



Geopolitical Strength in Religious Ties: How Diplomatic Relations Between the Vatican and Post-Revolutionary Iran have Bolstered Iranian Resilience

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Geopolitical Strength in Religious Ties:
How Diplomatic Relations Between the Vatican and Post-Revolutionary Iran have
Bolstered Iranian Resilience

Christopher James Nicholas Genovese

A Thesis in the Field of International Relations
for the Degree of Master of Liberal Arts in Extension Studies

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Abstract

Numerous players influence those at the helm of the global political stage. Yet dominant state powers, especially democratic ones, remain at the forefront. They set the tone, reshape borders, dictate trade, and attempt to instill peace in times of instability and turmoil. In the today's world, where information is immediate and no global event is "unsearchable," traditional rules are no longer uniplanar as to what international relations and diplomatic means may drive intrastate dialogue and change. Unlikely players can hold immense power.

This thesis outlines one salient example of significant impact relating to relations between two unique, noncentral players: the Islamic Republic of Iran, and the Holy See (herein referred to as "the Vatican"). At face value, most would not think that these two bodies share much in common. Beliefs, social norms, and political disposition vis-à-vis the rest of the world, are vastly different. Yet, upon deeper inspection we find many similarities, shared beliefs, common causes, and appreciation for what each represents. Importantly, both entities hold significant political and spiritual power over their citizens and adherents.

Contrast this with the most powerful political authority on Earth, the United States. Hailed for democracy and freedom fighting, feared for its mighty military, and envied for its development and wealth, the U.S. sits at the top of all global powers. But this position comes with immense responsibility and expectations. Not only is the U.S. expected to assist in maintaining global stability, but the democratic values of the

country's leadership and its citizens empower it to export democracy to all who will listen and even to those who will not. While sentiments had been building for decades, the terror attacks of September 11 exacerbated intolerance for dissimilar players. If you are not democratic, it is difficult to be viewed positively by the U.S., however it is the right of individual nations to determine what political structure will bind them and that democracy is not always the choice. Some nondemocratic entities are benign, such as the Vatican, while others present an adversarial threat to democracy, for example, postrevolutionary Iran. Ironically, these two are similar politically in that they both follow theocratic principles. But one heads a list of top five foreign policy priorities and threats to the U.S., and the other heads a list of friends, eager to be engaged in times of needed counsel.

Through this thesis, I will show how the U.S. and the Western world find relations with the Vatican useful when convenient. On the other hand, I will outline how a deeper, religious bond between the Vatican and Iran has come to supersede the mere diplomatic relationship between the U.S. and the Vatican. I will explain how Vatican–Iranian relations have yielded unexpected gains for Iran and have bolstered their political body when most of the world has stood against them.

Frontispiece



Pope Francis and Iranian President Hassan Rouhani shared a laugh during their private audience at the Vatican, Jan. 26, 2016. (Credit: Andrew Medichini /AP.)

Author's Biographical Sketch

Christopher James Nicholas Genovese is an Italian-American academic and international business professional. As a dual citizen, he resides in Charleston, SC, USA, and Frasso Telesino, Campania, Italy. Fluent in several languages and having lived throughout Europe and the Americas, Christopher first pursued the academics of business. He holds a Bachelor of Science in International Business and Spanish, with a minor in European Studies, from the University of North Carolina Wilmington, as well as a Master of Science in International Marketing, from Escuela de Alta Dirección y Administración in Barcelona, Spain.

Having led two successful careers in global touring in the music industry and at various international technology companies, particularly those in health and well-being, he ultimately pursued his passion, international relations. In fall 2020, he revisited his academic pursuits when he began a ALM program at Harvard Extension School. With one of his first courses, “The Politics and Ideology of Post Revolutionary Iran,” he took a keen interest in not just Iran, but in Shi’a Islam. As an Italian Catholic who saw threads between the two religions, he focused on determining whether these interreligious dialogues either aided or detracted from Iran’s current disposition with the Western world.

This centered on the United States leveraging nontraditional bodies like the Vatican to engage with Iran and their proxies in hope of de-escalation. This became more salient following the failed Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, which in parallel saw

notable interactions between the Vatican and Iran, as well as a papal visit to a Shi'a neighbor, Iraq.

At Harvard, Christopher has found the value of religion at the global negotiating table when traditional diplomatic practices fail, a topic on which he hopes eventually to pursue a doctorate.

Dedication

This thesis is dedicated to the late Pope Francis. His progressiveness and openness may have suggested that the answer to political turmoil is not always rooted in politics. Human beings are driven by meaning, belonging, and belief as paths to purpose in life. Politics are justified frameworks of control and order to achieve that purpose, but when paths differ, politics see them as right and wrong and thus lose sight of the destination. I believe that Francis held that global divisions are best mended not through Washington or The Hague or London but, instead, through interreligious faith and dialogue, for which reason he sought a relationship with Iran's Ayatollah Khamenei and Iraq's Sistani.

Acknowledgments

Any academic pursuit requires sacrifice and dedication, regardless of one's age. In my previous academic pursuits, I had the luxury of limited responsibilities beyond my grades. Returning to pursue this degree amidst a career and now with a family proved to require the support of everyone around me, and for that, I am truly grateful.

I thank my thesis director, Dr. George Soroka, for his counsel and patience, and his push for excellence over mere completion. I also thank my research advisor, Doug Bond, who gave me the confidence to explore my topics deeper and more strategically.

Fr. Christopher Clohessy of the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies graciously provided counsel and support. What started as a mere email of inquiry to him yielded a wonderful academic relationship.

Lastly, I thank my family: my wife, Hunter, who ensured I was supported through the challenging schedules, late nights, early mornings; my father, Paul, who has always instilled in me the importance of learning and integrity; and my uncle, Nick, for sharing his wisdom and guidance.

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List of Terms & Definitions

Axis of Evil	Term used to describe the terrorist tendencies of Iran, North Korea, and Iran. The phrase was coined by U.S. President George W. Bush.
E.U.	European Union
Holy See	The universal government of the Catholic Church, in which the Pope is the ruler. The Holy See has diplomatic relations with 177 nations, including Iran and the United States.
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
IRGC	Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps
IRI	Islamic Republic of Iran (shortened to IRI, or Iran)
JCPOA	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
P5+1	A coalition comprised of the UK, France, Germany, Russia, and China
PISAI	Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies
Shi'a	Muslims of the branch of Islam comprising those who believe in Ali and the Imams as the only rightful successors of Muhammad, and in the concealment and messianic return of the last recognized Imam.
Sunni	Muslims of the branch of Islam who adhere to the orthodox traditions and acknowledge the first four caliphs as rightful successors of Muhammad.

Theocracy	A system of government by divine guidance or by officials who are regarded as divinely guided. Both the Vatican and the Islamic Republic of Iran are theocracies.
Vatican	A sovereign, independent city state territory, in which the Pope is the central leadership figure. The small territory is fully encompassed by the city of Rome. <i>Note:</i> The Vatican and the Holy See are often referenced in literature as an interchangeable title representative of the general body of the Catholic Church. Most commonly, the Vatican is referenced when the given intent should instead reference the Holy See. Given the complexity of this reference, for ease, I will use “the Vatican” unless its usage would be confusing.
WMD	Weapons of Mass Destruction

Chapter I.

Introduction

Persia-Iran is among the oldest continuous civilizations, and for many centuries it enjoyed immense regional strength and dominance. Today, however, it is globally one of the least understood and divisive among world powers. Its distance from the rest of the world stems in part from its form of government—a theocratic Islamic Republic which, against all odds, has resisted for nearly a half century. Iran's isolation creates severe downstream implications in many matters, including but not limited to geopolitics, regional stability, foreign relations with the Western world, national security policies with Western governments (e.g., the United States), political campaigns, and religious dialogue. Due to such stark differences, Iran is an enigma to democracies of the West. Without some understanding, it becomes challenging to control geopolitical outcomes.

Religion—in this case Shi'ism—is a cornerstone of Iranian life. Similarly, it is the central tenet of many other nationalities in the region. To understand Shi'ism is paramount to understanding the theocratic Islamic Republic of Iran. Understanding this theocracy allows for improved comprehension of what followed in the wake of Iran's 1979 revolution. Post-revolutionary Iran has seen a 45-year decline in foreign relations with the West. The simple question is: Why? But more so the question: Is our answer for the past 45 years accurate or is it misguided? What other key players have influential relations with Iran? These multifaceted questions speak to the persistence and resilience of Iran (despite Western efforts to thwart its development), coupled with historical

Western interventions and specific religious ties and diplomatic relations with the Catholic Church.

Holding religion as the key to the cipher naturally guides us to inquire as to what other religious bodies interact with Iran? While there are many, among the most interesting is the relationship between the Vatican/Holy See and Iran. This relationship is religiously rooted, politically derived, and today extends from mere diplomatic ties to strong sentiments of respect between the heads of both government and religious bodies. This includes the Pope, the President of Iran, and the Iranian Supreme Leader, or Ayatollah.¹

Over time, because the distinction between politics and religion is heavily blurred, the relationships among religious leaders naturally extend to the president of Iran, a religiously approved political appointee. As to the theocratic nature of both governments, many scholars dispute this arguing that the Bible does not serve as the Vatican's constitution, whereas the Qur'an, in theory, is the constitution of Iran (C. Clohessy, personal communication, August 7, 2025).

There are clear synergies between these two religious and political bodies that bolster one another on the global stage and provide outward strength and support. It is known that the Vatican has historically been tapped by the U.S. and other Western powers to assist with negotiations, de-escalations, and with establishing a common ground when one cannot be found through traditional political means. To be clear, the Vatican is a very

¹ Here I distinguish between two unique entities: the Holy See as the political body that has diplomatic relations with the political entity of Iran (e.g., the President of Iran), as well as the Vatican, which as a religious body has dialogue with the head of Shi'ism in Iran, the ayatollah. Otherwise, if not vital, I will refer simply to "the Vatican."

intentional, strong, and independent entity; it does not do the bidding of other governments; it does function at times to support attempts at peaceful resolutions.

