or militarily costly from an instrumental perspective, yet remain internally coherent within its normative worldview (Fathollahi, 2024; Hajiyousefi, 2021). Western analyses that neglect this dimension consistently underestimate Iran's capacity for endurance and misinterpret the sources of its strategic resilience.

The analytical model developed in this study synthesizes Weber's interpretive sociology, cognitive theories of misperception, and the structural transition from Westphalian to post-Westphalian international order. Jervis's insights into cognitive bias and motivational misperception illuminate how policymakers interpret external stimuli through preexisting belief systems, while Weber's framework explains why these belief systems are rooted in deeper value structures rather than transient policy preferences. The transformation of international order provides the structural context in which these cognitive and normative divergences acquire geopolitical significance (Shani, 2021; Stachoń, 2024).

Misperception thus emerges not as a temporary distortion but as a structural condition of interaction between actors embedded in incompatible rationalities and political ontologies. U.S. policymakers operating within a Westphalian framework consistently misread Iran's post-Westphalian behavior, interpreting normative commitments as strategic threats and moral discourse as ideological manipulation (Maloney, 2020; Walt, 2018). Iranian leaders, in turn, perceive American actions as manifestations of systemic domination and cultural arrogance, reinforcing their commitment to resistance and independence (Hajiyousefi, 2020a; Khosrokhavar, 2019). This reciprocal misinterpretation stabilizes conflict and limits the prospects for durable accommodation.

By integrating these theoretical perspectives, the present framework demonstrates that resolving the Iran-U.S. conflict requires more than policy adjustments or confidence-building measures. It demands a transformation in the cognitive and interpretive structures through which each side understands the other. Only through such epistemological recalibration can the cycle of misperception be disrupted and the foundations for meaningful dialogue be established.

3. Iran's Post-Westphalian Foreign Policy Logic

The 1979 Islamic Revolution represents a paradigmatic rupture in Iran's political identity and external orientation, marking a transition from a state embedded in the modern Westphalian order to an actor advancing a distinct civilizational project. This transformation was not merely institutional but epistemological, redefining the meaning of sovereignty, legitimacy, and political

obligation. Scholars emphasize that the Revolution replaced the Shah's state-centric modernization project with a normative order grounded in Islamic values, revolutionary consciousness, and resistance to hegemonic domination (Ahmadi, 2019). Mottaghi describes this shift as Iran's entrance into a new phase of international agency, one that challenges the foundational assumptions of the modern international system (Mottaghi, 2016). Rather than conforming to the secular rationality of the post-war order, Iran constructed a political identity in which religion, morality, and historical memory became constitutive of foreign policy itself.

This rupture elevated Iran from a conventional regional state into what many analysts describe as a civilizational actor. Adib-Moghaddam argues that post-revolutionary Iran positions itself as a moral alternative to Western political modernity, articulating an indigenous vision of global order grounded in spiritual and ethical principles (Adib-Moghaddam, 2018). Hajjousefi similarly notes that the Islamic Republic's self-understanding is inseparable from its perception of a global mission to resist injustice and domination (Hajjousefi, 2021). The Revolution thus reconfigured the ontological foundations of Iranian foreign policy, producing a mode of action that cannot be adequately interpreted through Westphalian categories of interest maximization, territorial sovereignty, and instrumental diplomacy.

The first core indicator of Iran's post-Westphalian logic is its conception of divine sovereignty and religious legitimacy. Unlike modern Western states, where authority is derived from social contract and secular institutions, Iran's political legitimacy is explicitly grounded in religious authority and theological obligation. Seyed Jalali emphasizes that justice and obedience to divine command form the normative core of Iran's external conduct (Seyed Jalali, 2020). This conception shapes foreign policy decisions in ways that often defy conventional cost-benefit reasoning. Dehghani Firoozabadi explains that Iranian leaders frame security and diplomacy as moral responsibilities rather than merely strategic calculations (Dehghani Firoozabadi, 2018). The persistence of this logic even under extreme economic pressure demonstrates that Iran's behavior is not guided primarily by instrumental rationality but by value commitments embedded in its ideological identity.

