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The Double Standard: Analyzing U.S. Non-Proliferation Policy toward Iran and Israel

**A Dissertation Submitted to the Department of Letters and English Language in Partial
 Fulfillment of the Requirements for a Master's Degree in Language and Culture**

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"This work is valuable in terms of the knowledge it presents, and it carries within it many answers to questions that have been asked—and others that will undoubtedly arise in the future."

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Abstract

By contrasting the U.S. position on Israel's and Iran's nuclear projects, this study investigates the double standard in the country's non-proliferation policy. Finding the underlying reasons for these disparate strategies and their effects on regional and global dynamics is the goal. Israel, which is generally suspected of having nuclear weapons but is not a party to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), enjoys strong U.S. support and minimal criticism, whereas Iran, a signatory to the NPT, is subject to harsh sanctions and international pressure. This discrepancy calls into question the real forces behind US policy. The study uses a qualitative comparative approach and pulls from academic research, official papers, and reports from international agencies, as well as policy statements, historical records, and geopolitical analyses. Findings suggest that historical alliances, strategic interests, and domestic politics play a decisive role in shaping U.S. non-proliferation efforts. The U.S.-Israel alliance and concerns over Iran's regional influence heavily influence policy direction. Ultimately, this double standard undermines global non-proliferation goals, heightens regional tensions, and erodes trust in U.S. leadership.

Keywords: Iran, Israel, United States, Double Standard, Nuclear power

المخلص

من خلال المقارنة بين موقف الولايات المتحدة من المشروعين النوويين في إسرائيل وإيران، تسعى هذه الدراسة إلى التحقيق في المعايير المزدوجة في سياسة عدم الانتشار النووي الأميركية. يتمثل الهدف في الكشف عن الأسباب الكامنة وراء هذه الاستراتيجيات المتباينة وتأثيرها على الديناميكيات الإقليمية والدولية. فإسرائيل، التي يُشتبه على نطاق واسع في امتلاكها أسلحة نووية دون أن تكون طرفاً في معاهدة عدم الانتشار، تحظى بدعم قوي من الولايات المتحدة وتتعرض لانتقادات محدودة، بينما تواجه إيران، الموقعة على المعاهدة، عقوبات صارمة وضغوطاً دولية متواصلة. يثير هذا التباين تساؤلات حول الدوافع الحقيقية التي تقف وراء السياسة الأميركية. تعتمد الدراسة على منهج مقارن نوعي، وتستند إلى أبحاث أكاديمية، ووثائق رسمية، وتقارير صادرة عن وكالات دولية، إلى جانب تصريحات سياسية وسجلات تاريخية وتحليلات جيوسياسية. وتشير النتائج إلى أن التحالفات التاريخية، والمصالح الاستراتيجية، والسياسات الداخلية تلعب دوراً حاسماً في صياغة الجهود الأميركية في مجال عدم الانتشار. فالاتجاه السياسي يتأثر بشدة بالتحالف الأميركي الإسرائيلي وبالقلق من النفوذ الإيراني في المنطقة. وفي نهاية المطاف، تقوّض هذه المعايير المزدوجة أهداف عدم الانتشار العالمية، وتزيد من حدة التوترات الإقليمية، وتضعف الثقة في القيادة الأميركية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: إيران، إسرائيل، الولايات المتحدة، المعايير المزدوجة، القوة النووية

Résumé

En contrastant la position des États-Unis sur les projets nucléaires d'Israël et de l'Iran, cette étude examine le double norme dans la politique américaine de non-prolifération. L'objectif est d'identifier les raisons profondes de ces stratégies divergentes et d'en analyser les effets sur les dynamiques régionales et mondiales. Israël, largement soupçonné de posséder l'arme nucléaire sans être partie au Traité de non-prolifération (TNP), bénéficie d'un fort soutien américain et de critiques limitées. En revanche, l'Iran, signataire du TNP, est soumis à de lourdes sanctions et à une pression internationale soutenue. Ce décalage soulève des interrogations sur les véritables moteurs de la politique américaine. L'étude adopte une approche qualitative comparative, s'appuyant sur des recherches académiques, des documents officiels, des rapports d'agences internationales, ainsi que sur des déclarations politiques, des archives historiques et des analyses géopolitiques. Les résultats indiquent que les alliances historiques, les intérêts stratégiques et la politique intérieure jouent un rôle déterminant dans la définition des efforts américains en matière de non-prolifération. L'alliance américano-israélienne et les inquiétudes liées à l'influence régionale de l'Iran orientent fortement la direction de la politique. En fin de compte, ce double norme sape les objectifs mondiaux de non-prolifération, exacerbe les tensions régionales et affaiblit la confiance dans le leadership américain.

Mot Clés : Iran, Israel, Etats Units, Double Norme, Force Nucléaire

List of Abbreviations and Acronyms

NPT	Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
JCPOA	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
SWIFT	Society for Worldwide Interbank Financial Telecommunication
IEEPA	International Emergency Economic Powers Act
EO 12170	Executive Order 12170
CISADA	Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
HEU	Highly Enriched Uranium
WMDs	Weapons of Mass Destruction
QME	Qualitative Military Edge
NIE	National Intelligence Estimate
UN	United Nations
MENWFZ	Middle East Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone
AIPAC	American Israel Public Affairs Committee
CNN	Cable News Network
NAM	Non-Aligned Movement
CIA	Central Intelligence Agency

INF	Intermediate-Range Nuclear Forces Treaty
UNSC	United Nations Security Council
ICBMs	Intercontinental Ballistic Missiles
MENA	Middle East and North Africa
IEEPA	International Emergency Economic Powers Act
P5+1	The United States, United Kingdom, France, Russia, China, and Germany.
EO12959	Executive Order 12959 (Clinton, 1995): Prohibited most U.S. trade and investment with Iran.

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Introduction

Nuclear weapons are one of the greatest threats to global security in the modern era. First developed in World War II, nuclear weapons are unparalleled in their destructive power and can quickly destroy entire communities. The threat of nuclear proliferation endures despite efforts to curb its spread as more and more states want to develop or acquire nuclear capacity, sometimes driven by regional rivalries or security concerns. The existence of nuclear weapons, whether declared or not, violates international nonproliferation norms and raises the possibility of war, accidents, or even nuclear terrorism. Proliferation is a challenge to global peace efforts and highlights the need for robust arms control agreements and diplomacy to prevent further proliferation.

David Albright, in “Iran’s Nuclear Program: Status and Implications”, along with his coauthored work *Peddling Peril: How the Secret Nuclear Trade Arms America’s Enemies*, has followed Iran’s nuclear progress, the impact of sanctions, and the efforts made under diplomatic agreements like the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

Concurrently, a smaller yet increasing literature examines Israel’s policy of nuclear ambiguity. Researchers like Avner Cohen, author of *Israel and the Bomb*, have devoted considerable attention to the historical development of Israel’s nuclear power and the strategic rationale for its refusal to sign the NPT. Such work illustrates how U.S. governments have facilitated or at least tolerated Israel’s cryptic nuclear policy, often portraying it as a Middle Eastern stabilizer. The U.S.-Israel nuclear relationship, based on the Nixon-Meir understanding and reinforced by colossal military aid, is presented in the majority of works as an intentional exception to the world nonproliferation regime.

Recent comparative scholarship has attempted to close the gap between the two cases and reconcile the double standard of U.S. policy. Writers such as Trita Parsi, in *Treacherous Alliance: The Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran, and the U.S.*, and Joseph Cirincione, in *Bomb Scare: The History and Future of Nuclear Weapons*, have argued that the United States applies completely different standards based on geopolitical considerations rather than consistent legal or moral standards. These writers argue that Iran is held in extreme accountability for its nuclear program—despite being a member of the NPT and having declared peaceful intentions—while Israel is let off the hook even though it has an undeclared nuclear weapon.

Domestic politics' impact is also a common thread in the scholarship. Pro-Israel pressure groups, particularly the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), which is one of the most powerful lobbying groups in the United States, focused on strengthening the U.S.–Israel relationship, are most often cited as exerting a significant impact on congressional opinion and policy decisions. Foreign policy and international relations scholars John J. Mearsheimer and Stephen M. Walt, in *The Israel Lobby and U.S. Foreign Policy*, illustrate how domestic political pressures intersect with strategic interests to produce policies that vary from stated international norms.

This research analyzes the selective implementation of U.S. nuclear nonproliferation policy, specifically the unequal treatment of Iran and Israel. While the United States has long portrayed itself as a global advocate of nuclear restraint, its actions in the Middle East reveal selective adherence to nonproliferation norms. Iran, a signatory of the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), has been subject to extensive sanctions, international scrutiny, and threats of military intervention. In contrast, Israel—universally recognized as possessing nuclear capabilities and not a member of the NPT—continues to receive U.S. military support and

diplomatic protection. This disparity undermines the credibility of U.S. foreign policy and challenges the legitimacy of the global nonproliferation regime. By analyzing both the Iranian and Israeli cases, this thesis explores the strategic, political, and ideological roots of this double standard in U.S. nonproliferation policy and its broader consequences for international security.

The United States applies a double standard in its non-proliferation policy by opposing Iran's nuclear program while accepting Israel's nuclear capabilities. This difference is not based on consistent international rules, but on political alliances, historical ties, and strategic interests, which weakens global efforts to stop the spread of nuclear weapons and increases tensions in the Middle East. Three main research questions serve as the foundation for this study. The first question it poses is how far the United States' nonproliferation strategy treats Israel's and Iran's nuclear programs differently. Second, what are the domestic, political, strategic, and historical reasons for this apparent inequality. Lastly, what are the broader implications of this kind of policy approach, and how it affects Middle Eastern regional stability and the legitimacy and efficacy of the international nonproliferation community.

In order to answer these questions; this study covers the different U.S. nonproliferation policy trajectories between Israel and Iran using a qualitative comparative approach. This approach allows for a thorough discussion of the political, historical, and strategic elements that shape American decision-making. To create a thorough and fact-based study, the research draws on a range of sources, such as historical records, official statements, and geopolitical studies. Also, information from scholarly journals, official government documents, and published reports. By triangulating these sources, the study ensures a comprehensive and balanced analysis of the motivations, implications, and consequences of U.S. nonproliferation policy in the Middle East.

Chapter One examines the evolution of U.S. nonproliferation strategy toward Iran, including the use of multilateral agreements like the 2015 nuclear deal between Iran and world powers, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), sanctions, and diplomatic pressure. Starting with a chronology of Iran's nuclear program, it demonstrates how U.S. policy evolved over time, shifting from being an ally to isolation and punishment to limited cooperation and diplomacy. The chapter looks at key events, and ongoing diplomatic reengagement efforts and demonstrates how worries about regional influence, domestic politics, and the possibility of nuclear proliferation shaped US strategies.

Chapter Two discusses the U.S. policy regarding Israel's clandestine nuclear program and its long-standing policy of nuclear ambiguity. It analyzes the ways in which the U.S. has consistently provided Israel with military aid, strategic support, and diplomatic protection and stayed away from any confrontation of its nuclear program. The chapter scrutinizes the origins and evolution of Israel's policy of opacity, the rationale for continued American support in light of non-signatory status to the NPT, and the arms control implications of the policy at the regional level.