This thesis addresses the Vatican as a diplomatic and theocratic intermediary, which is how the West has leveraged it to negotiate favorable outcomes (especially after the 1979 Iranian Revolution). It also considers how those initiatives seem to have had unexpected outcomes for the West and more favorable outcomes for Iran, thanks to the strong Iran–Vatican diplomatic ties. Clear historical accounts of events since the 1979 Revolution reveal their impetus, the factors that drove outcomes, and why those outcomes came to be.

To start, the link between the Vatican and the Islamic Middle East is not a new one. There has long been a bilateral push for interreligious dialogue. (In fact, the Vatican has an entire institute dedicated to it.) Marrying these religions comes as a surprise to many, especially conservative Catholics, who “can accept the idea that Christians and Jews worship the same God, but they won’t accept that Islam is part of that triangle, even though Vatican II has made it clear that it is” (Clohessy, pers. comm., 8/7/25).

In reality, all three Abrahamic religions have common origins, and thus a natural synergy exists between them. There are also mutual interests on both sides for ensuring religious freedoms and respect of their followers around the world in places where one party may have greater influence than the other. Ellis (1987) establishes a basis for my own argument, as it displays a precedent dating back to the 1980s that begins to connect the dots from religion to politics and from Catholicism to Shi’ism, in the context of post-revolutionary Iran. Furthermore, Ellis establishes a pattern of the Vatican’s influence in other states in the region, including Egypt, Israel, Jordan, and Lebanon. Clearly, then, it is

important to acknowledge that the Vatican wields influence in many spheres outside of its Catholic base and countries with a Catholic majority.

Fr. Christopher Clohessy is Senior Lecturer in Islamic Studies and Muslim-Christian Relations with a focus on Shi'ism, at the Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies (PISAI). When Fr. Clohessy began his own studies at PISAI, leadership there sought to dissuade him by suggesting that Shi'a Islam was "not particularly relevant in the world" and that he "ought to concentrate on Sunniism" (Clohessy, pers. comm., 8/7/25). Fr. Clohessy shared with me that two days before that leader's passing, he conveyed his joy in Fr. Clohessy's choice to pursue Shi'ism, inasmuch today Shi'a Islam has become a major part of PISAI, and today, "thanks to the Iranian ambassador, we have almost all of the most important Shi'a works in Arabic in our library" (Clohessy, pers. comm., 8/7/25). Any doubt about the value of a relationship with the Shi'a world was disproven when Pope Francis visited Najaf in 2021, which according to Fr. Clohessy, "made a huge difference when people began to realize that the Shi'a world is as important as the Sunni world" (Clohessy, pers. comm., 8/7/25).

From a multitude of sources during the decade immediately following the Iranian Revolution additional analyses can be drawn. However, I am not familiar with any scholarly literature that draws direct parallels between the Vatican and Iran and how this relationship has strengthened Iranian resilience. There are few inferences; for example, Ferrari (2004), which enabled me to understand how the Holy See positioned itself, not just with Iran but with the larger region, and specifically what developing initiatives have remained important (Ferrari, 2004, pp. 79–88). Murray (2010) shows what U.S. foreign policy was and what actions were taken. Then I connected those actions to requests of the

Vatican made by the U.S. or other Western powers as they related to Iran.² Murray evaluates strategic rationale and effectiveness, then begins to discuss the consequences. Russian author Ivan Oschcypok (2020) supports substantial leverage and power wielded by the Holy See in matters of intervention with other countries.

What is missing in these analyses are the events that occur between the Vatican and Iran in conjunction with inflection points in the relationship between Iran and the Western world. These connections are memorialized in declassified government documents, press releases, newspapers, articles, and other primary sources. One such source is the *Foreign Office Files for the Middle East* from The National Archives in London. Several dossiers show direct, documented correlation between U.S. requests for Vatican support, intervention, guidance, or back-channel negotiation at times when the desired outcomes could not be derived through routine diplomatic efforts. These include confidential inter-country memoranda between the U.S. and several European powers, including the Vatican, that are in the London Archives compilations know as “Political Relations Between Iran and the USA: Seizure of American Hostages in Iran,” and “Political Relations Between Iran and the USA: The Iran Hostage Crisis.”

A more recent work by Duncombe (2016) uniquely highlights the preceding 36 years of each side’s representations, which she asserts led to misrecognition and feelings of disrespect, ultimately exacerbating tensions as the two parties begin the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) or nuclear deal negotiations. Although her work does not mention the Vatican, but I contend that the Vatican’s recognition and respect for Iran on the global stage, contrary to the stance of the U.S., empowered Iran to assert itself

² This text was instrumental in establishing a factual baseline for the U.S. position toward Iran since the Iranian Revolution and the subsequent political determining factors.

on the global stage. I am not suggesting that the Vatican is solely responsible, but I will show how it served as a support mechanism for Iranian strength.

The problem at hand is obvious: two countries on opposite ends of the political and ideological spectrum. Under such circumstances, can those countries find common ground? I believe they can, but I contend it requires an understanding and respect for each other without the need to align on every matter. The U.S. is a democracy that formally requires the separation of religion and state. Iran is a theocratic republic in which religion and state are inextricable. I submit that cooperation and diplomacy are possible but I have chosen to analyze the post-Revolutionary actions of both the U.S. and Iran that have led to furthering a division instead of making progress.

It is evident that while the U.S. was following the Iranian Revolution, it understood little about the newly formed government and the motivations of the Iranian people. In many ways, the Revolution was a shock to their system. Subsequently, the U.S. began a scrambling effort to amass resources that could include some form of control over the Iranian entity (e.g., a deeper relationship with Iraq despite its questionable regime ethics), especially given early indications that relations would spiral downward. Noticing a budding relationship between the Vatican and post-Revolutionary Iran, the U.S. took to additional step of establishing relations with the Vatican—something that until that time was more ceremonial than official. This culminated in the appointment of the first U.S. ambassador to the Holy See in 1984, three years after the new Islamic Republic of Iran appointed its ambassador. It is important to be aware that formal diplomatic relations began in 1954 but were uninterrupted by the transition of government in 1979.

To weave further connections, it is imperative to couple these elements with the pervasive Westernized “collapse narrative” that has existed for 45 years since the inception of the Islamic Republic. Western powers, championed by the U.S., continually insist that Iran is on the brink of collapse, that its political structure is unsustainable, and that sanctions will be its undoing. However, for nearly five decades, Iran has not collapsed. In fact, it has proven resilient, and I contend that today Iran’s position is stronger than ever. The question again is, Why hasn’t Iran failed? Why has the government been resilient and resisted unrest and isolation? What is bolstering its position?

I pose a further question: Has the strong relationship with the Vatican served to strengthen Iran’s political and religious clout, domestically and internationally, to produce resilience in the face of Western efforts to thwart their development and position as a regional protector and geopolitical leader? I believe this to be true.

I further hypothesize that when Western powers have called on the Vatican for support (which usually is for de-escalation through dialogue and yields positive outcomes), the shared religious beliefs between Shi’a and Catholics have yielded a deeper relationship, rooted in religious respect and admiration for one another. This bond supersedes political breadth and better positions the same Iran that the West hoped to control.

This outcome is far from one what the U.S. or most European players ever envisioned possible, far from one they ever would desire, to this day. A religious and morally aligned partnership, yet distant theocratic, is one that the U.S. seems unable to understand, it goes against what is sensible to U.S. sensibilities. How can an

ultraconservative Islamic theocratic government find common ground with an antiquated, Catholic church? The answer: they both share Abrahamic religious roots, are hypersensitive to persecution and the oppression of their people, and lament the encroachment of secular society on their morals.

In this thesis, I will analyze the following seminal periods to support my claims. The first period occurred during and immediately following the Iranian Revolution of 1979. This creates a timeline from January 1979 until the mid-1980s, including significant events such as the return of Ayatollah Khomeini (February 1, 1979); the formation of government (between February and October of 1979); the American hostage crisis (November 4, 1979, through January 20, 1981); and the Iran-Iraq War (September 22, 1980–August 20, 1988).

Next, I analyze the “post-9/11 years.” The U.S.’s clear desire was to avenge that spectacular act of terror. Subsequent foreign policy decisions were emotionally driven against Iraq and Afghanistan, driven by a new world directive to combat terror that shifts the terms of engagement and is shown in successive interactions.

Last, I will move into the Obama administration, the foundation of the JCPOA, and the turn it took following the election of President Donald Trump. These distinct time periods enable me to segment what actions transpired on both sides, compare them to respective policies, then buttress those against actions taken by the Vatican at the request of the U.S., or those that occurred between Iran and the Vatican, or the Vatican and the U.S. simultaneously with those events.

There are some concerns. First, Shi’a Islam, contrary to its counterpart, Sunni Islam, is much less studied by Western scholars. Second, Iran and Shi’ism are

inextricably linked but because of the first point, Iran is not widely studied and understood in the proper context. Third, there is a vast amount of research on the Vatican, the structure of the Holy See, the pope, the history of the Catholic Church, and the topic of Catholicism in general. However, I again ask the question: Do we understand all the above in the proper context as it relates to their spiritual and political influence with other state and spiritual powers, for example, Iran and its supreme leader? I contend we do not.

Why this matters may be the simplest question to answer. The U.S. is incredibly confident—and equally arrogant. It believes countries should submit to its greatness. This includes countries that arguably step out of line or go against the U.S. grain. Every U.S. president since the Iranian Revolution, every U.S. Congress, much of Western Europe, many Middle Eastern powers, and other West-aligned powers place Iran at the top of their list of foreign policy priorities.

That has not changed; it is the approach that changes. The U.S. devotes significant energy and investment to controlling Iran, and what the U.S. believes will stabilize the Middle Eastern region in a way that promotes global democracy and preserves U.S. interests. The U.S., as the global leader, an understanding of Iran is necessary. But the ability to drive favorable mutual outcomes is paramount for a more safe and secure global environment. If the nature of Western democracy and its potential shortcomings are impeding progress in the Middle East—and Iran is one of many ongoing challenges—then the implications are substantial.

