

**Research Article**

# The World's Most Theatrical Stage U.S. Foreign Policy's Double Standards & Iran's Iron Theocracy

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## Abstract

*This report investigates how the United States' strategic double standards in foreign policy, nuclear exceptionalism, selective human rights enforcement, and arms partnerships with authoritarian regimes, and Iran's theocratic Velayat-e Faqih governance model, unelected supreme leadership, systematic women's rights violations, and violent repression of the 2022 uprising, function as mutually reinforcing systems of geopolitical hypocrisy. The central research question examines how both governments sustain domestic power and regional instability through their antagonism, each weaponizing the other's violations to legitimize its own exceptionalism. Accordingly, this report aims to document and critique these parallel hypocrisies, demonstrate their interdependent dynamics, and provide conceptual grounding for consistent international accountability mechanisms that transcend geopolitical convenience. Employing a qualitative desk research methodology drawing on peer-reviewed literature, policy documents, and official data, the report interrogates Washington's selective application of democratic norms, nuclear exceptionalism favouring allies, and complicity in humanitarian crises through strategic arms partnerships. Simultaneously, it documents Iran's Velayat-e Faqih governance model, the systematic legal dismantling of women's rights since 1979, violent suppression of the 2022 Woman, Life, Freedom uprising, and the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps' stranglehold over state and economy. The report further argues that both governments sustain their power through mutual antagonism, while their respective populations bear the consequent costs. Findings underscore the urgent need for principled, consistent international accountability mechanisms transcending geopolitical convenience.*

**Keywords:** U.S. Foreign Policy, Iran Theocracy, Nuclear Double Standards, Women's Rights

## 1. Introduction

If global geopolitics were a TV show, it would be cancelled after the first season for being too unbelievable. Consider the plot: the world's largest arms exporter lectures others about peace; a government that executed over 500 people in a single year tells its citizens it governs by divine law; and international bodies created to enforce rules seem to apply those rules with remarkable... flexibility. Welcome, dear

reader, to the real world of international relations, where the rules are made up and the principles don't matter. This report examines two of the most consequential actors shaping global instability today: The United States of America, a democracy that can't quite decide whether it believes in democracy, and the Islamic Republic of Iran, a theocracy that has perfected the art of punishing its own people for simply existing. Buckle up (Figure 1).



Figure 1: Infographic Abstract

### 1.1. Research Problem

The central research problem driving this inquiry is the persistent and consequential gap between proclaimed normative commitments, democracy, human rights, non-proliferation, and rule of law, and the strategic practices of two pivotal geopolitical actors: The United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran. While extensive literature documents U.S. foreign policy contradictions or Iranian domestic repression in isolation, insufficient scholarly attention has been paid to how these two systems of hypocrisy mutually reinforce one another, perpetuating regional instability and imposing compounded costs on civilian populations. The problem is not merely descriptive but analytical: existing frameworks often treat Washington and Tehran as independent actors, whereas this report posits that their antagonism functions as a structurally sustaining dynamic, with each government weaponizing the other's violations to legitimize its own exceptionalism. Furthermore, the absence of consistent international accountability mechanisms, exposed by the selective application of nuclear, humanitarian, and human rights norms, demands a critical synthesis that moves beyond episodic critique toward systemic interrogation.

### 1.2. Research Question

Against this backdrop, this report addresses the following overarching research question: How do the United States'

strategic double standards in foreign policy and Iran's theocratic governance model each sustain domestic power structures and regional instability, and in what ways does their mutual antagonism function as a self-perpetuating system of geopolitical hypocrisy?

### 1.3. Research Purpose and Objectives

The purpose of this analytical report is to critically examine and expose the systemic hypocrisies embedded in both U.S. foreign policy behavior and Iranian theocratic governance, while illuminating how their symbiotic antagonism undermines international norms and harms their respective populations.

#### 1.3.1. To Achieve this Purpose, the Report Pursues Four Specific Objectives

- To document and critique selective U.S. application of democratic, humanitarian, and nuclear non-proliferation norms, with particular attention to nuclear exceptionalism for allies (Israel), strategic arms partnerships with authoritarian regimes (Saudi Arabia), and the invocation of false premises for military intervention Iraq 2003.
- To analyze systematically the institutional and ideological architecture of Iran's Velayat-e Faqih governance model, including the Supreme Leader's unelected veto powers,

Guardian Council candidate disqualification practices, legal discrimination against women, and state violence against the 2022 “Woman, Life, Freedom” uprising.