Chapter Three provides a comparative study of U.S. nuclear policies between Iran and Israel, revealing the strategic and political elements that lead to what is commonly perceived as an obvious double standard. It looks at how domestic politics, strategic partnerships, and regional security considerations influence U.S. strategy and how these decisions impact the legitimacy of global nonproliferation standards. The chapter discusses the wider effects of this imbalance, such as instability in the region, a decline in trust in the United States as a neutral power, and potential threats to the efficacy of global efforts to combat proliferation.

The subject of nuclear nonproliferation and the case of U.S. foreign policy toward Iran and Israel have provided a rich scholarly literature. Analysts and scholars have analyzed U.S. actions on their strategic, legal, and ideological dimensions, often pointing to seemingly inconsistent application of nonproliferation principles. Most of the literature is concerned with the Iranian nuclear program, and the international community is concerned with potential weaponization, regional instability, and treaty violations.

Chapter one: U.S. Non-proliferation policy towards Iran

Since World War II, the topic of international security has been dominated by nuclear weapons because of their potentially huge destructive force. They generally exist in two general classes: atomic bombs, which depend on nuclear splitting, and more destructive hydrogen bombs, which depend on nuclear fusion. Their potential for destruction raised global alarm. In response, the international community signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) in 1968. The treaty was intended to stop the nuclear weapon proliferation and narrow its use only for peaceful uses. America, as a leading country, has taken a prime position in promoting nonproliferation on an international level through diplomacy, international agreements, and enforcement activities such as sanctions. Iran's nuclear ambitions are probably the most controversial case in the world of nonproliferation. Initially pursued in the 1950s with US funding under the auspices of the Atoms for Peace program, Iran's nuclear ambitions shifted in direction after the 1979 Islamic Revolution.

Over the decades, Iran pursued nuclear work more and more secretly, fueling suspicion about the true purpose of its ambitions. There are indications that by the early 1990s and late 1980s, Iran was importing sensitive technology and material from abroad, including from Pakistan's A.Q. Khan network, which is a nuclear proliferation group led by Abdul Qadeer Khan, a Pakistani nuclear scientist. By the early 2000s, there were signs of secret enrichment plants that prompted nations to raise an eyebrow of concern. Though Iran has constantly maintained that its nuclear ambitions are peaceful and within the parameters of the rights under the NPT, above all through the lack of transparency and the tactic of concealment, doubt has been induced. Today, Iran is widely considered a nuclear threshold state, i.e., it possesses the knowledge and

infrastructure needed to produce nuclear weapons, even though it has not officially developed them (“A History of Iran’s Nuclear Program”).

This complex history indicates the fine balance between a nation’s civilian nuclear access and the global responsibility to prevent nuclear weapons proliferation. It also indicates the challenges confronting the international community—and particularly the United States—in promoting norms of nonproliferation while managing regional security politics.

1.1 Historical Context: The Nuclear Issue in Iran

Iran began its nuclear program in the 1950s, when the United States, under President Dwight D. Eisenhower, initiated the Atoms for Peace program, which promoted the use of nuclear energy solely for peaceful reasons while preventing the spread of nuclear weapons. Iran at this point was a faithful Western ally under Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, who was the last king of Iran, ruled from 1941 until 1979. He was known for his modernization efforts and close ties with the West before being overthrown in the Iranian Revolution. The United States provided nuclear technology, training, and facilities to aid Iran in its pursuit of nuclear capabilities. Iran and the United States had an agreement regarding civil nuclear cooperation in 1957.

The United States had provided Iran with a research reactor, used primarily for research, education, and producing isotopes, along with enriched uranium fuel by 1967, which is suitable for use as fuel in nuclear reactors or, in higher enrichments, for nuclear weapons. During the Shah’s rule, Iran jointly worked with America and Europe to create its nuclear energy program. Before the NPT went into effect in 1970, Iran was in fact carrying out nuclear research at the University of Tehran under Akbar Etemad, the head of the Atomic Energy Organization in the 1970s. Iran was one of the first nations to sign the NPT.

By the middle of the 1970s, Iran had planned to develop a number of nuclear power facilities, with European companies contracted to construct reactors and Iran investing in a French uranium enrichment factory. In addition, it was developing its own nuclear fuel cycle through uranium mining and research facilities (Rowberry). Then came the Iranian Revolution of 1979, which drastically altered things. The new government of Ayatollah Khomeini who led the 1979 Iranian Revolution and became the founding Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic of Iran, declared nuclear weapons to be contrary to Islamic teachings, and the U.S. shortly thereafter ended all nuclear cooperation.

Washington encouraged countries to cancel Iran agreements, halting activities like the Bushehr nuclear reactor, Iran's major nuclear power plant project, and Iran's investment in uranium enrichment (Rowberry). Isolation kept Iran's nuclear development from advancing for decades. The relationship between the United States and Iran deteriorated after the 1979 hostage crisis, during which Iranian students stormed the U.S. embassy in Tehran and held American diplomats as hostages for over a year ("Iran Hostage Crisis").

Iran's nuclear facilities were once more destroyed during the 1980–1988 war with Iraq, with bombings demolishing portions of the facility. Iran attempted to revive its nuclear program covertly in the 1990s with assistance or technology from nations like China and Russia. Iran signed deals with China and Russia, including completing the Bushehr reactor. But some of the projects never materialized because of persistent U.S. pressure. Iran also has been accused of buying nuclear technology through the network run by Pakistani scientist A.Q. Khan at this time (Takeyh 55).

In the late 1990s and early 2000s, Iran allegedly conducted the "Amad Plan," a covert nuclear weapons development program, with the clandestine production of nuclear material and

weapons parts. These moves put the world community in question, following the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) in 2002 revealing that Iran had secretly established nuclear facilities at Natanz and Arak, two key nuclear areas in Iran (Albright et al. 132). Iran has been limiting IAEA inspections since 2006, which further raised the concern of the global world regarding its nuclear aspirations. Concerns that Iran might be developing a nuclear weapons program were heightened in 2009 when a uranium enrichment plant in the Qom region was discovered, but Tehran maintains that its nuclear program is wholly civilian (Albright).

A former U.S.-supported civilian nuclear program in the 1950s, Iran's quest for nuclear power has now become one of the leading reasons for tension and mistrust. The revolution of 1979 provided a definitive turning point, with decades of suspicion and exile in between. Iran's covert aspiration for more nuclear power, as well as collaboration with other countries and restrictions on international inspections, created concerns about regional security and the threat of nuclear proliferation. Iran's program went through many stages, some of which affected it positively and some negatively, the most important of which was the Islamic Revolution transition, which was a turning point not only for Iran but for the world's outlook towards its nuclear path and the escalation of questions about the extent of its danger (Katzman 12).

1.2 U.S. Diplomatic Strategy: Sanctions and the JCPOA

The United States has tried various methods for decades in an attempt to stop Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons. They used negotiations, economic sanctions against the Iranian economy, and diplomatic pressure. Negotiations are held in hopes of settling disputes in a nonviolent manner. Economic sanctions are actions that prevent a nation from doing business with others to impose pressure. Diplomatic pressure is used to encourage a nation to comply

with laws without resorting to force. The U.S. imposed many sanctions after the 1979 hostage crisis.

The sanctions were imposed on Iran's financial institutions, including banks and money networks; its oil exports, mainly oil sales; and the officials in the government (Katzman, "Iran Sanctions.").

Around 2010, fears that Iran was enriching uranium in a form that could be used to make nuclear fuel or bombs led to a massive 2015 deal called the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). The deal was between Iran and six of the world's greatest powers in a group called the P5+1: the U.S., UK, France, Russia, China, and Germany. Iran agreed to limitations on its nuclear activities, and sanctions were eased partially. The United Nations and the IAEA supervise to ensure that Iran complies with the accord (Davenport, "The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) at a Glance").

The US has long attempted to control Iran's nuclear aspirations through diplomatic pressure, economic sanctions, and diplomacy. Sanctions and diplomacy have provided some victories, but lasting solutions were impossible due to the nature of the issue and politically opposing viewpoints. Although the 2015 JCPOA was a positive step forward, there remain concerns that show just how crucial it is to continue diplomatic efforts and remain vigilant.

1.2.1 U.S. Sanctions Policy toward Iran

Sanctions are intentional measures implemented by a nation or group of nations to sway the conduct of another nation without using force. Sanctions can be economic (e.g., trade embargoes), political (e.g., denying diplomatic recognition), or other types of pressure intended to promote cooperation with global norms or punish violations of them (Katzman, "Iran Sanctions."). Foreign policymakers use sanctions to encourage governments that are considered

aggressive or uncooperative, like states that are developing nuclear weapons, to change their course (Nephew 45). The United States has used sanctions extensively against Iran, working to ban its nuclear weapons program and reduce its influence in the Middle East without going to direct war (Kerr).

Sanctions exist in countless varieties depending on whom they target and what they aim to do. Economic sanctions restrict trade, investment, or financial exchange—such as the freezing of assets or a ban on exports and imports. For instance, America has imposed these on the Iranian banking industry and oil exports (Katzman, “Iran Sanctions”). Economic sanctions directly prevent Iran from accessing international banking systems or foreign exchange transactions, such as barring Iranian banks from using the international payment system SWIFT (Davenport, “The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) at a Glance”).

Commercial sanctions aim at controlling exports or imports, mainly military or dual-use commodities that may enable the nuclear drive of Iran (Katzman, “Iran Sanctions”). Travel bans prevent certain individuals like government officials or researchers from traveling to other countries. Military sanctions involve arms embargoes or banning military relations. Other sanctions are specifically aimed—so-called “smart sanctions”—targeting specific individuals or entities like the Revolutionary Guard or oil industries, to reduce harm to civilians (Haass). Others, like the restrictions imposed following the hostage crisis in 1979, are wide and universal and have an impact on a country’s entire economy (Crist 89).

There are several purposes for which sanctions are applied. They can enforce policy appeasements, punish violators of international norms, discourage undesirable actions like the development of nuclear weapons, send messages of disapproval over the world, or motivate

governments to enact changes (Nephew 22). Sanctions on Iran provided diplomatic pressure and isolated the regime, as seen by the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) (Kerr; Davenport, “The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) at a Glance”).

The Executive Order 12170 by President Jimmy Carter in November 1979 was one of the first actions to freeze Iranian assets totaling approximately \$12 billion in the U.S., including bank deposits and gold. This was achieved under the International Emergency Economic Powers Act (IEEPA), a law which allows the president to regulate commerce during crisis situations and attempted to force Iran to release American hostages (Exec. Order No. 12170).

Despite the Algiers Accords (1981) between the United States and Iran, mediated by Algeria, that resolved the Iran hostage crisis by securing the release of 52 American hostages in exchange for unfreezing Iranian assets, almost all of the sanctions were still in place and opened the door for more severe ones. Because of the continued animosity between the two nations, every U.S. president since then has extended the national emergency proclaimed under EO 12170 (Exec. Order No. 12170; Katzman).

In 1984, the United States designated Iran as a State Sponsor of Terrorism, increasing its diplomatic and economic isolation. This was in response to Iran’s support of militant groups like Hezbollah, who attacked American interests in the Middle East, such as the 1983 Beirut barracks bombing that killed 241 U.S. and 58 French military personnel (“Country Reports on Terrorism 2020: Iran”).