Beyond the political realm, this research seeks to answer not only how to understand one another politically but also how to de-escalate tensions in religious matters and limit religious persecution. A better understood and integrated Iran can have

significant positive downstream impacts on the regional states of Israel, Iraq, Lebanon, Palestine, Syria, and Yemen, as well as all global countries that the U.S. believes are today incompatible with democratic principles.

Chapter II.

Historical Context of the U.S., the Vatican, and Iran

Since the conclusion of World War I, the United States has garnered a reputation for exporting democracy. On the surface, this is almost a badge of honor. But deeper evaluation of the principal shows despite being admirable, it is a flawed approach. Over the time, whether forcefully instilled or peacefully, imparting beliefs and practices as to the most desirable government, does not always have an edenic ending. Some cultures, and norms of that culture, may work better within a different framework. Regardless, this principle combined with a century of stark economic growth, emboldened the U.S. to be the champion of world order.

The U.S. and Iran

For Iran, the vast first part of the 20th century saw a mixture of positive and benign relations. Even during WWII, despite U.S. allies' invasion of Persia, subsequent relations remained good, with most of the focus was between the United Kingdom and Persia regarding oil and the UK prime minister's desire to nationalize oil rights.

These relations took a turn when the U.S. organized a coup to overthrow Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh, who was democratically appointed. This became a key turning point in U.S.–Iran relations. Subsequently, the Shah of Iran, Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, assumed authoritative power and reversed much of Iran's democratic course.

The following 26 years leading up to the Iranian Revolution of 1979 saw a close alliance with the U.S. with the U.K. as a lesser participant. This alliance was so enduring that in the 1950s the U.S. helped Iran create its nuclear program. Indeed, the U.S. saw Iran as an indispensable and eerily necessary pillar during the Cold War. Iran was pivotal geopolitically, given its border with the USSR, but also its huge petroleum stores allowed it to gain wealth and prominence.

Oil pressures in the larger Middle East, coupled with U.S. economic woes, led to further meddling, which led to continued consternation, and ultimately Iran's relationship with the U.S. suffered. Essentially the U.S. foisted its economic instability onto Iran. This, coupled with a series of challenging political missteps, led to growing support among the anti-Shah population, which paved the way for support for the Islamic Revolution of 1979.

Brief Persian History

It is important to note the deep identity crisis that has been at play in Iran for centuries. Persia was once one of the most powerful empires in the ancient world. For the past two millennia, it has declined even as its power suffered. This reality is a national crisis but a longstanding and painful ache for the Persian people.

Two elements are at play. First, there is regional identity. Persia is often grouped with the rest of the Middle East, although Persians are not Arabs. In fact, most things that are Persian—language, food, norms, physical appearance, and religion (historically, Zoroastrianism, not Islam)—are far removed from that of their Arab neighbors. But at the direction of the West, the U.S. in particular, the Middle East is viewed as a whole, when

in fact it is markedly diverse. This cultural sensitivity after centuries of reduction, coupled with ideological differences, served both as a prime catalyst for a revolution and a major source of anti-Western and anti-democratic sentiments.

The Role of Religion

The context of Persian culture naturally brings us to the role of religion. The West has little to no understanding of the differences between Shi'a Islam and Sunni Islam. The Shi'a are much more progressive and liberal than the Sunni, which is ironic considering the U.S. aligns mostly with Sunni populations, which are the most conservative and doctrinally opposed to U.S. values.

This, too, needs further delving into the background and sensitivity of Persians and present-day Iranians. Iranians have always (but particularly in the 20th century) desired equality. They want a seat at the table and a voice like their Western counterparts, so much so that the Shah worked hard to “Westernize” the country. Traditional Persian garb was traded for Western suits and dresses; Persian culture was replaced by an infatuation with Western movies and music—and the Persian way of life became largely threatened. These changes led to a severe and devastating loss of Persian identity.

The resulting behavior was revolutionary. The U.S. was no longer to be trusted, with the mainstream narrative declaring that the West was only involved in Iran for the interests of the West, seeking to stabilize the Middle East, control the price of oil, have unfettered trade access to the Strait of Hormuz, help the U.S. economy and its closest allies, and when possible, to export democracy so that peace, as they saw it, ensued. Furthermore, the Shah was viewed by Iranians as a Westernizing puppet in the hands of

the U.S., which was exacerbated by U.S. rhetoric suggesting that Iran was, according to President Jimmy Carter, an “island of stability in one of the most troublesome regions of the world” (Carter, 1977, para.1).

After the Revolution

Following the revolution, a completely new, polar-opposite government was installed. Iran changed from an authoritarian monarchy driven by Westernization, to a theocracy and, more importantly, an Islamic Republic. Theocracies and democracies are not necessarily incompatible. Probably more incompatible, foundationally, is the influence of religion on policy. Overnight, religion came to exist in all elements of Iranian government, daily life, and foreign policy. Of course, the U.S. is rooted in a key principle: the separation of church and state.

Despite its deep religious guidance, the newly formed Islamic Republic of Iran has some elements of democracy. There are regular elections held for both presidency and Parliament, although the “freeness” and “fairness” of these elections are often contested.

Nevertheless, while the governing body changed drastically, the interest in one another did not change at all. Strategically, Iran was still no less important to geopolitics, and the U.S. remained the dominant global leader, actively embroiled in a Cold War with the USSR. Maleki and Tirman (2014) state:

mutual suspicion and perceptions of perfidy . . . have collectively resulted in a lack of basic communication and a consistent failure to recognize common interests to resolve or at least contain disagreements. . . .

Despite the fact that Iran is important to the resolution of various Middle East conflicts involving the United States or its allies, in addition to overlapping concerns on a wide variety of issues, dialogue,

communication, and compromise are scarcely attempted between Tehran and Washington. (p. 10)

This historical overview sets the stage for the complete reversal of constructive relations between the U.S. and Iran.

Representation and Recognition

We often think of these relations myopically from a Western stance, but what truly drives Iranian foreign policy posture? For reasons previously discussed, history and culture greatly complicate the Iranian disposition toward the U.S. Much of what we know to be true about this, and any relationship that Iran develops, is centered on the concepts of representation and recognition.

Iran desires recognition and equality, and those desires—to “cultivate a certain image” and “to be recognized in a particularly way”—determine much of its foreign policy actions (Duncombe, 2016, p. 637). Duncombe continues:

It is remarkable how powerful the representations are that exist within Iran–US relations, . . . [These] representations have influenced not only how each state recognizes the other, but also what foreign policy options each believes are available as a result. (p. 637)

Iran believes it is a Shi’a state that is “triumphing over adversity,” while the U.S. simultaneously appoints itself with the title of “the leader of the international community . . . imbued with divine purpose to spread the liberal values so ingrained in its own national identity. (p. 638)

What we do know is that both countries are at an impasse. Traditional political sense suggests that no matter how well-intentioned (which most engagements between Iran and the U.S. are not), two countries taking this stance cannot bilaterally engage efficiently unless there is a significant shift (e.g., invasion, regional war, economic

collapse, coup d'état). A third-party intermediary may be used to identify and develop alternative outcomes. Thus, in the case of this research, I will show that such an intermediary has been the Vatican.

The U.S. and the Vatican

The U.S. intentionally began a formal diplomatic relationship with the Vatican in 1984. There is evidence that this relationship was developed to leverage the Vatican as a way to accomplish goals in the global political arena, which the U.S. knew it could not do on its own. This relationship ran in parallel with but somewhat delayed by the budding relationship between the Vatican and Iran, and it may have been intended to retain an element of control over Iran. Perhaps the ambition was to allow the U.S. to drive outcomes that, if sought through traditional channels, would not be entertained given the vast divide between the two political entities. I contend that the U.S. hoped to use the Vatican to weaken Iran's geopolitical power. Instead, however, Iran leveraged its relationship with the Vatican to draw similarities, elicit favors, and show the world that its plight was more than similar to that of the Catholic Church.

Brief History of U.S./Vatican Relations

Here it is appropriate to highlight the historical relationship of the U.S. to the Vatican, and briefly evaluate a pivotal point in more formalized relations. It should be noted that for nearly two decades during the 1950s and 1960s, the U.S. had no formal representative appointed to the Holy See. Not until Pope John Paul II was elected in

October 1978 did President Carter decide it would be prudent to appoint Robert Wagner as his personal representative to the Holy See.

Many other events occurring in Europe at that time—not least the spread of communism and the political situation in the Pope’s own native Poland—would also have contributed to Washington’s interest in a closer alliance with the Vatican. However, its real importance to the U.S. became apparent just after the Iranian Revolution of 1979 with the official appointment of William Wilson as the first United States Ambassador to the Holy See on April 9, 1984. While this appointment came five years after the Iranian Revolution, the action was subtle yet prudent considering the historic lack of interest.

A January 1984, an article in the *National Catholic Reporter* summed up why this appointment was of such importance. One can infer that it is at least passively related to continually deteriorating U.S. relations with Iran. The headline, “U.S.–Vatican relations, hemisphere policy tied,” barely consumes one-third of the page. But a closer read quickly informs the reader that for the first time the U.S. has chosen to deploy an official ambassador to the Holy See, 69-year-old William Wilson, a Catholic Republican.

At the same time, the article announces that the Vatican has chosen to reciprocate with Archbishop Pio Laghi, as their Pro-Nuncio to the U.S. (Hebblethwaite, 1984, p. 9). Of particular interest is the fact that the “United States joins countries such as Finland and Iran, which both have diplomatic relations with the Vatican” (p. 9). It is unlikely the country of Iran (among all the countries that could or should have been highlighted) was not most intentionally added to this call-out. Many Americans believed Iran was in a state of disarray, yet it had diplomatic relations with the Vatican? And yet the U.S. had continued to choose not to?