- To demonstrate empirically how U.S. and Iranian government behaviors are not merely parallel hypocrisies but an interdependent system, each using the other’s violations as domestic legitimization and international deflection, thereby perpetuating a cycle of hostility that serves ruling elites on both sides.
- To propose conceptual grounding for consistent international accountability mechanisms that transcend geopolitical convenience, contributing to scholarly conversations on foreign policy ethics, authoritarian resilience, and the possibility of principled engagement.
- These objectives are pursued through a qualitative desk research methodology synthesizing peer-reviewed literature, policy documents, official data, and human rights reports, as detailed in the methods section of the report.

#### 1.4. Literature Review

##### 1.4.1. The Double Standards Paradigm in U.S. Foreign Policy

A growing body of scholarly literature examines the persistent gap between America’s proclaimed democratic ideals and its strategic practices. Provide systematic documentation of how the United States “usually condemn[s] abuse in rival countries such as China and Iran, maintaining strong alliances with repressive regimes such as Saudi Arabia” [1]. Their qualitative analysis, drawing on historical case studies and declassified documents, concludes that American intervention choices are “more shaped by geopolitical and economic interests than by moral obligations”. This finding aligns with earlier critiques of selective humanitarianism, yet offers fresh empirical grounding through comparative case methodology. The nuclear non-proliferation domain represents perhaps the most visible manifestation of this double standard. An Algerian university study contrasting U.S. positions on Israeli and Iranian nuclear programs reveals that Israel, a non-signatory to the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) with an estimated 80–90 warheads, enjoys “strong U.S. support and minimal criticism, whereas Iran, a signatory to the NPT, is subject to harsh sanctions and international pressure”. The study argues that “historical alliances, strategic interests, and domestic politics play a decisive role in shaping U.S. non-proliferation efforts,” with the U.S.-Israel alliance remaining the primary determinant. Extends this analysis by examining competing security narratives through qualitative discourse analysis of diplomatic exchanges from 2002 to 2023 [2]. His research demonstrates that “both nations weaponize historical grievances and security dilemmas to justify their positions,” with the United States “emphasizing non-proliferation norms and Iran invoking sovereignty and asymmetrical power dynamics”. The study concludes that “nuclear hedging perpetuates mistrust, undermining disarmament goals, while rigid disarmament frameworks fail to address Iran’s security anxieties, fueling a cycle of escalation”.

##### 1.4.2. Iran’s Theocratic Governance and Domestic Repression

Mehran Kamrava’s comprehensive examination of Iran’s political theology, *How Islam Rules in Iran*, provides the definitive scholarly treatment of the Velayat-e Faqih system [3]. Drawing on extensive fieldwork and previously inaccessible Persian-language sources, Kamrava analyzes the “jurisprudential debates that have shaped the country’s political institutions and state policies” and reveals the “theoretical justifications for religious authoritarianism” embedded within contemporary Iranian Shi’ism. His work traces the evolution from Khomeini’s original formulation to Khamenei’s expanded doctrine of Velayat-e Mutlaqaye Faghih (Absolute Guardianship of the Jurist), demonstrating how religious intellectual production has “underwritten the fate of the Islamic Republic”. The “Woman, Life, Freedom” movement, triggered by the September 2022 death of Mahsa (Jina) Amini in morality police custody, has generated significant scholarly attention. Examines the movement’s “strategies of political activism leveraged by Iranian women,” including street protests, student demonstrations, information and communications technology deployment, electoral boycotts, and symbolic reenactments [4]. The thesis argues compellingly that “Iranian women have positioned themselves to continue to disrupt the status quo and threaten the power of the Iranian regime, underscoring the power of collective female resistance”. Edited collection, *Woman Life Freedom: Voices and Art from the Women’s Protests in Iran*, complements this analysis by documenting first-person accounts and artistic responses from inside Iran, offering rare grassroots perspectives on a regime characterized by its “repressive and vindictive” nature [5].