President Bill Clinton’s adoption of Executive Order 12959 in 1995, which prohibited the majority of trade and investment with Iran, further tightened sanctions. The order shut down imports of Iranian goods, exports of American technology to Iran, new U.S. investments, and even banned Americans from assisting foreign entities to engage in business with Iran. The

policies were aimed at pressuring Iran about its nuclear ambitions and terrorism support (Executive Order No. 12959). The Iran and Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA) of 1996 targeted companies investing \$40 million or more annually in the oil industry of Iran, applying sanctions such as denial of export licenses and U.S. loans from financial institutions as a disincentive to invest in Iran's petroleum industry ("U.S. Sanctions on Iran").

Congress passed the Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act (CISADA) in 2010, tightening sanctions to involve Iran's petroleum refining industry and financial institutions backing the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) which is a powerful branch of Iran's military that safeguards the Islamic Republic's ideology. CISADA also encouraged divestment against companies acting in Iran's energy sector and imposed stricter regulations on foreign banks engaging with sanctioned Iranian companies ("Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability, and Divestment Act").

The 2011 National Defense Authorization Act placed extra sanctions on foreign banks that facilitate dealings with Iran's Central Bank or other institutions involved in nuclear or terrorist activities. This left foreign banks in a dilemma and had to choose between doing business with Iran and retaining access to the U.S. financial market. These sanctions were mostly instrumental in limiting Iran's oil exports and placing economic pressure that led to the 2015 JCPOA negotiations (Katzman 18).

1.2.2 The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)

Despite the multitude of sanctions imposed over the years, Iran's nuclear program continued to expand, prompting increasing international concern. Continued growth has shown

that sanctions alone would not be capable of putting an end to Iran's nuclear aspirations. Iran intended to build new nuclear facilities in 2006 with some 2,784 centrifuges—machines that enrich uranium by concentrating the uranium-235 isotope, which is needed for nuclear weapons and civilian nuclear power. Iran announced in 2010 that it was able to produce highly enriched uranium (HEU), which is enriched to a degree sufficient for weapons-grade material. While the peaceful nuclear energy requires enrichment levels of 3-5%, weapons-grade uranium requires enrichment levels above 90%. Iran was previously acquiring HEU externally. This discovery heightened international concern, and there was increased imposition of sanctions and covert operations to slow down Iran's nuclear program.

The 2013 election of Hassan Rouhani as president of Iran was a turn towards diplomacy because he was ready for open negotiations regarding Iran's nuclear program. Consequently, Iran entered into talks with the P5+1 group. These negotiations ultimately resulted in the signing of the JCPOA on July 14, 2015. The agreement aimed to push back the time Iran could make a nuclear weapon by restricting Iranian nuclear progress extremely tightly. Specifically, Iran agreed to reduce the number of centrifuges, cut back on research on heavy water (heavy water is a type of water that is used in some nuclear reactors), and limit the production and stockpiling of weapons-grade plutonium and uranium. The deal also demanded that, in case Iran went ahead with the development of a nuclear weapon, it would take a minimum of one year before the world powers and global inspectors could react ("What Is the Iran Nuclear Deal").

1.2.3 The JCPOA: Key Provisions and Challenges

The JCPOA, which was negotiated in 2015, was a historic agreement between Iran and six major world powers with the facilitation of the European Union. The aim was to contain Iran's nuclear ambitions and weaponization, in exchange for lifting international sanctions.

The deal required Iran to impose strict constraints on its nuclear program. One of the main obligations was to limit the enrichment of uranium to 3.67% purity which cannot be used for weapons. By limiting enrichment to 3.67%, the deal guaranteed Iran's nuclear fuel would be considerably below weapons-grade levels. As an additional safeguard, Iran would reduce its working centrifuges — which spin the uranium at high speed to increase the concentration of uranium — to 5,060 IR-1 centrifuges, and only at its Natanz plant, for ten years. Iran also would need to re-engineer its Arak heavy-water reactor to the extent that it would be unable to produce plutonium, another fuel that can be used to build nuclear bombs.

In order to further enhance the openness, Iran adopted interim implementation of the IAEA Additional Protocol, which occurred as part of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), which enhances openness for monitors at its nuclear facilities, such as Natanz and Fordow, and allows for short-notice inspections, in an attempt not to allow any undeclared nuclear activity or material to take place. As a reward for such nuclear restrictions, the United States, European Union, and United Nations pledged to lift economic sanctions, with Iran gaining access to billions of dollars of frozen assets and a chance to reenter markets, primarily oil and finance.

In spite of being successful initially, the JCPOA was not perfect. Perhaps most contentious was the provision for sunset clauses — clauses allowing some of the limitations placed on Iran's nuclear activities to expire after several years. Critics protested that once such restrictions have expired, Iran legally would be free to revive its sensitive nuclear activities, potentially introducing a second wave of proliferation risks. The second major failure in the deal was that it did not touch upon Iran's ballistic missile program. Ballistic missiles, which were

capable of delivering nuclear warheads over long ranges, were not being put under the JCPOA. It meant that Iran would continue to develop its weapons delivery systems in the years to come but limit its nuclear material (Satloff).

Verification was also an issue. While the IAEA might inspect nuclear plants, it might find it difficult to inspect military camps, which raised speculations that Iran might be concealing something in secret places (Albright and Stricker 2). In the Middle East, countries like Israel viewed the JCPOA as not strong enough in that relief from sanctions would be enabling Iran to gain more ability to expand its capability and sponsor its proxy militias further destabilizing the region (Mousavian 35). Meanwhile, inside Iran, economic expectations were crushed to some extent. Sanctions were removed, but foreign investment was sparse due to political instability and apprehension of secondary US sanctions. This bred growing domestic frustration, as some felt the deal released too many concessions in exchange for too little gain (Khalaji).

In May 2018, President Donald Trump announced U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA. He justified this step in view of Iran's past record of not being forthcoming, no controls on missiles, and ongoing patronage of "terrorist" organizations all over the Middle East. Sanctions were then re-imposed, most notably at Iran's oil exports — the linchpin of its economy. Iran responded by gradually rolling back its cooperation. As of January 2020, it had announced that it was no longer bound by the provisions of the limitations of enrichment or use of centrifuges under the agreement. In December 2020, with implementation underway from January 2021 onward, its parliament enacted legislation that committed the country to resumption of 20% enrichment, expanding production of sophisticated centrifuges, and starting production of uranium metal — material that has potential applications in nuclear weapons manufacturing (IAEA) (Davenport,

“The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) at a Glance”).

When Joe Biden became President of the United States in January 2021, he said that he would prefer to go back to the agreement. Diplomatic talks began in Vienna in April, and although initial steps were being noted, the negotiations slowed down during the summer. Iran demanded stronger guarantees that America will not withdraw from the agreement again, and to shut down an IAEA probe into uranium particles at unstated sites. In addition, Iran’s real repression of its internal protesters at the end of 2022 and further collaboration with the Russians in Ukraine’s war discouraged the Western powers from full re-engagement further (“Iran Nuclear Deal”).

International community reactions to the US withdrawal were varied. France, Germany, and the UK all expressed strong regrets and reaffirmed continued support for the JCPOA. They described the accord in a communiqué as an international nuclear non-proliferation cornerstone and urged all of its signatories to be faithful to their commitments. Their skepticism was also echoed by UN Secretary-General António Guterres, who asked all parties involved to respect the accord and emphasized its importance to regional and global stability. The American move was forcefully criticized by the Russian Foreign Ministry on the grounds that it defied international norms and undermined security. Russia stated that the UN Security Council Resolution 2231 imposition of sanctions on the agreement testified to its legitimacy. The Chinese reaction was less aggressive but it stood firmly behind the agreement and called for it to be respected.

On the other hand, America’s withdrawal was greeted warmly by Israel and Saudi Arabia. Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu referred to the JCPOA accord as a "disastrous" accord and greeted the U.S. move. It was also greeted warmly by Saudi Arabia, where it was noted that the accord had failed to stem the destabilizing influence of Iran in the region (Chohan

et al.).

1.2.4 American Reengagement Initiatives in 2025

The United States changed course in April 2025, indicating that it was willing to negotiate with Iran on its nuclear program. Despite announcing plans to engage in negotiations, President Trump also imposed fresh penalties on entities connected to Iran's nuclear activities. Around the world, this mix of pressure and diplomacy produced a range of reactions. Iranian Foreign Minister Abbas Araghchi indicated openness to indirect negotiations with the U.S., suggesting the possibility of mediated discussions through a neutral party such as Oman. After years of stalled diplomacy and elevated tensions, these indirect talks—where communication takes place through intermediaries rather than direct meetings—represented a significant advance (“Saudi Arabia Will Develop Nuclear Bomb if Iran Does – Crown Prince”).

The Russian government advocated for political solutions and stated support for diplomatic initiatives aimed at reducing nuclear tensions between the United States and Iran. However, Russia criticized U.S. threats of military action as unlawful and warned such measures could destabilize the region. Meanwhile, Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu demanded a stringent agreement akin to Libya's complete nuclear disarmament, insisting that Iran's nuclear infrastructure be dismantled under U.S. supervision. Israel was also wary of negotiations perceived as insufficient to prevent Iran from ever pursuing nuclear weapons. European leaders have been inclined toward diplomatic and multilateral means of addressing Iran's nuclear ambitions, although the EU's specific response was not clearly delineated. They would most likely have favored restarting negotiations, pending the guarantees and conditions advanced (Davenport, “U.S. Imposes New Sanctions on Iran”).

The intricate interaction between diplomatic initiatives, regional security concerns, and the desire to block nuclear proliferation is illustrated in foreign responses to American policy shifts. Iranian readiness to pursue indirect discussions through mediators like Oman signaled a desire to reduce tensions, though the United States sought to pair strengthened sanctions with an eagerness to engage in negotiations. To guarantee regional stability, Russia encouraged political negotiations but remained wary of American influence. While differing from shorter-term arrangements like the JCPOA, which was precipitated by the need to contain Iran's nuclear ambitions, Israel's position was rooted in strong and irreversible disarmament actions, reflecting its extreme skepticism of Iran's intentions. The EU's traditional commitment to multilateral diplomacy is consistent with its support for enhanced engagement.

1.3 U.S. Policy towards Iran: Analysis

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, U.S. policy toward Iran has been marked by sharp fluctuations—alternating between containment and sanctions, cautious diplomatic engagement, and periods of renewed hostility. These shifts reflect Washington's longstanding concerns about nuclear proliferation, regional hegemony, terrorism, and human rights, all within the broader aim of maintaining strategic influence in the Middle East.

1.3.1 Sanctions and Isolation during the Initial Period (1979–2000s)

The 1979 hostage crisis and the establishment of the Islamic Republic caused a major rupture in U.S.-Iran relations. In response, the Carter administration froze Iranian assets held in American banks, initiating a long-term policy of political and economic isolation. In 1984, the U.S. officially designated Iran as a "State Sponsor of Terrorism" due to its support for groups such as Hezbollah. Throughout the 1980s and 1990s, Washington increasingly relied on unilateral sanctions, targeting Iran's oil industry, military imports, and financial system. These

measures aimed to punish Iran for its revolutionary ideology and regional activities carried out through proxy forces (Katzman “Iran Sanctions”). Diplomacy was virtually absent during this time, as the U.S. prioritized punitive measures over dialogue.