Even more noteworthy: when speaking to the rationale behind the appointment and establishment of the new embassy, Hebblethwaite pointed out the need for intelligence, noting that “the Holy See does have access to information not otherwise available . . . [and] the U.S. needs to share what the Vatican knows” (p. 9). Here we see a changing of tide in the U.S.–Vatican relationship, an acknowledgment that the U.S. cannot let Iran have a diplomatic relationship with a power as significant as the Vatican without the U.S. having such a relationship as well. What historians acknowledge is that Vatican–U.S. relations developed into becoming much closer during the latter part of the 20th century, mainly due to a shared desire to combat communism (Gayte, 2011, p. 714).

This is a key point in history and a major shift in what historically in the U.S. was a rather anti-Catholic period of rhetoric. Not only did the U.S. tell the world that it is valuable to have diplomatic relations with a spiritual entity (despite their expressed views on a separate church and state), but the U.S. states that it is most imperative.

Acknowledging this type of relationship gives further credit to the power of spiritual authority, and, inadvertently, strengthens the theocracy of Iran. As Marx would have his readers believe that religion is the ‘opiod of the masses,’ the U.S. government, the strongest political power, shows its need for information from a religious entity. This means Iran’s spiritual center in Ayatollah Khomeini and its theocratic government may have just enough significant power over the masses to bring a government to change its policy position.

Furthermore, this shift occurred due to the U.S.’s need to “occupy the moral high ground” and “offset critics at home who were challenging the morality of certain U.S. foreign policy options” (Gayte, 2011, p. 724). Gayte writes that in 1982, the “need to

secure Vatican support for key U.S. foreign policy decisions is one factor that motivated the decision to establish diplomatic relations” to “ensure that the Holy See understands and takes into account our [U.S.] position on important world issues and vice-versa” (pp. 724-725).

Two U.S. Ambassadors to the Holy See served under President Ronald Reagan: William Wilson and Frank Shakespeare. Then followed Patrick Melady, appointed by President George H. W. Bush. By this time, the significance of the formal ties was fully realized—but most definitely not always. In his book, *The Ambassador’s Story*, former Ambassador Melady (1994) provides a pointed overview of the difficult road to the recognition of formal diplomatic relations: “It took 208 years for the United States to enter into full diplomatic relations with the oldest international personality in the community of nations” (p. 41). Dating back to 1776, the U.S. acknowledged only that the Vatican had authority over central Italy, then known as the Papal States. Subsequently,

the consular relations established by the United States in March 1797 with the Papal States, whose capital was in Rome, were reciprocated at the same consular level in 1826 when the Papal States established a consulate in New York City. (pp. 41-42)

Essentially, the U.S. acknowledged its dominion over territory but did not establish relations with the Pope as the head of the Catholic Church, nor did it ascribe any official value to the papacy over the global Catholic population.

After a string of foreign ministers were deployed by the U.S., in 1867 Congress “prohibited the financing of any diplomatic post to the Papal States” (Melady, 1994, p. 43). The last resident foreign minister, Rufus King, left his post in August 1867 when Giuseppe Garibaldi went on to unify the Papal States under the Kingdom of Italy. King’s departure from Rome initiated a “long interregnum of seventy-two years when the United

States had no diplomatic representative to the Pope,” coinciding with a period of strong anti-Catholicism in the U.S. (Melady, 1994, p. 43). Relations were not restored until “President Franklin Roosevelt announced on December 24, 1939, that he had intended to send a personal representative to the Pope” noting the desire for “closer contacts with the leaders of the major faiths” (1994, p. 43). Congress needed to approve an ambassador post, but a personal representative served at will of the President.

This return to diplomacy was short-lived, for when President Harry Truman entered office he chose not to have a personal representative. It was not until 1969 when “President Nixon broke the long interregnum . . . and appointed Henry Cabot Lodge as his personal Representative to the Pope” (Melady, 1994, p. 47). President Carter followed suit, briefly appointing David Walters, then Robert F. Wagner, who served “as a personal representative of the President until 1981 and devoted many efforts to the problems of the United States Embassy hostages in Iran” (1994, p. 48).

Accordingly, for years the Vatican and the U.S. maintained relations only if the U.S. felt it was worthwhile—and this is a key element. There were various times when relations were attempted, but precluded by the following: 1) anti-Catholicism in the U.S., 2) lack of belief that the Holy See met the burden for forming diplomatic relations, 3) that the Holy See was not a necessary partner to have relations with, and 4) that church and state should be bifurcated.

I believe that under President Reagan, the U.S. saw a clear opportunity coming out of the fall of the Soviet Union. Ambassador Melady noted in his book that with diplomatic relations, the U.S. and the Holy See were able to work together to resolve global issues. Melady remarks that his tour of duty coincided with dramatic shifts in

Central and Eastern Europe as well as the Soviet Union, and that “both the Holy See and the U.S. played significant roles in this transformation, and it was clearly facilitated by the existence of full diplomatic relations” (pp. 54-55).

Frances Rooney (2013), who served as ambassador to the Holy See under President George W. Bush, wrote that although engagement with the Vatican had been varied since official recognition:

Depending on the priorities and the values of individual presidents and the particular strategic interests of the United States and the Holy See at each point along the way . . . [even in moments of] tension and discord, our mutually beneficial diplomatic ties have allowed the U.S. and the Holy See to manage differences reasonably and effectively, and to move quickly together to leverage and advance shared goals and objectives. (p. 167)

A Clarification

Before proceeding, I wish to make a brief but important clarification: the Vatican versus the Holy See. The distinction between these two is often so confused that even politicians and political scientists use the two interchangeably.

While most correspondences truncate the Holy See to just the Vatican, it should be understood that the ambassadors, and papal representatives to states supporting diplomatic relations and international organizations, represent the Holy See. In making my own evaluations, some unofficial and back-channeled events may be presented as nonpolitical so that representatives may be simply “of the Church,” and not the Church’s government, for which I will generally use the term “the Vatican.”

Iran and the Vatican

It would seem that the relationship between Iran and the Vatican has strengthened to a point that far exceeds that of the U.S. and the Vatican. This is likely because of the religious common ground between the two, which exceeds whatever the U.S. seems capable of attaining. Ultimately, the outcome is an Iran that is not weak, not afraid, and not shunned among others. While the U.S. would wish it otherwise, Iran feels strong and emboldened, particularly thanks to its relationship and legitimacy gained from substantial formal ties with the Vatican. This is a surprising outcome for anyone watching the global stage since the Iranian Revolution of 1979, but particularly for the U.S., which certainly hoped a Western European Christian ally would not serve to strengthen a perceived rogue, revolutionary Shi'a state.

My interview with Fr. Clohessy yielded some telling dialogue as to the nature of the current relationship between Iran and the Vatican, best summarized in the following transcript:

I think that the Vatican and Iran look upon each other with a mixture of suspicion and admiration. That's the profound impression I get and have gotten over the last few years. I think that they both accept that the other lives by a certain moral code, which is not evident all over the world, but only in very few places, and I think they both accept, deep down inside, no matter what the Christian view of Islamic spirituality and vice versa may be, they both accept that the other does live by a fairly deep sense of spirituality. I think those two things, the moral code and the spirituality, are the glue that holds these two really very diverse places together. I think that they both agree it's a good idea to stick as a friend of the other, rather than as an enemy. (Clohessy, pers. comm., August 7, 2025)

This will be a pervasive theme, since respect may be one of the largest prerequisites for a constructive relationship with Iran, and continues to be a shortcoming in its relationship with the U.S.

The respectful relations between the Vatican and Iran did not just come as a byproduct of the revolution, however. Their relations go back well before the Iranian Revolution. Official relations date back to 1954 under Pope Pius XII who, coming out of World War II, wanted to ensure that many concordats were formed to preserve the religious freedom and safety of Catholic Christians throughout the evolving global political landscape. Since then, relations have grown, not only in size but also in depth.

This was clear when regime change occurred during the Islamic Revolution of Iran. In 2007, *Time Magazine* noted that Iran had the second-highest number of diplomats accredited to the Holy See, which remarkably had “monthly meetings with papal advisors” (Israely, 2007, para.5). I believe Iran views the Vatican as an invaluable moderator, and many other reporters, writers, and scholars agree with this position. Accordingly, Iran often has been swift to leverage its good relationship with the Vatican in times of need—mostly notably when it involves Western powers. Writer Luke Coppen (2024) highlights a statement by Italian journalist Francesco Peloso, who said Iran was “seeing interlocutors in the West capable of exerting diplomatic pressure, a sort of moral suasion” (para. 31). While this refers to strained Iranian relations vis-à-vis the U.S. and Israel, the same applies to many moments when Western tensions with Iran needed an impartial moderator to cool the temperature. Particularly considering decades of sanctions, the Iranians are desperate for dialogue that destigmatizes their pariah status on the global stage. For a religiously rooted system, arguably no better counterpart exists than that of the Vatican. “The Iranians . . . are seeking moral legitimacy as a firebreak against the impact of US sanctions, and see their bonhomie with the pope as an important ‘soft power’ asset” (Allen, 2023, para. 21).

While it is evident what the Iranians stand to gain from deeper relations, the Vatican is not immune to the benefits of such a relationship either. This is where many pause and question how this can be. Why would a largely, globally accepted body risk investing in such a divisive character? Iran is a country that most consider to be culturally oppressed, with a regime accused of deep corruption, and a religion that appears to be opposed to traditional Catholicism. Here misconceptions can yield dangerously incorrect assumptions.

As mentioned, the Vatican is not just the city-state in Rome. It represents a global population of faithful Catholics. Despite Western desires to thwart Iranian growth, Iran's presence in the Middle East is formidable. Many of the countries with which Iran shares close influence, largely Shi'a strongholds, look to Iran for support and guidance. But those same countries also have Christian populations. Thus, the Vatican has a keen desire to ensure religious freedom and safety for those populations. While the West considers Iran a destabilizing power, ironically the Vatican looks at them in the opposite: it hopes that through maintaining a strong relationship predicated on interreligious moral principles, the safety of those on both sides can be achieved.