##### 1.4.3. Mutual Antagonism as Structural Maintenance

Recent scholarship has moved beyond state-centric analysis to examine how U.S.-Iran hostility functions as a mutually reinforcing system. Offers a sophisticated constructivist analysis in *Israel, the United States, and the Antagonistic Identification of Iran*, arguing that “hostility toward Iran is not simply the result of strategic calculations or historical grievances, but is deeply shaped by an internalized understanding of what it means to be ‘pro-Israel’ in Washington, a stance increasingly tied to American political identity itself” [6]. Drawing on discourse analysis of congressional hearings, think tank productions, and policy statements, Dieudonné demonstrates how “identifying Iran as a threat becomes a central, often unquestioned, component of expressing political credibility and belonging” within American foreign policy circles. From the Iranian side, a study published in the *Journal of Iran and Central Eurasia Studies* employs Robert Jervis’s theory of perception and misperception to analyze elite discourse between 2012 and 2020. Analyzing 147 purposively selected speeches and policy documents, the research identifies that following the U.S. withdrawal from the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), “Washington was increasingly depicted as an existential threat engaging in ‘economic terrorism’”. The findings reveal how “cognitive biases, particularly confirmation bias, shape elite interpretations of U.S. actions, reinforcing threat perceptions and perpetuating mutual

mistrust". This perceptual entrenchment suggests that addressing these dynamics "is essential for the success of any future diplomatic engagement".

#### 1.4.4. Gaps and Future Research Directions

While the literature has robustly documented both U.S. double standards and Iranian theocratic repression, several gaps remain. First, limited comparative research examines how smaller powers navigate these competing pressures. Second, the role of international institutions in either mitigating or institutionalizing double standards remains undertheorized. Third, scholarship on Iranian civil society, particularly labor movements, ethnic minority resistance, and diaspora activism, requires further development beyond the focus on women's protests. Future research should also explore whether emerging multipolarity creates accountability mechanisms or merely new configurations of geopolitical hypocrisy.

## 2. Methods

This report adopts a qualitative desk research methodology, conducting a critical review and synthesis of peer-reviewed articles, authoritative policy documents, and official data. This approach is well suited to the analytical goals of this report, enabling comprehensive examination of existing knowledge without primary data collection, and drawing on established secondary sources to derive meaningful conclusions [7]. Searches were undertaken across Scopus, Web of Science, and Google Scholar using combinations of terms including: U.S. foreign policy, nuclear non-proliferation, Iran theocracy, women's rights Iran, Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps, nuclear double standards, and Middle East geopolitics. Inclusion Criteria Required: (a) Publication in peer-reviewed journals or recognised policy sources (UN bodies, Arms Control Association, SIPRI, Amnesty International, Human Rights Watch). (b) Direct engagement with normative frameworks, empirical findings, or theory relevant to international relations and human rights. (c) Relevance to at least one of three domains: nuclear policy, authoritarian governance, or geopolitical hypocrisy.

Data were extracted into thematic matrices covering: nuclear arsenals and non-proliferation; U.S. alliance double standards; Iranian governance and theocratic structures; and women's rights suppression. Findings were narratively synthesised using an integrated flexible approach as outlined by Saliya, providing a framework for combining diverse literature sources and highlighting both theoretical and empirical insights [8-10]. Quality appraisal emphasised clarity of data sources, operationalisation of key constructs (e.g., "double standards," "authoritarian governance"), and external validity across geopolitical contexts. Limitations include English-language bias and uneven data availability across some sub-topics. Through this method, the study contributes to ongoing discussions on foreign policy accountability, democratic norms, and human rights [11-14].

## 2.1. The Drama

### 2.1.1. Episode I: The United States, 'Do as I Say, Not as I Do'

#### 2.1.2. The Democracy Export Business

The United States has, for decades, positioned itself as the global guardian of democracy, freedom, and human rights. It is a noble brand. The marketing budget alone, in the form of military expenditure at \$886 billion in 2023, is staggering [15]. And yet, the product being sold and the product being delivered have often been... different things. Nothing says 'we believe in democracy' quite like overthrowing a democratically elected Iranian Prime Minister (Mohammad Mosaddegh, 1953), installing the Shah, and then acting shocked when Iranians harbor deep suspicion of American intentions decades later. The CIA-backed coup of 1953, codenamed Operation Ajax, removed Iran's democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh and reinstated the autocratic Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, primarily to protect Anglo-American oil interests [16]. The blowback from this single act of geopolitical selfishness has reverberated through six decades of U.S.-Iran hostility. Washington sowed this wind. The region reaps the whirlwind.