1.3.2 The Nuclear Concern Emerges (2002–2015)

In 2002, the discovery of undeclared nuclear facilities in Natanz and Arak intensified Western fears about Iran’s nuclear ambitions. This development hardened the U.S. stance, especially under President George W. Bush, who labeled Iran part of the "Axis of Evil", along with North Korea and Iraq, portraying these nations as grave dangers because of their purported support for terrorism and quest for WMDs. While the European powers (UK, France, and Germany) led early negotiations, the U.S. focused on imposing financial sanctions and pressuring international bodies to limit Iran’s nuclear progress (Davenport, “History of Official Proposals on the Iranian Nuclear Issue”). A major shift occurred during the Obama administration, which emphasized engagement over confrontation. In 2015, after years of negotiation, the U.S. and other world powers reached the JCPOA which the Obama administration viewed as a diplomatic success that reduced nuclear risks and reintegrated Iran into the global system (Kerr).

1.3.3 The “Maximum Pressure” Campaign (2018–2020)

In 2018, the Trump administration withdrew the U.S. from the JCPOA, arguing that the deal did not adequately address Iran’s ballistic missile program or its regional interventions. In place of the agreement, the U.S. launched a "maximum pressure" campaign, combining broad economic sanctions with increased diplomatic isolation. While the campaign inflicted serious economic damage on Iran, it also led Tehran to gradually scale back its compliance with the

JCPOA. Tensions escalated further in January 2020, when a U.S. drone strike killed Iranian General Qasem Soleimani the commander of Iran's Quds Force, sparking fears of direct military confrontation (Pompeo). Rather than curbing conflict, the policy deepened hostility and widened the rift between the two nations.

1.3.4 Biden's Struggle to Rebuild Diplomacy (2021–2023)

Upon taking office, President Joe Biden expressed readiness to return to the JCPOA if Iran resumed full compliance. Talks resumed in Vienna, but progress was hindered by several challenges. Iran demanded guarantees that the U.S. would not withdraw again, while unresolved issues with the IAEA further complicated negotiations. Additionally, Iran's internal repression and alleged military support to Russia during the war in Ukraine drew strong international criticism (Vaez). In response, the Biden administration adopted a dual-track approach: pursuing diplomatic talks while maintaining pressure through cyber operations, targeted sanctions, and increased cooperation with regional allies (Geranmayeh). Domestic political divisions in the U.S.

and skepticism from Middle Eastern partners also constrained diplomatic efforts.

1.3.5 Recent Trends (2024–2025): Strategic Ambiguity and Tentative Engagement

In 2025, with the return of Donald Trump to the presidency, the U.S. expressed willingness to resume indirect talks with Iran through intermediaries such as Oman. At the same time, new sanctions were imposed on Iranian individuals and entities linked to advanced uranium enrichment (Geranmayeh). Ambiguity has been a defining feature of the U.S. relationship with Iran. The transition was profound and long-lasting, ranging from the early collaboration under the Shah to the intense hostility that followed the Islamic Revolution in 1979. American approaches to prevent Iran's regional activities and nuclear aspirations have

changed throughout time, at times relying more on diplomacy and engagement and at other times primarily on isolation and sanctions.

One of the most evident patterns in this regard is inconsistency. The United States often modifies its policies whenever a new government takes office. Although sanctions have been a popular tool for applying pressure, their results have varied over time. Iran has found ways to adjust, and it has sometimes been challenging to maintain international unity around those sanctions. The 2015 nuclear deal brought optimism for a more stable future, but it broke down a few years later, showing how fragile these accords can be, especially when there are strong political disagreements and low confidence.

In conclusion, not much has changed in recent years. Due to new sanctions, backchannel talks, and changing alliances, both countries are locked in a vicious cycle of conflict and reluctance. Iran's growing ties with China and Russia only serve to confuse the matter, and America's influence in the region is up against greater challenges than ever before. Stopping nuclear escalation, supporting regional allies, and preventing another expensive war are the challenges facing the United States. This will require politicians to strike a balance between communication and pressure. Success will require a combination of strategies, clearly stated objectives, and ongoing diplomacy. It may be the only way to achieve long-term stability, but it will take time to rebuild a little amount of understanding after decades of mistrust and lost chances.

Chapter Two: U.S. Nonproliferation Policy toward Israel

For decades, the United States has pioneered a policy of preventing the proliferation of nuclear weapons, leading a worldwide application of the NPT, but because America has chosen to assist and even protect Israel's nuclear ambiguity, allowing it to maintain its capability for nuclear weapons without any legal approval or scrutiny, all of this has raised suspicions about the legitimacy of this policy. This dichotomy has bred fear of double standards in American nonproliferation policy and broader strategic interests in the Middle East.

This chapter follows the U.S. policy toward Israel's nonproliferation from a historical perspective, diplomatic trade-offs, and security agendas. The chapter examines Israel's nuclear ambiguity, the strategic rationale behind it, and the arrangements that have enabled Israel to maintain its nuclear capabilities outside the NPT without facing penalties. The chapter also addresses the security relations of the United States with Israel, including military aid, technology sharing, and diplomatic shields in world forums. It also reflects on broader

implications of the connection for U.S. nonproliferation interests, Middle Eastern security, and congressional responsibility. Taking the above into mind, this chapter attempts to take a broad view regarding the unique U.S.-Israel nuclear relationship and its significance for global nonproliferation, Middle East security, and U.S. Middle East foreign policy.

2.1 The Nuclear Ambiguity of Israel

Israel's nuclear policy has always been characterized by a deliberate ambiguity, or what is called "nuclear opacity." This policy neither confirms nor denies the existence of a nuclear capability in the country. This has played a major role in shaping bilateral and regional ties, as well as the security and relationship between the U.S. and Israel (Cohen 1–4).

The ambiguity stems from the late 1950s and early 1960s, when Israel, covertly with French help, started developing its nuclear program to receive later tacit U.S. approval. This indicates that the U.S. was aware of Israel's covert nuclear activities but chose not to publicly protest or halt them. U.S. policymakers either tolerated or disregarded the expansion of Israel's nuclear program rather than officially endorsing it, for political and strategic reasons—most significantly to maintain good relations with Israel and avoid political problems in the Middle East. Although U.S. intelligence had enough evidence of Israel's nuclear progress, diplomatic and strategic considerations prevented the U.S. from publicly acknowledging Israel's nuclear capability (Cohen 1–4).

2.1.1 Origins and Evolution of Nuclear Ambiguity

Prime Minister David Ben-Gurion felt that nuclear weapons were necessary for Israel's future security and survival and thus launched the country's nuclear program during his government. Israel and France were close through the late 1950s, and Israel acquired the

technical and material support it required to build the Dimona nuclear reactor. To conceal the activity, Israeli leaders openly referred to the Dimona location as a research institute. Behind this story, however, they were secretly working on a nuclear weapons program (Cohen 15–19).

To sustain this deception, Israel placed the Dimona plant under strict secrecy and limited access to foreign agencies like the IAEA. In response to the rising international pressure, Israel permitted U.S. inspectors to make strictly regulated visits, revealing only non-sensitive parts of the establishment. While secret weapons development proceeded with ongoing French cooperation, the civilian cover story was further reinforced by carefully constructed narratives and false paperwork (Cohen 130–134).

As journalist Adam Entous explains in his detailed investigation published in *The New Yorker*, U.S. officials were not simply deceived by Israel's nuclear ambiguity; rather, they became tacit partners in maintaining it. Beginning with a secret understanding between President Richard Nixon and Prime Minister Golda Meir in 1969, successive U.S. administrations—Democratic and Republican alike—chose not to pressure Israel about its nuclear arsenal. This long-standing policy of silence illustrates that the U.S. was fully aware of Israel's capabilities and made a strategic decision to preserve the status quo, rather than confront it publicly. Therefore, the issue is not about American officials being naïve or “stupid,” but about calculated geopolitical considerations and mutual strategic interests (Entous).

Although Israel claimed that the Dimona reactor was being used for peaceful purposes, in October 1961, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) published a National Intelligence Estimate (NIE). This assessment revealed that by 1965–1966, Israel was preparing to produce plutonium for nuclear weapons. The report demonstrated that Israeli authorities, particularly Prime Minister

David Ben-Gurion, had misled American officials, including President John F. Kennedy (Cohen and Burr, “How the Israelis Hoodwinked JFK on Going Nuclear”).

According to a report by William Burr and Avner Cohen from The Wilson Center, President Kennedy did not believe Israel despite their assurances, and he enlisted the IAEA to confirm Israeli assertions regarding the reactor’s peaceful uses. Because they claimed to be concerned about the presence of Soviet bloc officials on the inspection teams, the Israelis protested the IAEA’s involvement. As a result, access was restricted to American scientists and carried out under strict guidelines established by Israel. Israeli officials deceived American inspectors with short, carefully planned tours, despite diplomatic pressure from the United States and Britain to allow monitoring (Cohen and Burr, “Kennedy, Dimona and the Nuclear Proliferation Problem: 1961–1962”). Ben-Gurion reaffirmed the peaceful nature of the Dimona project in a conference in May 1961. In 1962, Israel set up a false 45-minute tour of the plant to escape more examination. By portraying Dimona as a civilian operation, Israel maintained its nuclear ambiguity and avoided more thorough U.S. oversight (Cohen and Burr, “How the Israelis Hoodwinked JFK on Going Nuclear”).

By the end of the 1960s, U.S. officials came to the conclusion that Israel had likely obtained nuclear weapons, shifting their approach from prevention to a quiet acceptance. In a 1969 memorandum, National Security Advisor Henry Kissinger informed President Nixon that Israel possessed sophisticated nuclear capabilities, including missiles potentially intended to carry nuclear warheads by 1970. Rather than calling for disarmament, Kissinger emphasized the importance of keeping Israel’s nuclear status unofficial, stating that the minimum goal should be to prevent it from becoming a widely recognized international fact (Kissinger 2).

An important turning point was the Nixon–Meir agreement of 1969, in which the US pledged not to put pressure on Israel to refrain from nuclear proliferation as long as its nuclear program was secret (Cohen 284). While no declassified formal treaty or written agreement has been found, several academics claim that Prime Minister Meir and President Nixon came to an unofficial agreement that year. This unofficial agreement is sometimes referred to as the “Nuclear opacity arrangement”, permitted Israel to maintain an unrecognized nuclear capacity as long as it would not test it or reveal it to the public. The US agreed to refrain from pressuring Israel to ratify the NPT Treaty in exchange (Cohen, “Worst-Kept Secret” 8–10; Entous).

Regarding its nuclear status, Israel has chosen to maintain strategic ambiguity and has not joined the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). Since the ideology neither affirms nor denies the existence of nuclear weapons, it puts its opponents in uncertainty. By doing this, Israel benefits from nuclear deterrence without having to face the same international obligations and scrutiny as signatories to the NPT. This well-crafted ambiguity has also allowed the country to avoid official scrutiny or punishment. Consequently, the country limits its influence on the global scene while maintaining its strategic edge (Aftergood).