An additional common misconception is that peace is incompatible with either Islam or Iran. This is disappointingly wrong and naïve. Iran does not benefit from a divided Middle East constantly wrapped in turmoil, with a ravaged economy, and limits on its ability to progress. Iran has no desire to live in the shadows.

Further, Islam, particularly Shi'a Islam, does not fundamentally support war and destruction. Rather, its guiding principles are rooted in peaceful existence, without killing and mainstream hatred. Granted, the Iranian regime has instilled legislation and practices

that have continuously made it the subject of scrutiny from international human rights groups. These are grave missteps. But those practices are not pan-Islamic or even pan-Iranian; they are a function of regime politics and control, not religious ideology. I would submit that this same questionable political leadership, because of moral convictions, is capable of moral outcomes. A article by J. Allen, overviewing the Vatican's natural affinity with Iran, cleverly sums up this point:

Iranian leaders operate in a psychological and cultural matrix in which such religious convictions matter, but most Western leaders simply can't engage them on that level. . . . They'd be out of their depth, and anyway, Western concepts of church/state separation would make doing so inappropriate . . .

The pope and his diplomatic team, however, can meet the Iranians on their own turf, so to speak, from within a shared universe of spiritual and theological convictions. (2023, paras. 11, 12).

Further solidifying the match of this relationship is the fact that Islam is an Abrahamic religion as is Christianity. Their bases, traditions, and much of their structures are closely aligned. While beliefs are different, common tenets allow for a shared respect and appreciation that truly is unparalleled by any other player in the Western, arguably the entire world. The Vatican very much invests in interfaith dialogue, and runs its own Pontifical Institute for Arabic and Islamic Studies (PISAI), whose leading Catholic/Shi'a scholar, Christopher Clohessy has provided first-hand accounts.

A Holy Trinity: Determining Links Between the U.S., Iran, and the Vatican

To draw the conclusions posited here requires a multitude of diverse sources. These include national archive records from related parties that have been involved in the Iran–U.S.–Vatican relationship. Among them are the National Archives of London, as

well as multiple online and print newspaper articles and reviews that report on the evolution and ultimate stability of these relationships.

From a comparative analysis with the post-9/11 years we may draw conclusions as to the change in Iranian position—mostly the domestic (Iranian) perception of increased power—and correlate that to a continuous and improved relationship with the Vatican. I argue that despite little research into what influence the Vatican plays in global politics, that influence is evident. With nearly 1.4 billion of the world's population identifying as Catholic and growing every decade, when the Church speaks much of the world listens. It is increasingly evident that interactions among the Vatican and Iran (occasionally at the request of the U.S.), have strengthened the legitimacy of the Iranian theocracy, and have served to provide links and communications to the outside world that the West has strived to stifle. In fact, the West has even hoped a Vatican presence would contribute to that cause. The Vatican's diplomatic presence and interreligious dialogue with Iran amid these points of inflection, and its historic willingness to give Iran an equal seat at the table, has helped its geopolitical situation.

I used content analysis to first scrutinize the dialogue and determine main themes. Then subsequently I undertook a comparative analysis to determine how the dialogue evolved over time, what themes stayed true or have changed, and how these narratives speak to a further established Islamic Republic of Iran.

The widespread declassification of government documents in the Western world, Europe, and the U.S. helped to determine through reports, newspapers, and third-party accounts that may have played a role in the U.S., Iran, and the Vatican relationship. In fact, clear and tangible evidence showed the level of involvement, minor or major, so that

I could begin to weave the web of each player's face-value intent, coupled with their veiled but desired outcome. This was confirmed by mainstream narratives supplied by those countries and the political (or theocratic) elements in question. However, that freedom to access documents degrades in a post-9/11 era, as matters of national and homeland security expand to a point that severely limit access to these previously available correspondences.

Chapter III.

Post-Revolution Iran: The Revolution, the U.S. Hostage Crisis, Foreign Policy Shifts, and the Infancy of Vatican/Iranian Relations

In 1979, the Persian people rose up and retaliated. And the world, in particular Western Europe and the U.S., was dealt a blow for which it was largely unprepared. Who would have thought such a close ally nation—governed by a figurehead such as the Shah who kept frequent presence with U.S. presidents and British royals while backed by Western support—would crumble? Over the course of a single month, the world saw the Iranian monarchy dismantled, the Shah abscond into exile, and Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini return to Iran to assume the seat of power. I am dramatizing the speed just slightly: in fact, uprisings compound, they rarely happen spontaneously.

The 1979 Iranian Revolution

For Iran, the course of events began well before the tipping actions of the revolution. British interest in Persia extended back into the 19th century and was rooted in a desire to protect India. The Shahs at the time tended to quickly give up Persian rights in exchange for concessions or offerings that largely benefited the elite. By the time oil came onto the global scene in the early 1900s, Persia was viewed as a treasure trove of opportunity given its large reserves, which served to further deepen British controlling interests.

In 1941, during World War II, British and Soviet troops concerned with Iranian susceptibility to Germany, invaded Iran and forced the hand of Reza Shah, who ultimately abdicated the throne to his son, Mohammad Reza. Initially, Mohammad Reza was viewed as a route to quick stability. He also was more progressive and was liked by the people.

However, Mohammad Mosaddeq, a parliamentarian, rose in parallel interest to later become the new prime minister. Mosaddeq was democratically elected, but his move to nationalize Iranian oil did not sit well with Britain, which controlled and profited from much of its production. That made Mosaddeq a target. Despite his legitimate power and popular support, he soon drew the ill intent of not just the Shah but of the British and the Americans. On August 15, 1953, a first attempt to remove him from power ended in complete failure, with the Shah fleeing Iran. The next time around, just four days later and with the help of U.S. and British intelligence forces, Mosaddeq was successfully overthrown and the Shah returned to Iran.

Over the next two and a half decades, the Shah would largely be considered a friend of the West. He admired the Western way of life, and integrated more Western elements into the Iranian society. He introduced the White Revolution, which centered on mimicking Western modernization and redistribution. Recall that the Persian people not only having a strong national identity but an even stronger sensitivity to the loss of that identity to other cultures, norms, and viewpoints. The Persian plateau—the country of Iran—is an island amid the Arab populations of Sunni Islamists. Consequently, the Shah's admiration for the West and its ways was tolerated initially, even supported by some. But it soon drew criticism on a larger scale from landowners, clerics (the *ulamā'*,

or “knowledgeable ones”), and directly from one prominent cleric, Ruhollah Khomeini. Ayatollah Khomeini, a cleric with strong support, was soon exiled to Iraq due to his intense and outspoken criticism of the Shah.

Khomeini’s exile is very significant. Persian identity and Islamic identity are often confused, and this led to the Shah’s failure. Yes, the overwhelming majority of Iran shares Persian cultural identity, but it is tied to the land and their ancient civilization, traditions, heritage, and language. The religion of Persia, however, has evolved from sixth-century BCE Zoroastrianism, to predominant present-day Shi’a Islam. As such, it is imperative to understand which factor is most influential in society: a centralized, cohesive religion or a deep-rooted cultural, regional identity?

Although the Shah himself was Shi’a, his government increasingly followed a secular approach, leading to the marginalization of religion, in fact, of all religions. While Iran has historically been made up of many religious bodies—eastern Christians, Zoroastrians (still to this day), Jews, and Baha’is—Shi’a Muslims remain predominant, today accounting for between 90 and 95 percent of the population (Masci & Desilver, 2018, sec. 4). Hence, the Shah probably underestimated, first, the adherence of the population to their religious beliefs over societal modernization, and second, the immense influence of the voice of a cleric when confronted with a secularizing government.

Beginning in 1977, civil unrest intensified due to political corruption, inflation, and failed reforms. Additionally, the Shah became more of a tyrant and less of a democratic (Western-like) leader. It is also important to note he was battling severe late-stage cancer which made him not only volatile, but largely unavailable to support all the

elements of government that nearly unilaterally relied on his approval. He increasingly employed his SAVAK security forces to dispel opposition at all costs.

Dissatisfaction and inequality grew in 1978, with numerous demonstrations and uprisings that were met with brutal force but proved to be uncontrollable. All along, Khomeini continued to broadcast to Iran and the global arena his desire to return from exile and reset the country on a corrected course.

The Shah made several last-ditch attempts to walk back some of his policies, but ultimately, on January 16, 1979, he fled, leaving the country in the hands of newly appointed Prime Minister Bakhtiar. Famously, just a few weeks later, Ayatollah Khomeini returned to Iran to utter fanfare. He immediately instilled his own, “legitimate” prime minister, Mehdi Bazargan, and less than two weeks later, all remnants of the Shah’s regime had collapsed, as Khomeini’s new provisional government began to take shape.

Consequences of a New Post-Revolutionary Iranian Regime

This unprecedented change came largely as a shock to the Western world, notably to the U.S. Donette Murray (2010) wrote:

When the end finally came it took America’s breath away The Carter administration underestimated the religious dimension to the revolution but officials did realise that a tangled web had brought the Shah down. (p. 25).

After decades, this meant the U.S. had to completely restructure its approach to Iran, and the same was true for many Western allies including the British. For a few months, there were attempts, even glimpses of hope, of some sort of renewed diplomatic

relations. However, Murray asserts, the U.S. administration largely dismissed the impact that previous meddling events had on the present day.

I contend that much of this “inability to decipher” the reality of the revolutionary state stems from a few insurmountable blocks in basic American policy: (1) the separation of church and state in American politics, which makes it difficult to understand the motivations of this new theocratic body, and (2) the cultural ‘adolescence’ of the U.S. versus the deep-seated Persian identity that spans millennia. After the revolution, U.S. officials largely “underestimated both the extent to which the United States was resented and the way in which this was being used to consolidate the revolution” (Murray, 2010, p. 29).