### 2.1.3. Nuclear Exceptionalism: The World's Worst-Kept Secret

The United States currently holds approximately 5,550 nuclear warheads, the second-largest arsenal on Earth, yet it leads international campaigns demanding that other nations not develop nuclear weapons [17]. This is a bit like the world's most heavily armed person standing at the door of a gun shop, telling customers they cannot purchase firearms. Washington's approach to nuclear proliferation exposes one of its most glaring double standards. Israel, a close ally, is widely believed to possess 80-90 nuclear warheads and has never signed the Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT). The United States has never imposed sanctions on Israel for this. India and Pakistan, both outside the NPT, were rewarded with nuclear cooperation deals after testing weapons. Iran, which IS a signatory to the NPT and whose nuclear program remains civilian in declared purpose, faces crippling sanctions and the threat of military strikes [18]. The message is simple: if you are an ally, or if you already have the bombs, the rules simply do not apply. If you are adversarial, different standards apply. This is not non-proliferation policy. This is geopolitical favoritism with nuclear branding.

### 2.1.4. The Saudi Arabia Paradox

Perhaps no relationship illustrates U.S. foreign policy hypocrisy more vividly than Washington's alliance with Saudi Arabia. The Kingdom is an absolute monarchy with no elections, no free press, where women were legally barred from driving until 2018, and where the murder of journalist Jamal Khashoggi, carried out, according to U.S. intelligence, on orders from Crown Prince Mohammed bin Salman, resulted in... arms sales continuing and diplomatic ties intact [19]. The United States sold Saudi Arabia over \$37 billion in arms between 2015 and 2020, weapons used in a Yemen war that the United Nations described as one of the world's worst humanitarian catastrophes [20]. Yet the U.S.

simultaneously held press conferences about human rights. The cognitive dissonance is not a bug. It is the feature. The formula is straightforward: nations with oil, strategic ports, or military bases get the 'valued partner' treatment. Nations that challenge U.S. hegemony get the 'axis of evil' treatment. Human rights are the garnish, not the meal.

### 2.1.5. Iraq: The Weapons of Mass Distraction

In 2003, the United States invaded Iraq on the basis of alleged weapons of mass destruction (WMD) that did not exist. The invasion resulted in an estimated 150,000–1,000,000 Iraqi civilian deaths depending on methodology, the displacement of millions, the destabilization of an entire region, and the rise of the Islamic State, none of which appeared in the original brochure [21]. The officials responsible for this foreign policy catastrophe faced no international tribunal. No sanctions were imposed on the United States. Several architects of the war are today respected media commentators. Meanwhile, the International Criminal Court (ICC), an institution the United States has never ratified, is expected to hold others to account for far lesser offenses. As of 2024, the U.S. has actively sanctioned ICC officials who attempted to investigate American personnel for potential war crimes in Afghanistan [22].

## 2.2. Episode II: Iran, God's Government, The People's Nightmare

### 2.2.1. The Supreme Leader: Because Why have One Boss When You can have God's Personal Representative?

Iran's political system is built on the concept of Velayat-e Faqih, the Guardianship of the Islamic Jurist, a political-theological doctrine holding that a senior Islamic cleric should govern society until the return of the Hidden Imam [23]. In practice, this means that Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, unelected by the general public, holds veto power over all branches of government, controls the military, the judiciary, state media, and the powerful Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). The elected president, whether 'moderate' or 'hardliner', operates within a system where real power resides with the Supreme Leader and an unelected Guardian Council that vets all candidates and can disqualify anyone it deems insufficiently Islamic. In the 2021 presidential election, the Guardian Council disqualified over 590 candidates out of 592 who applied [24]. The word 'election' is being used loosely here. Calling Iran's elections 'democratic' is like calling a restaurant's fixed menu a 'choice', technically there are options, but the kitchen has already decided what you are having.

### 2.2.2. Women's Rights: A Systematic Dismantling

Since the 1979 Islamic Revolution, Iranian women have endured one of the most comprehensive rollbacks of rights in modern history. Within weeks of the revolution, mandatory hijab laws were imposed, women were barred from serving as judges, and the minimum marriage age for girls was reduced to 9 years later revised to 13 in 1982 [25]. This was not incidental policy, it was ideological architecture. Today, Iranian women face legal discrimination across virtually every domain. Under the Iranian Civil Code, a woman's testimony in court counts as half that of a man. Women

cannot travel abroad without the written permission of their husband or male guardian. Married women cannot work without spousal consent in many circumstances. The diyeh (blood money) for a woman's life is legally valued at half that of a man [26]. In September 2022, 22-year-old Mahsa (Zhina) Amini died in the custody of Iran's Morality Police, the Gasht-e Ershad, after being arrested for allegedly wearing her hijab improperly. Her death triggered the Woman, Life, Freedom (Zan, Zendegi, Azadi) uprising, one of the largest protest movements in Iranian history. The government's response was to kill over 500 protesters, arrest more than 19,000, and execute at least four people in connection with the protests by early 2023 [27]. The Islamic Republic's response to women demanding the right to choose their own clothing was mass arrest and executions. Apparently, the divine governance model includes a very specific dress code enforced at gunpoint.

