

Iran, or the Persistence of Confrontation

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Iran: Between Nuclear Deterrence and Internal Fragility

When president Barack Obama approved the 2015 nuclear agreement with Iran — the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action — the stated goal was to close a cycle of confrontation and open the way to gradual normalization. The lifting of sanctions and the release of tens of billions of dollars were meant to encourage Tehran to adjust its strategic posture. Yet at the very same time, official rallies still echoed with the chant “Death to America.”

This dissonance is not anecdotal. It reflects the regime’s very nature: a power that blends tactical pragmatism with ideological rigidity. Hostility toward the United States and Israel is not merely a tool of domestic mobilization but a structural element of its worldview. For more than four decades, the Islamic Republic has made this confrontation a pillar of political legitimacy.

The Nuclear Issue as an Instrument of Power

The nuclear question must be understood in this light. Beyond the possible possession of a weapon, the ability to reach the technological threshold constitutes a major strategic lever for Iran. It strengthens deterrence, increases diplomatic weight, and allows negotiations from a position of strength.

The ten-day ultimatum issued on February 19 by Donald Trump, along with statements by U.S. officials on the progress of Iran’s program, reflects fears of a tipping point: an Iran capable, at any moment, of converting expertise

into military capability. In this dynamic, every negotiation cycle becomes a pause, and every concession potentially reversible.

The key question is therefore not only whether Iran wants the bomb, but whether it wants to preserve the option of obtaining it. That strategic ambiguity alone is enough to reshape the regional balance.

A Confrontation with Global Repercussions

Rising military tensions in the region — marked by U.S. deployments and close coordination with the Israeli government — culminated in a preventive strike against Iran on February 28. At the same time, the growing involvement of China highlights the global dimension of the issue. Beijing views Iran as both an energy partner, a link in emerging trade routes, and a counterweight to American influence. The Middle East thus becomes a theater where regional rivalries intersect with great-power competition.

This situation carries systemic risk: any major escalation, particularly against Gulf energy infrastructure, would have immediate repercussions for the global economy. The Iranian crisis is no longer merely regional; it has become a source of worldwide uncertainty.

A Strategy of Regional Influence

Over the past two decades, Tehran has patiently built strategic depth by relying on allies and militias from the Fertile Crescent to Yemen. This architecture has enabled it to exert constant pressure on Israel and its regional adversaries without resorting to direct confrontation.

But the strategy has come at a cost. By strengthening armed actors in already fragile states, Iran has contributed to institutional and economic erosion across parts of the region. The paradox is that increased influence has produced a more unstable environment, where any local crisis can quickly take on an international dimension.

External Power, Internal Fragility

While the Islamic Republic appears relatively solid militarily, its main vulnerability remains domestic. Cycles of protest – despite severe repression by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and the Basij – point to deep discontent.

Iranian society is young, educated, globally connected, and increasingly distant from the regime's ideological project. The contrast is striking: a state capable of projecting power abroad yet compelled to devote vast resources to maintaining control at home.

Revolutionary regimes can endure, but rarely without fractures. In Iran, the central unknown is no longer whether change will come, but whether it might take the form of a rupture – even a collapse – and how quickly such a dynamic could unfold.

The Western Dilemma

In dealing with Iran, Western powers oscillate between two approaches: maximum pressure and diplomatic engagement. The first seeks to weaken the regime and limit its capabilities; the second aims to influence its behavior over the long term. So far, neither has produced decisive transformation.

This dilemma stems from a simple reality: Iran is neither a classic rational actor nor an irrational one. It follows a coherent strategic logic, but one rooted in ideological objectives – notably the export of its Islamic revolution – that complicate any lasting compromise. Any policy must therefore grapple with this duality.

Yet, the trauma of September 11, 2001 – transposed to the nuclear scale – continues to shape Western security thinking.

An Outcome That Can Only Come from Within

In the short term, the logic of confrontation appears set to continue. Sanctions, targeted strikes, and negotiation cycles alone seem unlikely to alter the regime's trajectory.

Over the longer term, the decisive variable remains internal. A shift in the balance between society, the political elite, and the security apparatus could open the way to gradual transformation. Without it, the Middle East will remain trapped in chronic instability, where every crisis carries escalation risks.

The Iranian question is therefore not only about a nuclear program or regional rivalry. It points to a broader issue: coexistence between a revolutionary regime and an international order it fundamentally rejects. As long as that tension endures, any lull will remain fragile – and any negotiation, temporary.