The second indicator is Ummah-centrism and the prioritization of transnational identity over territorial nationalism. The Islamic Republic conceptualizes its political community not as a bounded nation-state but as part of a broader Islamic Ummah whose moral and political obligations transcend borders. Khosrokhavar shows how this identity has shaped Iran's engagement with regional movements and resistance networks, forming relationships based on shared ideological commitment rather than conventional alliance logic (Khosrokhavar, 2019). Mahmoodi Kia similarly argues that Iran's pursuit of resistance is inseparable from its commitment to transnational solidarity, which often places it at odds with Westphalian expectations of non-interference and strict sovereignty (Mahmoodi Kia, 2023). This transnational orientation redefines diplomacy as an instrument of moral affiliation rather than merely a tool of national interest.

The third indicator is the discourse of resistance and the predominance of value-rationality in foreign policy conduct. Resistance, within Iranian political thought, is not simply a strategic response to external pressure but an ethical principle rooted in revolutionary identity and historical experience. Hajjousefi highlights that resistance functions as a central organizing concept of Iranian strategic culture (Hajjousefi, 2020b). Baeidi Nejad observes that this commitment persists even when it imposes heavy economic or diplomatic costs, confirming that Iranian decision-making follows value rationality rather than instrumental logic (Baeidi Nejad, 2018). Western policymakers frequently misinterpret this orientation as ideological rigidity or irrational behavior, yet within Iran's normative framework, resistance constitutes the very definition of political responsibility.

The fourth indicator is the principle of independence encapsulated in the doctrine of "Neither East nor West." This doctrine reflects Iran's rejection of alignment with global power blocs and its insistence on epistemological as well as political autonomy. Fathollahi explains that independence occupies a foundational position in Iran's foreign policy equations, functioning as a non-negotiable constraint on diplomatic engagement (Fathollahi, 2025). Hajjousefi notes that this orientation distinguishes Iran from other regional actors whose foreign policies remain embedded in clientelist relationships with major powers (Hajjousefi, 2020a). From a Westphalian perspective,

such non-alignment appears destabilizing and unpredictable, but within Iran's worldview, independence is a moral imperative inseparable from sovereignty and dignity.

The fifth indicator is Iran's justice-centered mission and its declared support for oppressed peoples. Justice occupies a central place in Iran's conception of international order, shaping both rhetoric and policy practice. Seyed Jalali demonstrates how justice and identity operate as mutually reinforcing principles within Iran's external conduct (Seyed Jalali, 2020). Khosrokhavar adds that Iran's support for marginalized groups across the region reflects a moralized understanding of power that contrasts sharply with realist conceptions of interest and influence (Khosrokhavar, 2019). This ethical orientation explains Iran's willingness to incur significant costs in pursuit of normative goals, a pattern that repeatedly confounds Western analysts operating within utilitarian frameworks.

These five indicators collectively produce a foreign policy logic that redefines the meaning of security, legitimacy, and diplomacy. Security, for Iran, is not limited to territorial defense but encompasses the preservation of ideological identity and moral autonomy. Dehghani Firoozabadi argues that Iran's security doctrine integrates cultural, political, and ethical dimensions that extend beyond material threat assessment (Dehghani Firoozabadi, 2018). Legitimacy is measured not by institutional recognition alone but by fidelity to revolutionary and religious principles (Ahmadi, 2019). Diplomacy becomes an arena for advancing justice, independence, and resistance, transforming foreign policy into what Hajiyousefi describes as moral-mission agency (Hajiyousefi, 2021). This reconfiguration of political meaning produces structural incompatibility with the Westphalian system. The United States, as the principal defender of the liberal international order, remains committed to a worldview grounded in secular sovereignty, institutionalized norms, and instrumental rationality (Strategy, 2022; Walt, 2018). Within this framework, Iran's value-driven behavior appears inherently destabilizing. Maloney observes that U.S. policy consistently interprets Iran's actions as revisionist and threatening precisely because they violate core assumptions of the prevailing order (Maloney, 2020). Byman similarly notes that American

strategic culture lacks the conceptual tools necessary to comprehend Iran's ideological commitments (Byman, 2019). The result is a persistent cycle of misinterpretation in which Iran's normative conduct is read as strategic aggression, reinforcing mutual distrust. Shani's analysis of post-Westphalian transformation situates Iran within a broader global shift in which identity, religion, and civilizational narratives increasingly challenge state-centric political models (Shani, 2021). Iran's foreign policy thus represents not an anomaly but a harbinger of emerging forms of political agency that defy conventional IR categories. Stachoń's research on Iran's evolving capabilities further demonstrates that Tehran integrates technological and ideological dimensions into a comprehensive strategy of resistance, reinforcing its distinct approach to power and legitimacy (Stachoń, 2024). These developments confirm that Iran's behavior cannot be meaningfully understood through Westphalian rationality alone.