### 2.2.3. The Nuclear Program: Sovereignty or Brinkmanship?

Iran's nuclear program, begun in the 1950s with, note the irony, U.S. assistance under the Atoms for Peace initiative, has become the central flashpoint of Middle Eastern geopolitics [28]. Iran insists its program is purely civilian, a claim held with varying degrees of skepticism by the international community given the country's enrichment of uranium to 60% purity, far beyond civilian energy requirements but below weapons-grade [29]. The 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) was, by most technical assessments, a functional arms control agreement that placed significant limits on Iran's nuclear activities in exchange for sanctions relief. In 2018, President Donald Trump withdrew the United States from the deal unilaterally, reimposed harsh sanctions, and, in a spectacular display of geopolitical cause and effect, Iran subsequently accelerated its nuclear program to levels unprecedented before the deal existed [30]. The United States tore up a working nuclear deal, applied maximum economic pressure, and then expressed surprise when Iran moved closer to nuclear capability. This is a bit like removing someone's smoke detector and then being upset when the house catches fire.

### 2.2.4. The IRGC and State-Sponsored Repression

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps is a military-economic-political entity unlike any other in the region. It controls an estimated 20–40% of Iran's economy through businesses, construction contracts, and import monopolies [31]. It commands proxy militias across Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen. And it suppresses domestic dissent with a ruthlessness that has drawn consistent condemnation from United Nations human rights bodies. Amnesty International's 2022-2023 annual report documented the IRGC and security forces using live ammunition, birdshot, and metal pellets against protesters, deliberately targeting eyes, resulting in hundreds being blinded [22]. The UN Special Rapporteur on Iran documented 'serious, widespread and systematic human rights violations' constituting potential crimes against humanity [32].

### 2.3. Episode III: Where the Two Hypocrisies Meet

The relationship between the United States and Iran is, in many ways, a story of two entities who deserve each other, not in the sense that either population deserves the policies inflicted upon them, but in the sense that the behavior of each government has fed the domestic narrative of the other for decades. Washington uses Iran as justification for its military presence in the Gulf, its arms sales to autocratic Gulf states, and its general posture as indispensable regional hegemon. Tehran uses American hostility and sanctions as justification for economic failure, political repression, and nuclear advancement. Both governments' hard-liners need each other to remain in power. The Iranian people, 85 million of them, majority under 35, highly educated, and overwhelmingly wanting engagement with the world, are trapped between a government that treats them as subjects and an international sanctions regime that punishes them for their government's choices [33-36]. The American people, meanwhile, continue paying for a foreign policy architecture that serves arms manufacturers, defense contractors, and geopolitical abstractions more than it serves democratic values or human security. Both populations deserve better governments. Both governments prefer things exactly as they are.

### 3. Conclusion

#### Some Uncomfortable Truths

The United States is not the villain of every story, nor is Iran irredeemably authoritarian in the hearts of its people. What is consistent, and what this report has documented, is that both governments operate by standards they refuse to apply to themselves. Washington's foreign policy framework, built on selective application of human rights norms, nuclear exceptionalism for allies, and regime change as an occasional hobby, has undermined the very international order it claims to uphold. Its credibility as a democracy promoter has been eroded not by foreign propaganda but by its own documented choices. Tehran's theocratic governance has failed its population economically, politically, and most visibly in its treatment of women and dissidents. The Woman, Life, Freedom movement showed the world what Iranian society wants. The government's violent response showed the world what the Islamic Republic fears. The lesson, uncomfortable as it is, is that powerful states, whether wielding aircraft carriers or theology, tend to exempt themselves from the rules they demand others follow. The only antidote is an informed public that refuses to accept these double standards as the natural order of things. Read critically. Follow the money. And remember: when a government tells you, it acts in the name of God or democracy, check its receipts.

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