This implicit and unspoken accommodation between the United States and Israel reveals more than it speaks about strategic calculation—what is revealed is how geopolitical interests can stand in for public adherence to international norms. It is interesting and disconcerting to observe the way great powers from time to time find that silence and vagueness are preferable to disclosure, especially in matters of national security and regional alliance politics. The informal understanding that developed over these years contradicts presumptions regarding responsibility and the global relevance of nonproliferation principles. It also serves as a reminder in international relations, that what remains unsaid—what is whispered behind the scenes—can

push policy as hard as openly professed commitments.

2.1.2 Strategic Rationale behind Ambiguity

Israel's policy of nuclear ambiguity is motivated by several strategic considerations.

First,

it deters regional adversaries without provoking immediate international reprisal. Avoiding official nuclear status grants Israel, the privilege of avoiding the diplomatic and economic costs of overtly declaring itself a nuclear state (Cohen 2–5, 237–238). U.S. aid and Israel's nonmembership in the NPT, unlike Iran, allow for this privilege, which allows an estimated 90 to 200 warheads without IAEA supervision (Williams).

Israel's long-standing nuclear ambiguity ("amimut" which is the Hebrew word for nuclear opacity or ambiguity policy) allows it to maintain this delicate balance. Israel avoids the political and legal fallout by never publicly announcing or testing its weapons, which leaves enemies in suspense and makes them fear the worst (Maoz 44). According to David Albright, a nuclear physicist and founder of the Institute for Science and International Security, and Jacqueline Shire, an expert in nonproliferation and nuclear policy, in their report *Iran's Nuclear Program*, the inconsistent international response can be explained without defending the double standard by Iran's overt NPT violations and hostile posture, as well as Israel's nuclear ambiguity (Albright and Shire).

Second, the United States does not want to openly acknowledge Israel's nuclear capabilities, since it is unlikely to have any control over its nuclear development. Instead, the primary objective is to persuade Israel to keep its position as undetermined in order to avoid repercussions on a global scale (Kissinger 10). Zeev Maoz, an Israeli expert in conflict studies and international affairs, argues that Israel has successfully handled nuclear ambiguity from a

strategic standpoint. According to him, this policy allowed Israel to develop a nuclear arsenal while maintaining close relations with countries that openly support nonproliferation, such as the United States (Maoz 44).

By neither acknowledging nor denying its nuclear capabilities, Israel has been able to deter possible enemies by avoiding the political and diplomatic repercussions that accompany overt nuclear disclosures. Maoz says this careful balancing act allows Israel to profit from deterrence without endangering its relations or attracting international censure. This strategy highlights a broader reality in global politics: superpowers such as the United States often tolerate uncertainty when it serves their strategic goals. Thus, Israel's international legitimacy and security are maintained by its nuclear silence. Maoz challenges the idea that transparency is always better by showing that intentional quiet can sometimes achieve more.

2.1.3 Regional and International Implications

Israel's unclear nuclear status has been important to Middle Eastern security and in deterring threats from neighboring countries. Most see its secretive nuclear arsenal as an effective method of deterring Syrian, Egyptian, and Iranian attacks. Israel's nuclear project has changed the way countries plan their military action, making them think twice about mass attacks. Israel's unclear position has also slowed down the desire for Arab countries to pursue their own nuclear weapons and made Israel safer (Joshi). Even if this policy enhanced Israel's short-term security, it reproduces and preserves a regional inequality that undermines longerterm stability. That Israel uniquely enjoys an international nonproliferation standard exception, exempt from accountability, provokes region-wide resentment and sets a virulent precedent of

selective enforcement. Thus, while secrecy in Israel's case may have prevented public confrontations, it also contributes to the very fear and mistrust that render Middle Eastern arms control so difficult.

This secrecy has also been responsible for regional arms races, with nations like Iran employing Israel's nuclear status as an excuse for their nuclear pursuits (Rajiv). While Israel's ambiguity was intended to enhance deterrence, it has unintentionally encouraged rival states to consider nuclear options of their own, thereby undermining the very goal of regional stability. In this way, Israel's silence may have helped contain open conflict in the short term but has contributed to a long-term climate of mistrust and proliferation pressure. Rather than preventing the spread of nuclear weapons, opacity has created a strategic double standard that others in the region seek to challenge or emulate.

On a global level, Israel's nuclear stance has challenged the legitimacy of nonproliferation policies. Both IAEA and NPT designs rely on transparency, but Israel's exception, mainly supported by the United States, has caused double standards fears. While other nations, such as Iran, face scrutiny and sanctions for suspected nuclear activities, Israel has enjoyed US backing and support, feeding criticism of Western hypocrisy in nuclear diplomacy (Williams).

2.2 U.S. Security Assistance and Diplomatic Support

With decades of expanding American aid from conventional military support to joint defense projects and strong diplomatic protection in international organizations, the United States has been Israel's most important strategic ally for decades, providing Israel with extensive military aid, advanced defense technology, and diplomatic backing in international forums, strengthening Israel's security while influencing U.S. policy in the Middle East ("U.S. Security

Cooperation with Israel”).

2.2.1 U.S. Military Aid and Joint Defense Cooperation with Israel

With a total of \$158 billion in aid since World War II, Israel has received the most military assistance from the United States. The F-35 fighter jet, one of the most sophisticated aircrafts, and missile defense systems like Iron Dome, which fends against rocket attacks, are examples of this assistance (Sharp 2-23). The United States and Israel reached a deal in 2016 to give Israel \$38 billion between 2019 and 2028, including \$3.3 billion going toward military procurement and \$500 million toward missile defense (Sharp 2). In 2023, this funding was maintained (Sharp 53). By strengthening its defense and maintaining regional stability, the aid keeps Israel stronger than its neighbors (Sharp 6-10).

The United States and Israel have collaborated on a number of collaborative defense projects in addition to offering direct military assistance, such as the creation of missile defense systems like the David’s Sling, Iron Dome, and Arrow projects. These partially U.S. military grant-funded programs have significantly increased Israel’s ability to repel aerial attacks by enemies and non-state actors like Hamas and Hezbollah (“U.S.-Israel Missile Defense”).

Additionally, the US has offered to supply cutting-edge military equipment like F-35 fighter jets, cyber-security, and satellite-linked information. In addition to strengthening Israel’s defenses, the transfers have reinforced military interdependence between the United States and Israel and strengthened a long-term strategic alliance (“U.S. Security Cooperation with Israel”).

2.2.2 Diplomatic Protection on International Echelon

The United States has always defended Israel against the criticism of the world in international forums such as the UN, the IAEA, and other international organizations. Since 1945, the United States has continuously blocked efforts to challenge Israel’s settlement

practices, military actions in Gaza, and human rights violations, and it has vetoed at least 34 UN Security Council resolutions denouncing Israel. In 2017, the United States vetoed a resolution declaring that the American proclamation of Jerusalem as Israel's capital had "no legal effect" and that the actions were "null and void" in accordance with international law. Additionally, a resolution denouncing the use of any excessive and arbitrary force by the Israeli forces against Palestinian civilians for demonstrating during the Great March of Return in Gaza, for instance, was vetoed by the United States in 2018 (Asrar and Hussein).

U.S. diplomatic support has allowed Israel to ride out international pressure as it pursues its strategic agenda, most notably on its nuclear ambiguity and Middle Eastern security interests. The U.S. has employed its veto power to safeguard Israeli actions outside the Israeli-Palestinian front, including its veto of resolutions calling for the condemnation of Israel's invasion of southern Lebanon and annexation of the Syrian Golan Heights. Washington officially agreed to Israeli occupation of the Golan Heights in 2019, ending decades of U.S. policy ("Trump Formally Recognises Israeli Sovereignty over Golan Heights."). Through perpetual diplomatic cover, the U.S. has allowed Israel to implement its policies with impunity without substantive condemnation by international actors. Furthermore, the U.S. has consistently upheld Israel's policy of nuclear ambiguity, recognizing it as a core element of Israeli national security and ensuring that American nuclear policies do not impact Israel negatively (Ayalon).

In November 2024, a UN Security Council resolution calling for an "immediate, unconditional, and permanent" ceasefire in the Gaza Strip was vetoed by the US. The U.S. voted alone against it, maintaining its diplomatic cover for Israel, even though the other 14 council members supported it. The absence of provisions for the release of the hostages held by Hamas and the recognition that an unconditional ceasefire would benefit Hamas more than an equitable

resolution of the conflict were the reasons America opposed the resolution (Lederer). America has enabled Israel to continue its strategy without significant opposition from foreign authorities by consistently offering diplomatic cover.

2.2.3 Impact on Regional Stability and Arms Control Efforts

Although U.S. assistance has improved Israel's security, it has affected the balance of power in the region. In order to guarantee that Israel has more military capabilities than its neighbors, the United States has historically maintained Israel's qualitative military edge, or QME. Because Washington wants to fortify its regional allies without allowing Israel to lag behind, this commitment has propelled U.S. arms sales throughout the Middle East. Then, in August 2020, senior officials made it plain that Washington would "continue to sustain Israel's military advantage in the region" despite selling arms to Arab countries, reaffirming the US commitment to Israel's QME ("US Vows to Ensure").

The United States has authorized extensive weaponry sales to Arab countries like Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates (UAE) as part of this balancing approach. The United States and the United Arab Emirates signed a \$23 billion arms agreement in November 2020 that includes precision-guided missiles, armed drones, and cutting-edge F-35 fighter fighters. This deal was seen as part of the broader Abraham Accords, which normalized ties between Israel and a number of Arab nations. UAE normalized relations with Israel in exchange for access to advanced military technology. However, such transactions have raised concerns among Israeli officials, who worry that the sale of sophisticated weaponry to Arab states—even allies—could, in the long run, undermine Israel's military advantage (Lawler).

An arms race has begun in the area as a result of the weapon buildup. Iran wants to

strengthen its own military in reaction to this danger. Iran announced new weaponry in February 2025, demonstrating significant advancements in drone and missile technology. Iranian officials claim that these modifications demonstrate the region's militarization and are intended to deter Israeli and American military action ("Iran's Khamenei Cites Need").

2.3 The U.S.-Israel Relationship and Nonproliferation

International nonproliferation policy has been significantly shaped by the US-Israel relationship, which frequently highlights inconsistencies in US foreign policy. The United States has consistently supported nuclear nonproliferation, especially in situations like Iran's, but it has also protected Israel's nuclear program from criticism from other countries. Israel, as a nonsignatory to the NPT, is believed to be the only nation that possesses nuclear arms in the Middle

East; however, it has evaded inspection and limitations imposed on other states within the region (Entous).

Since 1948, Congress has ensured Israel's security through military support, defense cooperation, and diplomatic protection, maintaining its QME—a U.S. policy that guarantees Israel's technological and strategic superiority over potential regional adversaries ("United States-Israel Enhanced Security Cooperation Act" §8601). The United States has further solidified Israel's military supremacy by funding its missile defense systems, including Iron Dome, David's Sling, and Arrow (Zengerle). Despite decades-long U.S. intelligence awareness of Israel's nuclear weapons, Washington has refrained from pushing Israel to sign the NPT, unlike its stringent policies toward Iran and other aspirants to nuclear technology (Entous).