What seemed like an overnight volte-face for the Western world was a long time coming for the people of Iran. In hindsight, what Iranian civil society accomplished through the Iranian Revolution was unprecedented. Khomeini’s messaging was an instrumental element, but we must not mistake his tactful leveraging of a population movement. It was not just Khomeini but the entire Iranian people who inscribed an example not just in the Shi’a community but in the entire Muslim world. Fr. Clohessy explains that “in a sense, Iran is the model Shi’a country; it’s what every Shi’a country would want to be, that is, it’s a theocracy” (pers. comm., 2025).

Adding to its uniqueness and mystery, Khomeini assured, as he setup the new regime, that the Iranian constitution was basically the Qur’an. To facilitate adherence to that constitution, he made the ultimate power reside in the clerical class. Per Fr. Clohessy, this was a “very new idea” brought in by Ayatollah Khomeini and although successful, it

was not initially well received by his fellow Shi'a clerics, more the reason that the successful implementation of the regime caught the world by surprise.

The U.S. Hostage Crisis and Foreign Policy Shifts

It is interesting that today most people associate the Iranian Revolution with the immediate siege of the U.S. Embassy. But while the Embassy was stormed on February 14, 1979, the infamous hostage situation did not unfold until nearly nine months later, on November 4, 1979.

During that interim, while the U.S. was hopeful that it might be able to instill normal relations with the new regime, many notable events were being decided in a multi-referendum vote: on becoming an Islamic Republic, on formation of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC), on the formation of the Assembly of Experts, and on the installation of a new constitution, notably centered on religious authority as the underlying guiding principle to the new government of Iran. But because the undercurrents of these events were largely not understood, President Carter made the decision to allow the sickly Shah to enter the U.S. for medical treatment of his cancer. Incorrectly reading the sentiments on the ground in Tehran, the U.S. was deluded into a cautious optimism. However, as tensions rose, students involved in a protest stormed the U.S. Embassy, taking 66 diplomats hostage on November 4, 1979—a move that was ultimately endorsed by Khomeini, and lasted 444 days (Murray, 2010, pp. 29–30).

Much in line with previous shortsightedness, the U.S. failed to associate the multiple planes of symbolism. November 4 marked the anniversary of Khomeini's exile, as well as deadly clashes just one year prior between the U.S.-trained army and Iran

revolutionary forces (Murray, 2010, p. 30). The symbolism of a U.S. embassy operating amid a revolutionary Iran was unbearable to the Iranian people, who were increasingly convinced that the U.S. was at fault for their pain and suffering, for the deaths of Iranians which they had experienced under the hand of the Shah, for the control that had been exerted over the nation, and for Iran's restrictive position on the global stage versus where they *could* or *should* be.

The hostage crisis marked a start to a trend in which the U.S. and other Western powers continue to misjudge the resolve of the newly revolutionary government and its ability to prove resilient despite Western pressures. It also marks a time when other powers, such as the Vatican, are tasked to "communicate a dialogue" that the Iranians will respect and understand. I believe it marked a turning point in the relationship between Iran and the Vatican, witnessed by the strong investment that the new government of Iran promptly made in Rome with the Holy See. Murray (2010) describes the U.S. position during this time as

dealing with a regime of uncertain composition, characterized by a pungent anti-American thrust they did not adequately appreciate, which had made clear its lack of interest in what it regarded as western-dictated international law. (p. 32)

Further, Murray highlights that President Carter's aide, Hamilton Jordan, a close party in the developing relationship with Iran, reflected in his January 1980 diary: "All I understood about Iran . . . was that we didn't understand that country and its people. How in the world do you negotiate under those circumstances?" (p. 32).

In Maleki and Tirman's *U.S.-Iran Misperceptions* (2014), Steven Miller and Matthew Bunn describe the hostage crisis as the "defining moment" of the relationship

with Tehran, which produced “an abiding antipathy for Iran” (p.58). They cite Kenneth Pollack, who has written extensively on the matter, and conclude that it is

none other than the hostage crisis that set the stage for American officials considering Iran to be one of the greatest threats to American interests on the planet, and that all subsequent actions by Iran have been interpreted in light of it. (Maleki & Tirman, 2014, p. 58)

How the Hostage Dialogue Ensued

This sets appropriately sets the stage to pivot to how the dialogue between the U.S. and Iran ensued during the hostage crisis, both relative to the hostages and other topics of interest. To begin, I evaluated three specific dossiers from the digital archives of the Foreign Office Files for the Middle East, located in The National Archives in London. The first is a telegram sent May 21, 1979, between Washington, Paris, and the Vatican, regarding the Iranian Jewish community. Its first line explains that “the Prime Minister has received a request from President Carter to join in making urgent private representations to Iranian authorities to help assure the safety of Iranian Jews” (National Archives, 1979c, p. 31).

The telegram stated that post-Revolution, there was reason to believe that prominent Jews were being arrested and tried, and that President Carter was given assurances by Khomeini, Prime Minister Bazargan, and others that the “rights and freedoms of the Jewish community would be protected” and that “similar approaches have been made by the President to President Giscard [of France] and the Pope” (National Archives, 1979c, p. 31). The telegram concluded with a request to not disclose President Carter’s “approach” but to enquire what the French may have in mind on the

“score of the Jews” as well as ask “Could the Vatican make similar enquiries?” (National Archives, 1979c, p. 32).

Very early on, we see the U.S. asking, passively and through other Western partners like the French, if the French diplomats could reach out on behalf of the U.S. to Vatican officials to determine if they could move the needle on the Iranian position regarding persecution of the Jewish people post-Revolution.

Note that this event is pre-hostage crisis but post-Revolution. It is a salient example of what I have suggested was already formulating well before the Revolution—that is, a complete lack of understanding of the factors motivating the Iranian people and the regime.

In this light, there is a disconnect in communications that cannot be solved diplomatically. While France and the U.K. are likely allies to assist in brokering a conversation, it is of particular interest that the Pope is called on. It is logical that the Pope be employed as an advocate of religious freedom, but we must recall that during this time, the U.S. largely had a nonexistent diplomatic relationship with the Vatican, after multiple presidents sought to distance themselves from religious affiliations that might bleed into politics.

The next dossier brings us up to the time of the hostage crisis and is in the same archive titled “Political Relations Between Iran and the United States” (National Archives, 1979a,b,c). This compilation focuses on the seizure of the American Embassy in Tehran. Particularly interesting is the fact that in this archival dossier of 193 pages labeled “SECRET”, it was found pertinent to include a full-page clipping [original scan] from *The New York Times* of November 18, 1979—approximately 10 months after the

Islamic Revolution. It was titled, “Ayatollah Khomeini Defines His Stance in Respect to Embassy Occupation.” It was astonishing that at that time an American newspaper of national prominence and respect was willing to publish a full-page article that appeared to be written by Ayatollah Khomeini.

Equally astonishing was the following introduction:

Pope John Paul II sent an envoy to Ayatollah Khomeini to discuss the situation at the American Embassy in Tehran. Ayatollah Khomeini welcomed him as a religious man and took the opportunity to explain the position of the Moslem people of Iran. Ayatollah Khomeini’s statement has been only briefly and very selectively referred to by the media. Therefore, we print his message here for his intended audience, the people of the United States of America. (National Archives, 1979b, Folder 5, p. 97)

If we consider this newspaper article in the context of the post-9/11 years (which I will discuss shortly), I call attention to the fact that such a platform, were it published after those attacks, would have been very unlikely to be extended to anyone in Iran, except an opposition leader. The fact that the *New York Times* saw fit in 1979 to publish this statement speaks to a different type of media and a confidence that the newly formed Islamic Republic of Iran—despite the occupation of the embassy and subsequent hostage situation—was not long for this world, much less as a global contender.

While the Vatican was not at this early stage directly involved in establishing post-revolution Iran’s legitimacy, Iran essentially and partially used the Vatican to legitimize itself. It is my belief that Khomeini was showing the world that “this is my counterpart”; he is saying “the Pope is my equal and my people see me in the same capacity as the Catholic (and even the Christian) world views the Pope.” Events over subsequent years confirm that the Vatican accepted this legitimacy, religious equality, and thus established the Iranian state’s theocracy as an equal to their own.

At this point, to say there is a strong formalized relationship between post-Revolution Iran and the Vatican would be inaccurate, as formal relations continued to grow and evolve in the ensuing years. Of interest, however, is the foundation being set for the relationship, and what it means to Western powers like the U.S., which were undergoing a shift and reduction in diplomatic relations with Iran. At the point of the hostage takeover of the U.S. Embassy, Iran officially encouraged a narrative of the U.S. as the “Great Satan,” while the U.S. is myopically engulfed by Iran’s “death to America” rhetoric.

Amid this full-scale erosion of trust comes a third party with whom both sides are willing to engage peacefully and respectfully. This is important, as it marks the start of the U.S. delegitimizing the new regime of Iran. As mentioned earlier, a key component of what the Iranian people desire is acknowledgement and respect. In the absence of U.S. willingness to afford that to the new regime, the inclination of the Vatican and the figurehead of the Pope to bestow that acknowledgement afforded legitimacy to the new Islamic Republic of Iran. This concept of respect and legitimacy, of an equal seat at the global table, cannot be overstated as something Iran yearns for. Denying that, as the U.S. began to do there, only compounded Iranian skepticism of American interests and fueled the hatred and conviction of the Iranian people that America had always had their own interests in mind and never that of the Iranian people.