The persistence of misperception in Iran-U.S. relations therefore stems from this structural incompatibility. American policymakers continue to evaluate Iranian conduct through instrumental frameworks that systematically distort its underlying motivations (Walt, 2018). Iranian leaders, in turn, interpret U.S. actions as manifestations of hegemonic domination and cultural hostility, reinforcing their commitment to resistance and independence (Khosrokhavar, 2019). The conflict thus stabilizes itself through reciprocal misunderstanding, with each side's worldview confirming the other's fears. In sum, Iran's post-Westphalian foreign policy logic reflects a coherent and enduring normative order rooted in divine sovereignty, transnational identity, resistance, independence, and justice. These principles redefine security, legitimacy, and diplomacy in ways that render Westphalian categories analytically inadequate. Only by recognizing this transformation can scholars and policymakers begin to understand why conventional strategies of pressure, containment, and inducement repeatedly fail to produce their intended outcomes.

4. U.S. Westphalian Cognition and the Reproduction of Misperception

The systematic misperception that has characterized U.S. foreign policy toward the Islamic Republic of Iran is not the product of episodic diplomatic error but the consequence of deeply embedded cognitive structures

rooted in the philosophical and institutional foundations of American strategic culture. At the core of this worldview lies Enlightenment rationality, which privileges secular authority, empirical reasoning, and instrumental calculation as the primary bases of political judgment. American political identity emerged from an intellectual tradition that defines legitimacy through popular sovereignty, constitutional order, and rational governance, rendering religious authority largely irrelevant to the formulation of foreign policy (Walt, 2018). This epistemological orientation generates a specific mode of cognition in which international behavior is interpreted through calculable interests, power balances, and institutional norms (Strategy, 2022). Within such a framework, actors whose conduct is motivated by non-material commitments are frequently categorized as irrational, ideological, or destabilizing, producing a structural predisposition toward misinterpretation.

This philosophical inheritance is operationalized through what may be described as the Westphalian operating code of U.S. foreign policy. State-centrism remains the organizing principle of American strategic thought, with sovereignty, territorial integrity, and national interest functioning as the core reference points of analysis (The White, 2018). U.S. policymakers assume that all rational actors prioritize material security, economic stability, and institutional legitimacy in ways broadly compatible with the liberal international order. This assumption underpins Washington's commitment to preserving what it defines as a rules-based global system, a project that positions the United States as both architect and guardian of international norms (Strategy, 2022). Within this paradigm, deviations from established institutional frameworks are interpreted as threats to systemic stability, prompting corrective measures ranging from diplomatic pressure to economic sanctions and military containment.

The historical construction of Iran as an "abnormal actor" within this worldview illustrates the power of these cognitive structures. The 1979 Islamic Revolution constituted the initial rupture in U.S. perceptions, as Iran abandoned the Western-aligned monarchy of the Shah in favor of a political order grounded in religious legitimacy and revolutionary ideology (Takeyh, 2021). American policymakers struggled to interpret this transformation, perceiving it not as a sovereign act of political

reconstitution but as a rejection of the international system itself (Maloney, 2020). The subsequent Hostage Crisis reinforced this perception by framing Iran as an unpredictable and ideologically hostile entity, embedding the image of Iran as a fundamental threat within U.S. strategic discourse (Byman, 2019). Over time, these early interpretations solidified into durable narratives that continue to shape policy assumptions decades later.

The post-Cold War era further intensified this construction through symbolic moments such as the "Axis of Evil" designation and the expansion of the sanctions regime. These measures did not merely respond to discrete Iranian actions but reflected an interpretive framework that treated Iran's ideological identity as inherently incompatible with the liberal international order (Walt, 2018). Maloney notes that sanctions became a central instrument of U.S. Iran policy not only for their material impact but for their symbolic function in reaffirming Iran's status as a norm-breaking actor (Maloney, 2020). Through repeated cycles of confrontation and containment, the abnormality narrative became institutionalized, shaping intelligence assessments, policy debates, and media representations (Coletsou, 2023). This process demonstrates how misperception becomes structurally embedded within the machinery of statecraft.