While the United States brings nonproliferation to the world, its proximity to Israel has

established a culture of uncertainty and discriminatory policymaking. The United States has shielded Israel from the same scrutiny and pressure it has given to other nations, specifically Iran. This hypocrisy is the pinnacle of the complexity of the foreign policy of the U.S., whereby diplomacy alliances typically supersede the process of even-handed application of policies on non-proliferation. Its consistent provision of diplomatic and military assistance to Israel as well as to its nuclear program has resulted in an isolated and sometimes contradictory stance among the broader world discourse about ownership of nuclear weapons.

2.3.1 Strategic Partnership and Nuclear Nonproliferation Goals

The cooperation between the United States and Israel is based on common strategic interests. Washington has seen Israel's nuclear capacity as a stabilizing force since the Cold War, strengthening American influence in the Middle East and discouraging adversarial neighbors. Israel's nuclear arsenal is essential for deterring enemies from adopting aggressive measures and to preserving regional security, according to Efraim Inbar, president of the Jerusalem Institute for Strategic Studies. He argues that many Middle Eastern countries have historically sought Israel's destruction, Iran is just a new phenomenon, and its nuclear deterrent has helped prevent such threats from materializing (Inbar).

Furthermore, U.S. military aid has played a crucial role in reinforcing Israel's strategic position. Israel's conventional military continues to be superior, and its security is maintained with the help of billions of dollars in defense aid each year, which includes sophisticated missile defense systems. "Our support for Israel's security helps preserve peace and stability in the region," said Assistant Secretary Andrew Shapiro of the Bureau of Political-Military Affairs.

Therefore, maintaining Israel's military might and dominance in the area is essential to regional stability and, as such, is a vital US priority (Shapiro). Additionally, the U.S. has maintained Israel's QME; this policy has guided U.S. arms sales in the Middle East, balancing support for Arab allies while safeguarding Israel's military superiority. The emergence of Iran as a regional threat has further shaped U.S. defense strategy, reinforcing military assistance to Israel while recalibrating relations with Arab states (Scott).

2.3.2 U.S. Policy toward Israel's Non-Signatory Status in the NPT

Contrary to most nuclear-armed states, Israel has refused to sign the NPT, arguing that its security situation is unique. The United States has consistently taken this stance, thwarting international efforts to push Israel to sign the treaty. According to Ze'ev Snir, the now former chairman of Israel's Atomic Energy Committee, Arab states have persistently petitioned for resolutions urging the IAEA to inspect Israel's nuclear program. But these attempts have been frustrated because of U.S. intervention. As Snir explained, "The reason we succeeded is simple: the Americans were with us. If they weren't with us, it would have passed" (qtd. in Castelli). US intervention has guaranteed that Israel is not subject to the restrictions of the treaty, solidifying its decades-old policy of nuclear ambiguity. This policy has been explained by American policymakers as being necessary for the preservation of Israeli QME vis-a-vis the Middle Eastern adversaries (Zhao).

Israel's opacity over its nuclear program has, however, not gone down well with the rest of the world and has given rise to arguments over the effectiveness of U.S. nonproliferation policy. Israeli ambivalence over its nuclear program has also clouded U.S. arms control diplomacy. Middle East nuclear weapons-Free Zone (MENWFZ) proposals have consistently been put off as the result of Israeli reluctance to enter negotiations. The U.S. has aligned itself

with the Israeli stand in arguing that more extended security arrangements for the region must precede Israeli arms control commitment (Miklos).

2.3.3 The Role of Congress and Policy Debate

The U.S. Congress plays a pivotal role in upholding American policies that favor Israel's ambiguous nuclear stance. Influential lobbying organizations like the AIPAC have significantly shaped congressional discourse by promoting continued military aid and discouraging any legislative efforts that would compel Israel to disclose details about its nuclear capabilities. Often, congressional resolutions highlight Israel's security concerns without addressing the wider regional consequences of its nuclear opacity (Blumenthal).

In addition, Congress has had a major influence on the progression of U.S. arms exports to Israel. Agreements involving the transfer of cutting-edge fighter aircraft and sophisticated missile defense systems have reinforced Israel's strategic edge over regional adversaries (Copp). This defense collaboration effectively supports Israel's nuclear posture by enhancing its deterrence capabilities, even though the country has never officially confirmed its possession of nuclear weapons.

2.4 Analysis of U.S. Policy toward Israel

The American policy towards Israel's nuclear development has been influenced by a dynamic combination of historical ties, strategic concerns, and geopolitical motivations. Unlike its staunch nonproliferation policy toward other countries, particularly Iran, the U.S. has pursued a policy of strategic ambiguity toward Israel's nuclear status. This analysis examines the main elements of U.S. policy toward Israel, focusing on diplomatic support, military assistance, and

the broader impact on global nonproliferation efforts.

2.4.1 Strategic Ambiguity and Diplomatic Support

The United States has long pursued a plan of strategic ambiguity regarding the nuclear status of Israel. It allows Israel to either deny or avoid confirming its nuclear status without keeping it sheltered from international pressure to disarm or join the NPT. In contrast with its Iran policy, the U.S. has not imposed stiff nonproliferation policies upon Israel but instead has afforded diplomatic protection and security assurances. This policy is driven by the perception of Israel as a strategic partner in a volatile neighborhood, ensuring its deterrent capability while minimizing international controversy (Gilinsky and Weiss).

2.4.2 Military and Financial Assistance

American economic and military assistance has maintained Israel's Middle Eastern security edge intact. The United States provides billions of dollars annually in military assistance, ensuring that Israel preserves its QME against its regional adversaries. The assistance takes the shape of advanced weaponry, missile defense, and intelligence-sharing initiatives, supporting Israeli security without challenging its nuclear capabilities (Deen). The absence of any nonproliferation strings attached to the aid also undermines U.S. tolerance of Israel's military strategic position (Knickmeyer).

2.4.3 Shielding Israel from International Scrutiny

As other countries have demanded more openness on Israel's nuclear program, the United States has consistently defended Israel. UN and IAEA demands that Israel reveal its nuclear capabilities have been consistently resisted or undermined. For instance, in 2019, a resolution passed by the UN General Assembly that called for the establishment of a nuclear-

weapons-free Middle East was opposed only by the United States and Israel. Even though these policies are generally favored globally, both nations have consistently resisted them. The United States, Israel, and a few allies from the Pacific Islands rejected another resolution that was largely supported but called on all of the region's governments to join the NPT. Additionally, the U.S. has rejected regional proposals—such as the creation of a Middle East Nuclear-Weapon-Free Zone (MENWFZ)—which would require Israel to disclose details of its nuclear arsenal. The

United States was one of only three nations to vote against a proposal supported by the Arab League to hold a regional conference with the goal of creating a zone free of WMDs (Norton). The stringent inspections and severe penalties imposed on Iran stand in sharp contrast to this steadfast backing for Israel's opaque nuclear policy, underscoring an obvious double standard in U.S. nonproliferation policy.

Although Israel's nuclear ambiguity has likely improved its short-term regional security and deterrence, it has also led to long-term regional proliferation pressures and mistrust, which make the larger goal of Middle Eastern stability more difficult to achieve. Supported by defense accords, billions of dollars in military aid, and constant diplomatic protection, the US-Israel alliance reveals the inherent tension underlying international relations wherein strategic alliances equal as much value as, if not more so than, stated commitment to universal norms.

To conclude, this ambiguous approach has far-reaching effects outside of the Middle East, which calls into question the legitimacy and dependability of the United States' leadership in international nonproliferation policy. The delicate balancing act of the U.S.-Israel nuclear relationship, as demonstrated in this chapter, has preserved Israeli security at the expense of maintaining regional imbalances and jeopardizing the integrity of the international

nonproliferation framework. After discussing the complexities of U.S. policy regarding Israel's nuclear program, the following chapter compares and contrasts the U.S. attitude to Iranian and Israeli nuclear ambition.

Chapter 3: Comparative Analysis of U.S. Nuclear Policies toward Iran and Israel

The official nuclear policy program of the United States is based on the principles of non-proliferation, disarmament, and world stability. However, these concepts are applied very erratically in practice. For example, Iran, a signatory to the NPT, is subject to strict scrutiny, severe sanctions, and even the threat of armed attack, while Israel, which is not a party to the NPT and is almost universally suspected of having nuclear weapons, is subject to very little international pressure. This chapter looks at the justification for this unequal treatment as well as the consequences for regional security and the broader non-proliferation system.

3.1 Examining the Double Standard: A Comparative Perspective

On the surface, the non-proliferation regime should be impartial and based on rules. Yet the disparate treatment of Iran and Israel serves as a testament to a gigantic gap between theory and practice. Iran, as a signatory to the NPT, is forced to undergo rigorous inspection norms and is liable to punishment if it crosses boundaries established by the regime. Conversely, Israel is

still largely outside the purview of international accords, in spite of widespread assumptions about its nuclear status. This chapter considers how this double standard has emerged and what it says about the credibility of international nuclear regulation.

3.1.1 U.S. Policy towards Iran's Nuclear Program

The U.S. has long been distrustful of Iranian nuclear aspirations. Earlier incidents—such as Iran's secret work in the 1980s and 1990s to build enrichment facilities at Natanz and Arak—raised international alarm. Even if the Islamic Republic of Iran keeps claiming that its nuclear program is solely peaceful in purpose, under Article IV of the NPT, the United States points out its previous history of non-compliance and lack of openness (“A History of Iran's Nuclear Program”).

The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action signed between Iran and the P5+1 group in 2015 was a huge diplomatic triumph. The deal imposed strict limits on the enrichment of uranium in Iran, monitored its stockpiles, and was in control of centrifuge activities. As a result of these commitments, Iran obtained some form of sanctions relief, and the IAEA obtained an extensive inspection privilege (Katzman “Iran Sanctions”). But in 2018, the US government, under the administration of President Trump, withdrew from the JCPOA on the premise that Iran had violated the spirit of the agreement and continued to be a sponsor of terror. That action encouraged Iran to ease its compliance with JCPOA terms further, eventually declaring in 2020 that it would no longer adhere to those restrictions (“President Donald J. Trump”).

3.1.2 U.S. Approach to Israel's Nuclear Program

Although adopting an Iran hardline stance, the United States has an intentionally ambiguous stance regarding Israel's nuclear capability. Although Israel has never signed up for the NPT, and its de jure status remains undetermined, it is generally estimated to have 80 to 90

nuclear warheads (Kristensen and Korda). Rather than pressuring Israel to conform to universal non-proliferation norms or threatening sanctions, the U.S. has consistently provided Israel with significant support of over \$3 billion in annual military assistance, as well as advanced technological and diplomatic assistance (Sharp 24).

3.1.3 Similarities and Differences

The contrasting treatment of Iran and Israel within the global non-proliferation regime reflects a clear double standard that challenges the credibility of international nuclear governance. Iran, as a signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), is legally bound to open its facilities to International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspections and adhere to strict limitations, particularly under the now-fragile Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). Its past record of secret enrichment activities and allegations of non-compliance have resulted in intense scrutiny, sanctions, and diplomatic isolation. In contrast, Israel has never signed the NPT and maintains a policy of deliberate nuclear ambiguity, despite widespread estimates that it possesses 80 to 90 nuclear warheads (Kristensen and Korda). Rather than being held accountable, Israel continues to receive unwavering U.S. military, technological, and diplomatic support—amounting to over \$3 billion annually—without facing calls to submit to international oversight (Sharp 24). This discrepancy in enforcement and accountability illustrates how strategic interests often override legal norms, reinforcing perceptions of bias in the international non-proliferation regime.