Further evaluation of *The New York Time’s* printing of Khomeini’s position supports this theory. Khomeini started the full-page, nearly impossible to read, small-print announcement with a first line that highlights his respect for Catholics, which he does not share for the United States:

At this critical juncture I would not have received anyone who merely wanted to see me for this purpose (entry of students into the U.S. “Embassy”). But I agreed to this meeting due to our respect for Christian clerics and the Pope. (National Archives, 1979b, Folder 5, p. 97)

Khomeini suggested that the Western world should have some respect for his position of authority. As mentioned, his tactic was simple: he drew parallels between himself and an admired global figure, i.e., the Pope. First, Khomeini chose to address the plight of his people, so he set the stage for his reader. He wrote:

The 35 million people of this country who have for many years suffered under the weight of American imperialism and more recently under special pressure by Carter, along with the millions of impoverished masses throughout the world, have long expected some form of consolation from the Pope. (National Archives, 1979a, Folder 3, p. 97)

This text is important, as the reader may have expected Khomeini to attack President Carter. Instead he segued to his equal, the Pope. It is almost as if he were suggesting that President Carter was not of the caliber that Khomeini considered himself to be, thus he dismissed him. Then he used this opportunity to elicit a sense of guilt, and prey upon the conscience of the Pope and all of his Catholic followers. He did this by expressing that his suffering people “expected a paternal gesture of soothing from the Pope, and were hopeful that the Pope would in the least inquire about the condition of these deprived masses” (National Archives, 1979a, Folder 3, p. 97). Khomeini challenged His Holiness when he stated that he “should have warned the oppressors against all acts of injustice” and that the Iranian people “counted on him as a figure who would mediate between the impoverished nations and the superpowers who claim to be Christians” (National Archives, 1979a, Folder 3, p. 97). As if not profound enough to draw such accusations, he made one last emotional jab with his final remark, that “alas the cries of

the impoverished masses always fell on deaf ears” (National Archives 1979a, Folder 3, p. 97).

Khomeini, in a brief paragraph, has found the Achilles heel of those who, prior, had little means to relate to Iran. We should not discount the significance of having our sense of morals impugned, as Khomeini has employed this method to force undeniable accountability on behalf of the world that has chosen to ignore the hardships imparted on the Iranian people over the previous five decades he describes under Western oppression when people were massacred in masses, imprisoned, and tortured inhumanely. During those 50 years, Khomeini pleaded to the world profoundly, but

never did it occur to the great Pope to defend the rights of the impoverished people . . . never did it occur to him to act as a mediator so that this nation of impoverished masses could be left alone. (National Archives, 1979a, Folder 3, p. 97).

I contend that upon deeper examination of the full message, one will realize that Ayatollah Khomeini, despite feeling that the Pope had turned a blind eye, is extending an olive branch. It is my opinion that he was opening the door to not just any new relationship but a strategic relationship in which he could turn back against President Carter. The genius of this message is that Khomeini is using a U.S. public forum, the forum of his greatest oppressor and propagator of colonialism, to “call out” the Pope in a way that the Pope cannot deny.

Khomeini continues further:

In light of these facts, what would the Pope’s judgment be? I would like to request the Pope to contact Carter who has appealed to him, and to fully analyze these problems. Will the Pope really find that all the oppression imposed on us, all these massacres, and all the wealth taken away from these impoverished people . . . are justified?” (National Archives, 1979a, Folder 3, p. 97)

Khomeini knew that the Pope, a morally guided man of God, surely could not agree with these travesties in such a public forum and justify the position. As if these words were not enough, Khomeini seemingly desired to strike deep at the heart of the papacy by saying:

Were Jesus living today he would have rescued us from the claws of this enemy of the people. You are his representative and in your capacity, we expect you to do what Jesus Christ would have done had he been living today. (National Archives, 1979a, Folder 3, p. 97)

From this point forward, I will show how the interreligious dialogue between Iran and the Vatican improved. Khomeini's article marks a change of tides in the relationship, first between Pope John Paul II and Ayatollah Khomeini, and subsequently, between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Vatican.

Just one month following the release of this article, news broke that a papal envoy held Christmas services for captives in Iran. In this case, the Papal Nuncio, Monsignor Annibale Bugnini, was serving as an official ecclesiastical diplomat of the Holy See. Ironically, the *Times* also is credited again for making the announcement. The narrative of this previous message changed from what I would classify as the *New York Times* writings of skepticism and opposition to Iran during the initial capture of the American hostages to something quite drastically opposite. This article is conveyed in a positive light and yields a mutually beneficial narrative for Iran and the Vatican.

The press is responsible for following the facts, and hopefully in the facts lies the truth, but the press can also guide the reader with their choice of words. This article is a case in point: positive with statements like "morale was very high, really," as expressed directly by the Nuncio himself (Kifner, 1979). It is also particularly interesting to see that while the title of the article does not convey much, and its length is equally under-

whelming, the subsequent page displays large pictures of plentiful and elaborate foods being served and of congregating attendees seeming to enjoy the holiday. I believe the underlying message here to the American people, as supported by the Vatican and Tehran, is that the Iranian government was keeping these hostages not only live, but also healthy and treated well. This was a stark difference from the treatment the United States had inflicted on the Iranians for decades, and I believe was a very deliberate message being sent, now bolstered by the companionship of the official of the Holy See.

Perhaps the most important additional development is that this is relative to the stance of the U.S. government. In all of one and a half paragraphs, *Times* mentions that the U.S. officially declined to comment, but unofficially commented that this was “obviously not a complete picture” (Kifner, 1979). This small but powerful message indicates a turning of the tide in how the U.S. perceived the Vatican.

The American hostages went on to be released 444 days after their initial capture at the Embassy. I do not mean to insinuate that it was the Vatican that the U.S. called on to end the crisis; that is not what this event or the preceding argument indicates. Instead, I would submit that it indicates a missed opportunity (likely realized) on the part of the U.S., and that becomes apparent in the actions the U.S. takes to increase Vatican diplomacy (officially recognizing it and instilling diplomatic ties), as well as the requests it makes of that diplomacy in the coming decades, which were marked with substantial milestones that overlapped both parties (e.g., the Iran–Iraq War, 9/11, Arab Spring).

The hostage crisis was long and drawn-out, which proved quite embarrassing for the Carter administration. Ultimately, it took the Algiers Accords (which I discuss more thoroughly in the next chapter), to bring the hostages home and usher in the start of a new

U.S. administration under President Ronald Reagan. It is possible that the U.S. began to realize the dimension of a religious bond and transcendental relationship that the new Iranian regime could develop with the Vatican. This deeper potential was something the U.S. did not have, which ultimately meant the U.S. would risk being disadvantaged in its ability to leverage and call on the Vatican for assistance or mediation.

Relative to Iran, this balance shift could impact the evolving stance toward Iran, regionally and globally, as well as international sentiments toward the new Islamic Republic. The reader should keep this in mind as I further build upon the developing relationship between the Vatican and Iran, in addition to the parallel efforts that the U.S. requested the Vatican to engage in on their behalf. I contend that from this point, the U.S.–Vatican relationship transpired from that of wishful puppeteering, to that of necessary engagement with the hope of driving containment and encouraging stability in the Middle East and the Iranian state. I will show this evolution consequently through sources analyzed from the decades following the Iranian Revolution.

Chapter IV.

The Iran–Iraq War

A new regime's worst nightmare is essentially the scenario that unfolded for Iran shortly after the 1979 Revolution, including a full 12 months of changes: from revolution, to a fleeing Shah, to the return of a triumphant religious (now political) leader, Ayatollah Khomeini; formation of a new government through referendum; then the raid on the U.S. Embassy, creating a hostage crisis that captivated the entire world. And still within the year—the creation of a new Iranian constitution.

How would the Iranian people deal with it all? Iran was evolving within its borders, but the impacts of its revolution were felt across the globe. The idea of rejecting the status quo of imperialism, or either Western or Soviet Eastern dominance, painted the Revolution as an alternative beacon largely supporting the third-world movement. Not only did this concern prominent powers because it excited many of the underdog countries, but it rattled Middle Eastern neighbors that feared Iran could try to export their revolution to those nearby.

Iraq's Invasion of Iran

Yet again, global oil dependency continued to be centered in the Middle East. At this time, Iraq was a key exporter of oil, which affected not just the U.S. but the entire globe. Coupled with this, an ambitious new Iraqi president, Saddam Hussein, began to generate fears that political disruption could significantly impact the West.

Thus, in hopes of achieving a “first mover” advantage, Iraq chose to exploit the infancy of the Islamic Republic of Iran with a proactive invasion into Iran in September 1980. Given not just the need for oil itself but to ensure that global markets remained stable, the U.S. ultimately had no choice other than to back Saddam Hussein.

Iran’s Perspective

This may have been the ultimate breaking point for Iran’s position toward the U.S. inasmuch as “for Iranians, it was U.S. support for Saddam Hussein’s war against Iran, launched on September 22, 1980, that reinforced the Iranian belief in unremitting American hostility” (Maleki & Tirman, 2014, p. 58). Miller and Bunn sum it up:

The Iran–Iraq War dominated the first decade of the Islamic Republic’s existence and killed hundreds of thousands of Iranians; this was one of the formative experiences of the newly born regime and it contributed to an enduring fear in Tehran that the United States desire[d] the destruction of the Islamic Republic. (Maleki & Tirman, 2014, p. 58)

The next eight years represented a most trying time for the newly formed, tenuous theocracy of Iran. Most new governments, even those of democratic foundation, would have been put to the test. Only four months into the eight-year war, the Iranians released all the remaining U.S. hostages, and the Algiers Accords were executed, which sought to lift sanctions and unfreeze certain Iranian assets.

Just four months later, a somewhat overlooked event, yet significant gesture occurred in Rome. *The New York Times* reported on May 17, 1981: “The Vatican Gets First Ambassador from the Islamic Republic of Iran” (UPI, 1981). The fact that Iran, a newly formed theocratic Islamic republic, in the midst of massive turmoil, saw fit to appoint a senior Islamic scholar to the Vatican is, I believe, a significant historical event. It is a turning point in that relationship, a step forward, and furthers my argument that

these events underpinned the foundation of an enduring, mutual respect. Furthermore, the appointee, Hojatolislam Seyed Hadi Khosroshahi, was a scholar trusted by Ayatollah Khomeini (UPI, 1981).