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) illustrates the collision of incompatible rationalities that lies at the heart of this misperception. For U.S. policymakers, the agreement was conceived primarily as a technical mechanism to constrain Iran's nuclear capabilities and reduce proliferation risk through verification and compliance structures (Strategy, 2022). The negotiation logic assumed that Iranian behavior could be modified through material incentives and institutional guarantees. Iranian leaders, however, approached the JCPOA as a recognition of their sovereign rights and a partial validation of their resistance to external pressure (Hajiyousefi, 2020b). This divergence of expectations generated persistent tension throughout the implementation phase, as Washington interpreted Iranian compliance in procedural terms while Tehran assessed the agreement in moral and political dimensions (Parsi, 2017). The eventual U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA reinforced Iranian perceptions of American unreliability and hegemonic intent

(Hajiyousefi, 2020a), while simultaneously confirming Washington's belief that engagement with Iran yields only temporary tactical concessions. The agreement thus became a case study in interpretive failure rather than strategic miscalculation.

U.S. security discourse further amplifies this misperception through a pattern of threat inflation that frames Iranian behavior as inherently expansionist and destabilizing. American national security documents consistently classify Iran alongside major systemic competitors, portraying its regional activities as challenges to global stability (Strategy, 2022; The White, 2018). Byman emphasizes that such framing narrows policy options by privileging coercive instruments over diplomatic engagement (Byman, 2019). Within this discourse, Iran's support for regional allies is interpreted as aggressive power projection rather than as an extension of its resistance identity (Khosrokhavar, 2019). The securitization of Iranian behavior thus functions as a cognitive filter that magnifies perceived threats while obscuring the normative motivations underlying Tehran's actions.

Perceptual warfare and discursive construction play a central role in stabilizing these interpretations. Media narratives, think tank reports, and political rhetoric in the United States frequently depict Iran as an irrational and ideologically driven adversary, reinforcing stereotypes that shape public opinion and policy debate (Coletsou, 2023). Walt argues that American foreign policy elites operate within an echo chamber of shared assumptions that reward conformity to dominant threat narratives while marginalizing alternative interpretations (Walt, 2018). This environment discourages interpretive reflection and reproduces simplified representations of complex political realities. Over time, these discursive patterns become self-reinforcing, as policymakers cite media portrayals as evidence of threat while media outlets rely on official statements to validate their narratives.

Comparative insight further illuminates the cognitive foundations of this misperception. The Vatican, for example, also operates according to religious legitimacy and transnational moral authority, yet it is not perceived by the United States as a destabilizing force within the international system. Shani observes that the Vatican's moral diplomacy is accommodated within Western political consciousness because it does not challenge the

structural foundations of the liberal order (Shani, 2021). Similarly, Saudi Arabia derives political legitimacy from religious authority, but its alignment with U.S. strategic interests shields it from the abnormality label (Takeyh, 2021). Iran, by contrast, combines religious legitimacy with resistance to Western dominance, producing a form of political agency that directly contests the normative hierarchy of the international system (Adib-Moghaddam, 2018). This combination renders Iran uniquely threatening within the American cognitive framework, even when its material capabilities remain limited relative to major powers.

The cumulative effect of these dynamics is the creation of a self-reinforcing system of misperception. U.S. policymakers interpret Iranian actions through Westphalian assumptions of instrumental rationality and institutional compliance, leading them to misread value-driven behavior as strategic deception (Hajiyousefi, 2021). Iranian leaders, encountering persistent hostility and pressure, interpret American policies as confirmation of hegemonic intent, reinforcing their commitment to resistance and independence (Khosrokhavar, 2019). Each side's worldview thus validates the other's fears, locking both into a cycle of mutual distrust that resists correction through conventional diplomacy.

This analytical synthesis demonstrates that misperception in U.S.–Iran relations is not merely a cognitive error but a structural condition produced by the interaction of incompatible political rationalities. U.S. foreign policy institutions, grounded in Enlightenment rationality and Westphalian assumptions, systematically generate interpretive failure when confronted with Iran's post-Westphalian identity and value-based foreign policy. As long as these cognitive structures remain unexamined, policy initiatives will continue to reproduce the very antagonisms they seek to resolve.

5. Conclusion

The analysis developed throughout this study demonstrates that the enduring conflict between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the United States cannot be adequately understood through conventional strategic or materialist explanations. At its core, the confrontation is sustained by a deep and persistent interpretive failure rooted in incompatible systems of meaning, rationality, and political identity. This failure does not arise from

temporary diplomatic miscalculations or flawed intelligence assessments but from structural features embedded within the cognitive and institutional foundations of both states. The persistence of misperception is therefore not accidental; it is the product of two distinct civilizational logics encountering one another without a shared interpretive framework.