3.1.4 Analytical Review

The judicial requirements imposed upon Israel and Iran expose a controversial disproportion. Iran is a party to the NPT and is subject legally to the obligation to accept stringent assurances and to allow IAEA inspections; deviations, however slight, are met with

severe international criticism and sanctions. Israel, however, since it is not a party to the NPT, is not subject legally to inspection. This divergence not only damages the treaty's normative legitimacy but also erodes its function as a global standard of nuclear behavior (Kristensen and Korda 12). Political narrative also widens this divergence. The U.S. always blames Iran for being a state sponsor of terrorism and regional destabilizer—arguments that provide cover for aggressive containment policy (Parsi). Israel is constantly presented as a democratically and a stabilizing force at the same time. This manifests itself in strong domestic political backing, i.e., from pressure groups like the AIPAC, in contrast to relatively muted pressure from IranianAmerican pressure groups (Mearsheimer and Walt 45). Thus, Israel's nuclear program is comparatively immune to the question that pursues Iran for its long-term impact on non-proliferation policy.

3.1.5 Double Standards in Nonproliferation Policy

America's approach to Israel's nuclear program illustrates incoherence in its nonproliferation regime. Despite imposing stringent nonproliferation demands on adversaries such as Iran, Washington adopts a much more relaxed criterion among its own allies. Differential treatment raises questions about balance and consistency of global nuclear policy. Critics argue that this imbalance erodes United States credibility in nonproliferation diplomacy because adversaries may view Israel as a symbol of Western bias. Additionally, it establishes a precedent where geopolitical agendas may be prioritized over international security standards, thus sabotaging future arms control efforts (Williams).

The United States' approach to Israel's nuclear program is a unique and sophisticated facet of its anti-proliferation strategy, which is distinguished by strategic ambiguity, strong military and diplomatic backing, and a purposeful omission of the coercive scrutiny that other

nations are subjected to. The United States has maintained its strategic alignment with Israel as more significant than strict adherence to international nonproliferation treaties by subtly maintaining Israel's nuclear silence through earlier agreements like the Nixon-Meir understanding and ongoing diplomatic cover in international forums. This has made it possible for Israel to have a nuclear shield without drawing the same international censure that other nonNPT signatories, such as Iran, do. However, it has not been inexpensive. It has sabotaged initiatives such as the Middle East Nuclear Weapons-Free Zone (MENWFZ), prolonged arms control talks, and created the appearance of double standards in U.S. nonproliferation policy.

Although Israel's nuclear ambiguity has likely improved its short-term regional security and deterrence, it has also led to long-term regional proliferation pressures and mistrust, which make the larger goal of Middle Eastern stability more difficult to achieve. Supported by defense accords, billions of dollars in military aid, and constant diplomatic protection, the US-Israel alliance is a geopolitically balanced scale of international nonproliferation standards against selfinterest calculus. It reveals the inherent tension underlying international relations wherein strategic alliances equal as much value as, if not more so than, stated commitment to universal norms.

This approach has far-reaching effects outside of the Middle East, which calls into question the legitimacy and dependability of the United States' leadership in international nonproliferation policy. The delicate balancing act of the U.S.-Israel nuclear relationship, as demonstrated in this chapter, has preserved Israeli security at the expense of maintaining regional imbalances and jeopardizing the integrity of the international nonproliferation framework. After discussing the complexities of U.S. policy regarding Israel's nuclear program,

the following chapter compares and contrasts the U.S. attitude to Iranian and Israeli nuclear ambition.

3.2 Political, Strategic, and Security considerations

Although non-proliferation policy is based on institutional frameworks like the NPT, political, geopolitical, and security considerations also have a big impact on U.S. nuclear policy toward Israel and Iran. These factors influence how the United States approaches its partnerships, perceived threats, and the accomplishment of more general objectives in the area. The factors at play in the alleged double standard of U.S. non-proliferation policy are explained in the following.

3.2.1 Political Considerations.

The treaty's legitimacy as a cornerstone of global nuclear restraint is called into question by the contradiction. North Korea's exit from the NPT serves as an example of how feeling unfairly treated can cause other countries to follow suit. The legitimacy of the nonproliferation regime as a whole starts to deteriorate when certain states are held responsible while others are left out. If other countries believe the system is politically biased or deliberately manipulated, this discrepancy may cause them to doubt the benefits of continuing to cooperate. (Davenport, "U.S. Imposes New Sanctions on Iran")

The fact that Israel is not under the same level of surveillance as Iran indicates that political considerations, rather than objective legal norms, are driving enforcement (Cirincione 204). This type of inequality has actual regional implications. Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Egypt would be pushed to develop their own nuclear weapons in an effort to counter what they see as a lopsided regional deterrence. Saudi Arabia's previous intelligence chief, Prince Turki al-Faisal,

has warned that preserving imbalances would push Saudi Arabia toward nuclear weapons (“Saudi Arabia Could Seek Nuclear Weapons”). Second, the U.S. role as a neutral mediator in non-proliferation talks is tarnished. Israel’s nuclear ambiguity is invoked by Iran and North Korea as evidence of double standards to discredit American efforts at diplomatic negotiations and question the impartiality of international juridical organizations (Parsi).

3.2.2 Strategic considerations

With all of its unreported bombs, Israel has de facto nuclear status, which America must strategically view as an essential deterrence in a volatile region. Because of this presumption, Israel’s nuclear capabilities were implicitly acknowledged, and there was insufficient public discussion about the need to adhere to international non-proliferation standards (Doyle 45). However, efforts to halt this acquisition are motivated by the belief that Iran’s nuclear weapons capability poses a threat to U.S. interests and the security of its Middle Eastern allies (Katzman, “Iran: U.S. Concerns and Policy Responses”).

The United States actually has a great deal of strategic flexibility to act because of Israel’s refusal to ratify the NPT. Since Israel is a non-signatory to the international law treaty, the United States has the leeway to eschew legal controversy that could be a consequence of its nuclear policy and thereby preserve the dense bilateral relationship. This legal ambiguity allows Washington to support Israel both diplomatically and militarily without violating its nonproliferation commitments. It also shields both nations from uncomfortable international scrutiny that might arise if Israel were legally obligated by NPT rules. As a result of Israel's unique status, the US may continue to pursue its strategic objectives in the region without facing any legal challenges (Doyle 86).

Iranian obligations in the NPT, however, subject Iran to stringent international scrutiny, and it consequently becomes a target of enforcement and diplomatic pressure (IAEA). The intimate security ties between the U.S. and Israel—such as mutual sharing of intelligence and mutually beneficial military intervention—also deter any such step to coerce Israel over its nuclear question. On the contrary, Iran’s support to groups considered to be hostile to U.S. interests further confirms its image as a destabilizer, entitled to a firmer policy (Pompeo).

3.2.3 Security Considerations

Treating Israel and Iran differently has long-term security ramifications as well. For example, Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman of Saudi Arabia has implied that Saudi Arabia would also possess nuclear weapons if Iran did (“Saudi Arabia Will Develop Nuclear Bomb if Iran Does – Crown Prince”). This could release an arms race in an already very unstable nation and spoil the aims of non-proliferation. Furthermore, when enforcement is perceived as discriminatory—policing Iran but allowing Israel’s nuclear ambiguity to persist—it erodes confidence in global arrangements like the NPT.

Perceptions of injustice can be projected to states and will render them unlikely to honor non-proliferation regimes (Parsi). In terms of American security policy, Israel’s nuclear ambiguity is seen as a deterrent that enables regional balance. On the other hand, a nuclear Iran is perceived to be against American interests by its regional alignment and alliances with hardline forces, necessitating American reactions to prevent its nuclear ascension by diplomatic and militaristic means (Moussavian 72).

This split is not so much a matter of adhering to across-the-board non-proliferation policy

as one of profound strategic entente and geopolitical preferences. A short-term policy of appeasement that is consonant with U.S. interests raises long-term questions regarding the integrity of the global non-proliferation framework, Middle Eastern security, and the fairness of international law.

3.3 The Role of Domestic Politics in Shaping U.S. Nonproliferation Policy

U.S. nonproliferation strategy is heavily impacted by domestic political factors in addition to strategic goals and international standards. Foreign policy decisions, particularly those involving Iran and Israel, are heavily influenced by lobbying organizations, party differences, and ideological forces. This section examines the ways in which domestic political actors—from party-based preferences to pro-Israel lobbyists—have influenced the US's biased enforcement of nonproliferation.

3.3.1 The influence of pro-Israel Lobbying on U.S. Foreign Policy Decisions

The United States' decision to withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal (JCPOA), which was influenced by lobbying efforts against the agreement, is a prime example of how pro-Israeli lobbying, especially that of AIPAC, has significantly shaped American foreign policy toward Iran and Israel. According to Rosenberg, an American commentator on the Middle East who previously worked for the American Israel Public Affairs Committee (AIPAC), AIPAC and its cutout Citizens for a Nuclear Free Iran spent up to \$20 million in 2015 on a campaign to block the JCPOA. This campaign included full-page newspaper ads, fly-ins of AIPAC members to Washington, protests outside the offices of lawmakers who were thought to be voting against the deal, and making sure that thorny lawmakers were formally rebuked by the right donor. However, none of these tactics were able to stop the deal from being ratified (Rosenberg).

3.3.2 Partisan Divides and US-Iran Nuclear Policy

Political affiliations significantly influence how Americans perceive the threat posed by Iran's nuclear program. A 2014 survey by the Pew Research Center found that 74% of Republicans considered Iran's nuclear activities a major threat, while only 56% of Democrats held the same view. This reflects a stronger tendency among Republicans to view Iran as a hostile actor, rooted in a generally more aggressive national security stance. Republican dissatisfaction with President Obama's handling of Iran was consistently high. In December 2013, 71% of Republicans disapproved of his approach, in stark contrast to just 20% of Democrats. Many Republicans criticized him for lacking firmness in foreign policy, with 77% believing his responses to international challenges, including Iran, were too weak. When the temporary agreement with Iran was introduced, Republicans were more likely to oppose it than Democrats. Pew's findings show that 58% of Republicans disapproved of the deal, compared to only 27% of Democrats (Poushter). This division highlights the broader partisan gap regarding diplomatic versus hardline approaches.

Republicans were generally more distrustful of Iran's motives during nuclear negotiations. Among respondents familiar with the talks, 77% of Republicans believed Iran's leaders were not negotiating in good faith, whereas just 49% of Democrats shared this view. Additionally, Republicans were more supportive of military intervention, with 75% backing the use of force to halt Iran's nuclear ambitions in 2013, compared to 57% of Democrats. Although there were clear partisan differences, both parties showed some degree of support for diplomatic efforts. A CNN poll found that 77% of Democrats favored direct talks with Iran, while 65% of Republicans also supported negotiation (Poushter).

This suggests a bipartisan, though uneven, openness to peaceful solutions. Political

divisions also influence broader attitudes toward arms control policies. As Friedrichs and Tama, senior scholars at the Max Planck Institute and American University, argue, Democratic administrations tend to champion arms control agreements, while Republican lawmakers—particularly in the Senate—often respond with skepticism or outright resistance, which complicates bipartisan efforts at treaty ratification (Friedrichs and Tama 776).