From Iran's perspective, foreign policy is an extension of its revolutionary identity, moral commitments, and civilizational mission. The Islamic Revolution did not merely change leadership or institutions; it redefined the purpose of political action itself. Security became inseparable from dignity and independence, diplomacy from justice and resistance, and legitimacy from divine obligation and historical memory. This produced a post-Westphalian mode of agency in which material calculations are subordinated to value commitments. Iran's foreign policy thus operates as a form of moral-mission agency, seeking not only to protect national interests but to advance a particular vision of political order rooted in ethics, resistance to domination, and solidarity with the oppressed.

By contrast, U.S. foreign policy cognition remains firmly anchored in Westphalian rationality. Its strategic culture prioritizes secular legitimacy, institutional order, material security, and instrumental calculation. Within this framework, all actors are assumed to pursue power and security through comparable logics of cost, benefit, and efficiency. When confronted with Iran's value-driven conduct, American policymakers lack the conceptual tools required to interpret it accurately. As a result, Iranian behavior is repeatedly framed as ideological extremism, irrational defiance, or destabilizing revisionism rather than as the coherent expression of an alternative political ontology.

The interaction of these two incompatible rationalities generates a structural cycle of misperception. The United States interprets Iranian resistance as aggression, Iran interprets American pressure as hegemonic hostility, and each response confirms the other's expectations. Over time, these interpretations become institutionalized within policy doctrines, security documents, media narratives, and public discourse. The conflict thus acquires a self-sustaining character in which misperception is no longer a symptom of tension but one of its principal causes.

This study has shown that efforts to resolve the Iran–U.S. conflict through sanctions, coercion, or technical negotiations remain fundamentally constrained by this interpretive barrier. Agreements collapse not because of flawed implementation but because they are built upon incompatible understandings of purpose and legitimacy. The JCPOA illustrates this dynamic clearly: what Washington treated as a transactional security arrangement, Tehran understood as recognition of sovereign dignity and political independence. When these divergent expectations collided, the agreement's foundations proved unsustainable.

The broader implication is that international conflict in the contemporary era increasingly reflects epistemological and civilizational divides rather than simple clashes of interest. As global politics moves further away from the homogeneous assumptions of the classical Westphalian system, similar patterns of misperception are likely to emerge in other regions and relationships. Understanding these conflicts therefore requires an analytical shift away from purely material explanations toward interpretive approaches capable of reconstructing actors' internal worlds of meaning.

For policymakers, the findings of this study suggest that sustainable engagement with Iran demands more than tactical adjustments. It requires a transformation in cognitive orientation. Effective diplomacy must begin with interpretive understanding: the systematic effort to comprehend how Iran defines itself, how it understands justice, security, legitimacy, and what it ultimately seeks to preserve through its foreign policy behavior. Without such understanding, policy will continue to oscillate between pressure and engagement without producing lasting stability.

For Iran, the challenge lies in communicating its value-based worldview in a language that can be understood beyond its own ideological community. While its foreign policy logic is coherent and internally consistent, it remains opaque to external audiences shaped by different epistemological traditions. Bridging this gap requires sustained intellectual, cultural, and diplomatic engagement that articulates Iran's identity in conceptual terms accessible to the global community.

Ultimately, the future of Iran–U.S. relations depends not on shifts in power or leadership alone but on whether both sides can escape the interpretive traps that have defined their relationship for decades. As long as each

continues to see the other through inherited cognitive frameworks that distort reality, meaningful reconciliation will remain elusive. The path forward lies in recognizing that the most formidable barrier between Tehran and Washington is not military capability or economic rivalry, but the failure to understand how the other understands itself.

If international politics is to move beyond cycles of confrontation rooted in misperception, it must confront the deeper question of how meaning, identity, and rationality shape political life. The Iran–U.S. conflict offers a powerful illustration of this truth. Only by replacing instrumental judgment with interpretive understanding can the possibility of constructive coexistence begin to emerge.

Authors' Contributions

Authors contributed equally to this article.

Declaration

In order to correct and improve the academic writing of our paper, we have used the language model ChatGPT.

Transparency Statement

Data are available for research purposes upon reasonable request to the corresponding author.

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Ethical Considerations

In this research, ethical standards including obtaining informed consent, ensuring privacy and confidentiality were observed.

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