3.3.3 Domestic Pressures and the Double Standard

The conflicting U.S. approach to nuclear nonproliferation has been largely shaped by domestic political forces, especially the Israel Lobby. Washington has ignored or implicitly supported Israel's undeclared nuclear weapons while adopting a tough posture against Iran's nuclear activities, enforcing stringent sanctions and applying diplomatic pressure. The AIPAC, which has a significant impact on legislative politics in the United States, is one of the most powerful entities in this respect. AIPAC supports the election of pro-Israel candidates and silences opponents through calculated campaign contributions and political activity. On the global scene, the United States has continuously protected Israel from criticism. It has blocked 32 resolutions critical of Israeli conduct from the UN Security Council since 1982 by exercising its veto power. Additionally, Washington has consistently resisted Arab states' attempts to entrust Israel's nuclear program to the IAEA, thereby obstructing international examination of Israel's nuclear capabilities (Mearsheimer and Walt 13).

The Israel Lobby has an impact on the executive branch in addition to Congress. According to reports, former Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon emphasized that Iran was a bigger nuclear threat than Iraq and called on the US to attack Iran right away following the Iraq

War. This opinion illustrates how Israeli priorities might affect strategic choices made by the United States. The United States' animosity for Iran increased during the George W. Bush administration when prominent neoconservative figures who were allied to Israel, like Douglas Feith and Paul Wolfowitz, pushed for regime change in Tehran (Mearsheimer and Walt 28).

Pro-Israel actors also influence public opinion in addition to engaging in political lobbying. The Israel Lobby has legitimized coercive measures like economic sanctions and the possible use of military force by portraying Iran's nuclear program as an existential danger through collaborations with think tanks and media outlets. Even though Israel's nuclear capabilities are still unrecognized and uncontrolled, these domestic concerns have contributed to Washington's assertive posture toward Iran. A basic contradiction in U.S. nonproliferation strategy is shown by this glaring disparity (Mearsheimer and Walt 40).

3.4 Implications for International Nonproliferation Efforts

The disparities in U.S. nonproliferation policy toward Iran and Israel have important implications for the worldwide nonproliferation regime. The United States selective implementation of regulations, which penalizes Iran while ignoring Israel's nuclear ambiguity, calls into doubt the legitimacy and effectiveness of its attempts to promote nuclear restraint on the international scene. This part examines how these inconsistencies harm the standing of the United Nations regimes, jeopardize the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), empower regimes such as Iran to doubt Western legitimacy, and raise the possibility of a broader Middle East arms race.

3.4.1 Erosion of U.S. Credibility as a Neutral Enforcer of Nonproliferation Norms

The United States' pullout of significant arms control agreements undermines its role as a

neutral judge of nonproliferation principles. The Arms Control Association report states categorically that despite the United States' exit from the JCPOA and the reinstatement of sanctions against Iran in May 2018, Iran is compliant with the 2015 multilateral nuclear accord. Although Washington's JCPOA violation falls short of every criterion used to evaluate the US in this analysis, the action damages US credibility in future discussions and nonproliferation standards. (Sanders-Zakre and Davenport vi).

3.4.2 Israel's Undeclared Arsenal and the NPT's Crisis of Legitimacy

The NPT is gravely compromised in credibility by Israel's de facto nuclear status and exemption from international inspection. Israel's policy of strategic ambiguity allows it neither to confirm nor deny its nuclear status, which is reputed to include "between 80 and 400 nuclear warheads". Israel's ambiguous nuclear status allows it to avoid international accountability, as it remains one of the few UN member states that has not joined the NPT. This lack of openness is seen by many as a major obstacle to global efforts to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons ("Why Is Israel So Secretive").

The United States' tacit approval of Israel's nuclear arsenal has not gone unnoticed and is often viewed as a clear example of double standards, damaging the credibility of U.S. nonproliferation policy. Although it is widely accepted that Israel possesses nuclear weapons, the country has never officially confirmed this. Furthermore, it has avoided inspections thanks to a 1969 agreement with the United States, under which Washington agreed to overlook Israel's nuclear capabilities. According to Victor Gilinsky and Leonard Weiss, senior nuclear policy experts, who in their work, "The US Hypocrisy about Israel's Nuclear Weapons Must Stop", argue that this arrangement was supported by a classified directive warning U.S. officials against acknowledging Israel's nuclear weapons program. In addition, the U.S. has failed to enforce the

1977 Symington Amendment—a law that bans U.S. aid to nations pursuing nuclear weapons outside the NPT. Despite suspicions of an Israeli nuclear test in 1979, no punitive action was taken, effectively allowing Israel to escape consequences (Gilinsky and Weiss).

Together, Israel's unofficial nuclear arsenal, its refusal to sign the NPT, and the ongoing U.S. support for its policy of opacity severely weaken the legitimacy of the NPT. This selective approach undermines international nonproliferation norms, raising concerns about fairness and eroding trust in global disarmament efforts.

3.4.3 How Iran Uses this Double Standard to Challenge Western Legitimacy

Iran applies alleged double standards within the nuclear non-proliferation system to challenge Western legitimacy, particularly by emphasizing inconsistencies in how the international community addresses nuclear violations. In *International Responses to Iranian Nuclear Defiance: The Non-Aligned Movement and the Issue of Non-Compliance*, OgilvieWhite argues that Iranian diplomats assert their 'legitimate activities were driven underground by an unfriendly international environment and a Western technology denial conspiracy' (OgilvieWhite 455). This policy denounces Western behavior as biased, portraying Iran as a victim of discriminatory practices.

Iran strategically aligns with the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), which has consistently drawn attention to Israel's nuclear status, advocating for Israeli disarmament and the establishment of a Middle Eastern nuclear weapons-free zone. It leverages NAM's criticism of selective enforcement of the NPT, especially the leniency shown to non-signatory states like Israel. While Iran faces intense scrutiny and sanctions, Israel remains shielded from accountability, and violations by developed countries such as Japan and South Korea often go unpunished. This double standard enables Iran to frame its non-cooperation not as a threat to

global norms, but as a political stand against Western bias and agenda-setting (Ogilvie-White 463–64).

Through such actions, Iran takes advantage of perceived double standards in the nonproliferation regime to delegitimize Western credibility and rally Third World and Global South support. By portraying itself as a victim of discriminatory enforcement—where Western-aligned states avoid accountability while others are punished—Iran presents its defiance as principled resistance and not as a contravention of international norms.

This strategy has special attraction for those members of the NAM, many of whom also have their own historical complaints regarding Western domination of international organizations. By associating its rhetoric with widespread grievances over inequality and discriminatory application, Iran not only deterred critique of its nuclear agenda but also entrenched a discourse of resistance to the neocolonial distribution of power. In so doing, it undermines the moral leadership of Western states and erodes the legitimacy and cohesion of the global non-proliferation regime.

3.4.4 The Risk of a Regional Arms Race in the Middle East

Middle East tensions are growing into what many analysts view as a dangerous weapons competition fueled by perceived injustice and strategic imbalances. The MENA (Middle East and North Africa) region—extending from Morocco to Iran—has become one of the most militarized areas in the world, where persistent regional conflicts and rivalries drive massive defense spending, particularly in countries like Saudi Arabia, Egypt, and the UAE (Shruti, and Finaud).

This growing arms race reflects not only hostility but also deep concerns about nuclear imbalance. According to the Soufan Center, even the perception that Iran may be moving toward developing a bomb could set off a regional nuclear arms race, prompting other states to seek their own deterrents. Statements by regional leaders—such as Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman’s warning that Saudi Arabia will match Iran’s nuclear ambitions and President Erdoğan’s criticism of the unequal nuclear status quo—further illustrate the sense of injustice fueling this security dilemma. (“The Potential for a Dangerous Arms Race”)

This chapter emphasizes the dramatic double standard of American nuclear non-proliferation policy. Iran, legally a signatory of the NPT, is subjected to inspections, sanctions, and diplomatic pressure, while Israel, not a signatory with an undeclared nuclear arsenal, enjoys the American toleration and categorical support. This disconnect rests on profound U.S.-Israel strategic interests and facilitated by domestic political influence such as AIPAC lobby activity and partisans’ construction up the threat coming from Iran and minimizing Israel’s nuclear secrecy.

Such discrepancies have far-reaching implications. America endangers the integrity of the NPT with the discriminatory use thereof, especially in the perception of NAM states and newly rising nuclear actors who see the instrument as biased. Iran surfs the feelings by selling its defiance as a reaction to Western hegemony and thereby becoming popular among portions of the Global South. Meanwhile, Israel’s covert arsenal—released from the U.S.—accountable to no one and still sucking the legitimacy out of the NPT as well as destabilizing non-proliferation globally.

Most perilously, this imbalance risks triggering a regional arms race, with nations like Turkey and Saudi Arabia countering nuclear weapons in reaction to perceived strategic

unbalances. Ultimately, U.S. emphasis on strategic relationships at the expense of equitable enforcement erodes its diplomatic credibility and the international non-proliferation regime. Needed is a more equitable and open approach—applying NPT norms to all—to restore credibility, stop proliferation, and block nuclearization of tensions in the Middle East and elsewhere.

Conclusion

This study examined the various United States policies towards the nuclear programs of Iran and Israel and found a pervasive pattern of strategic inconsistency and geopolitical discrimination. Although the United States government has consistently reasserted the depth of its commitment to international nonproliferation norms, its policies demonstrate an extreme imbalance when distinguishing between friends and enemies.

Iran, which is an NPT signatory, has been subject to severe international pressure, diplomatic ostracism, and extensive economic sanctions. Israel—widely believed to possess nuclear weapons and an NPT non-signatory—is in the meantime paying nothing for its alleged nuclear arsenal in the form of the continued American diplomatic umbrella and generous military aid, including exemption of its open nuclear policy from international examination. This represents the articulation of the inherent priorities of U.S. foreign policy: upholding strategic alliances, defending local power, and dealing with perceived threats on a pragmatic—but often conflicting—basis.

While Iran has been sanctioned for nuclear ambitions under the loosest of security justifications and non-cooperation, Israel's de facto arsenal has been quietly condoned, rationalized away as a stabilizing force in an unstable region. This asymmetry is significant, however, to the legitimacy of international nonproliferation. It undercuts the normative authority of international agreements, undermines belief in the neutrality of international institutions, and provokes regional rivalries that erode long-term stability.

The contrast also highlights the role of domestic political interests within the United States. American nuclear diplomacy is so accustomed to partisanship, electoral politics, and pro-Israeli lobbying that it puts political expediency ahead of morality and legal commitments. One example of how nuclear accords can be undermined by sudden changes in policy is the JCPOA, which was hailed as a diplomatic triumph but was eventually shelved for political and strategic reasons.

In short, the U.S. approach to nuclear nonproliferation is defined by a mixed pattern of interests and ideals. Although security and politics of alliances are an unfortunate constituent of international relations, their dominance over legal maxims and equal treatment may jeopardize

the credibility of nonproliferation as an international principle. If the world community—and particularly the United States—is to enable a just and effective nonproliferation regime, it has to eliminate such double standards and apply more consistency, openness, and multilateralism. Otherwise, the vision of a nuclear-weapons-free and peaceful world will not only prove elusive but will be radically discredited.

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