This gesture should not be construed as something it is not. The Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) and the Vatican were probably not immediately intending to shape global policy from behind the scenes in Rome. But we can reasonably conclude that this was determined in good faith and was seen as a significant investment in an ally whom they should prioritize. I will elaborate on this point as well as the case of the U.S. assigning an Ambassador to the Vatican.

However, we should consider the conditions for assignment. Ambassadors are not assigned by countries unless the local relationship can provide consistent value in the diplomacy and relations either between the two countries or with allies in whom that country has a material interest (protection of citizens, economics, security, etc.). The assignment of an ambassador also increases power, confirms value, respect for position, and broadly shows an appreciation for the relationship. These are basic motives, whether out of necessity or genuine friendship.

The war itself may have been fought on Iranian and Iraqi territory, but the transformation that these eight years of turmoil brought to both sides has had incalculable impacts on the world ever since. Kayhan Barzegar is Director of the Institute for Middle East Strategic Studies in Tehran and has been a visiting scholar at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government and at MIT. His writings in Maleki and Tirman's seminal text, *U.S.-Iran Misperceptions* (2014), concisely describe the idea of reciprocal containment which unfolded during this time. Barzegar writes:

Although the war was ignited because of the adventurous and opportunist policies of Saddam's Ba'athist regime, the real battle was between Iran and the world powers—or, one can say, between Iran and the dominant forces in the international system, of which the United States stood on top. (p. 93)

Surely, the underlying need to ensure stability in oil supply was vital, but the core mission evolved, as the Iranian regime did not simply fade away as many had hoped. Instead, the directive of the war became very simple: block Iran's victory and ensure that its regional role did not extend beyond Iran's borders.

This normalized, although somewhat hypocritical stance of the major global powers (the U.S., Soviet Union, Great Britain, France—all of which at some point supported Hussein in the war) was transparent to the Iranians. It showcased that the support of their regime by these nations was based on convenience, not belief in the regime, alignment to policies, or their adherence to democratic and moral principles—all of which were elements on which both Iran and Iraq were at odds with global powers. Instead, the Iranians saw through this war, that support had the ability to turn a blind eye to dissimilar political parties and opposing ideologies when it was convenient or, politically speaking, stood to advance strategic security.

As Barzegar continues, these strategic actions are what “institutionalize[d] the sense of a U.S. threat towards Iran” (Maleki & Tirman, 2014, p. 94). It was no longer a perceived initiative spread in narratives among the masses. Instead, it became proven, confirmed through the support of Saddam and the desire to control Iran's ideological and geopolitical interests.

U.S. Perspective

While the preceding presents an Iranian perspective, it is important to briefly analyze the development of this conflict from a U.S. perspective. The Reagan administration was just getting its footing as it assumed the White House following the Carter administration. The Iran–Iraq War was well underway in the background, which forced on the new administration the need to deal with Iran. Murray quotes Admiral J. Crowe, later President Reagan’s Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff:

[There was] no coherent approach to the Iran-Iraq War, beyond a devout hope that it would go away, Rarely has there been a conflict of such potential importance to American interests where American leverage was so limited. (quoted in Murray, 2010, p. 42)

This confirmed that the U.S. largely was caught off guard by the success of the IRI, which left only limited options for the U.S. and little to no strategy. It also explains U.S. willingness to cozy up to the Ba’athist regime of Iraq—something that would haunt the U.S. for decades to come. Murray highlights when the “Iraqi tilt” as she terms it, occurred:

By 1982, the worm appeared to have turned. To the surprise of participants and observers alike, Iran had proved to be a tougher-than-expected prey and proceeded to confound conventional wisdom by unleashing a formidable onslaught against its erstwhile foe. It also appeared to be warming up to the Soviet Union, announcing, at the beginning of the year, that relations were “friendly” and “profitable.” The transformation of Iran’s fortunes externally and on the domestic front (because of the consolidation of clerical power) suddenly appeared to threaten the stability of the Persian Gulf states. The upshot of this, one commentator noted, was “a situation potentially more dangerous to Western interests than the unresolved Arab–Israeli conflict. (2010, p. 43)

With the Soviet Union having had a hand on both sides of the conflict through their supply of arms to both Iran and Iraq, the U.S. had to support one side in order to thwart any Soviet advances. While the U.S. did not want to see Iran claim victory in the war, they especially did not want to see the Soviets achieve an enhanced geopolitical

position through a stronger Iran. Again, the Americans had little choice but to support Iraq, regardless of how unsavory the regime proved to be. If they wanted to stave off Soviet advances, limit turmoil among existing conflicts in the Levant, and quell Persian Gulf state fears of a stronger Iran, then supporting Iraq was a necessary evil.

But despite backing Iraq, the U.S. was unprepared for Khomeini's reach within the region in the form of Tehran-backed opposition groups in Lebanon, Bahrain, and Yemen, which gave extended influence to Iran and made the once-trusted adversary a significant risk. Most distasteful for the U.S. was how quickly "Iran could hurt the US as much as it had previously helped" (Murray, 2010, p. 44). Having just been listed a sponsor of terrorism in 1979, Iraq was delisted in 1982, shortly before Iran was listed as a new exporter of terrorism in 1984.

Iran and the Vatican's New Relationship

After the installation of a new Iranian ambassador to the Vatican in May 1981, and amid a developing war, there was little diplomacy that I would consider to be "transformational." Importantly, however, there was diplomacy (albeit in the infancy of refined, new-regime relations; note that prerevolutionary relations dated back to 1954). I believe the most relevant element of relations during these straining years of war was that the religiously rooted respect for one another provided a platform for criticism, just as much as it allowed for progressive dialogue.

Khomeini, early on, was critical of the Pope, as I showed during the Revolution and the subsequent hostage crisis. But timing and context are important. Let us not forget, Pope John Paul II was new to his role, just as Khomeini was to becoming supreme leader.

Arguably, as a new leader Khomeini was strategically seeking out whoever could be developed into an ally. Those who were well off the table (e.g., President Carter) were not worth dialogue. The feasible few who could relate to Khomeini perhaps on multiple planes were worth “sparring” with. There were numerous public instances following the previously mentioned *New York Times* write-up of Khomeini’s appeal to the Pope, in which he criticized the Pope, or the position, rather than the person. He publicly exclaimed and scolded how a morally guided man could be blind to the oppression and abuses that had occurred for 50 years under both Shahs. But in doing so he acknowledged that the Pope has both the power and moral obligation to do something to protect the innocent.

I contend that Khomeini deliberately chose the figure of the Pope and the Catholic Church since the conviction to act on behalf of the divine transcends that of any other mere mortal political leader. For this reason, I argue that while how the two engage may be confusing when we try to deduce how the relationship brought positive change, the mere act of engaging when others choose not to is most significant. During the revolution, Khomeini, albeit critically, engaged with the Pope in response to his pleas for peace. During the hostage crisis, the Pope sent a special envoy, and even though Khomeini rebuked the Pope’s pleas for release, he again used that time to open dialogue and put forth the invitation to the Pope to foster change.

At the onset of the Iran–Iraq War, the Pope called on Khomeini once again for peace, to use words not weapons, and to protect the interests of eastern Christians who resided in both Iraq and Iran. This was met with a coinciding demonstration at the Vatican Embassy in Tehran in response to concern for treatment of Iranian students

residing in the U.S. Then we see the appointment of the Iranian ambassador to the Vatican shortly after a year into the war. Two years later, in January 1984, we see the first appointment of a U.S. ambassador to the Vatican. In 1985 there is a further invitation from Iran to foster interreligious dialogue between the Vatican and Shi'a religious leaders (Gaetan, 2015). Even family members of Khomeini were engaged in the exchange with Catholic clergy who were welcomed to Tehran.³ This type of dialogue has contributed over time, to yield a formidable platform for what would allow for closer ties and an even heavier demand on peaceful resolution to political opposition and challenges.

The U.S.'s Newest Diplomatic Attachment

It is a stretch to suggest that the U.S. formally sought ties with the Vatican because they were concerned about any furthering of relations between Iran and the Vatican. I suspect that a country arguably of highest geopolitical standing does not concern itself too much with following the example of such a lower-ranking foe like Iran. But timing and context are important.

The U.S. had been adamant for decades that engaging the Vatican in formal diplomatic relations was not only unnecessary but contrary to U.S. politics. Much of this came from deep-rooted anti-Catholic sentiments pervasive since the founding of the nation. But much of the 20th-century disposition came from a political argument that the Vatican did not control a significant sovereign territory following the Papal State's 1870 absorption into the Kingdom of Italy. Control over a sovereign territory denoted control over a significant population. Because there was no control over a significant sovereign

³ Of note: even now this same encouragement of interreligious dialogue prevails, with Fr. Clohessy and PISAI having been welcomed to Tehran to engage in 2024.

territory (Vatican City was considered an insufficient population of influence), the U.S. was adamant in its regard that the pope as merely a religious leader and not a leader of a country. Therefore, he was not a legitimate foreign political leader that should require diplomatic ties. However, this argument failed to account for was the power of the papacy and the Vatican to influence global population *en masse*. Despite acknowledging that a pope did wield such power and influence, the U.S. was conflicted as to whether it was permissible for the U.S. government to liaise officially with a pope.

In my opinion, this is a fundamental problem in a modern democracy's principle of a separate church and state. Many presidents—even John F. Kennedy, a lifelong Roman Catholic—were adamantly against engaging in formal, fully diplomatic relations with the Vatican, seeking instead to assure the American people that they were not able to be influenced by religious authority, regardless of their own beliefs. It is my belief that this central tenet of U.S. democracy hinders understanding and peacefully engagement with non-diplomatic governments. This is especially true of those who, at the core of their government and at the core of their populations, are guided principally and above all by a higher power.

It took 117 years for the U.S. to restore those formal relations. Of course, this required support from multiple entities. First and foremost, the current presidential administration had to demand it. From there, Congress had to approve it, which it had always refused to do. Ultimately, the American people had to support the cause. Finally, under the pressure of the Reagan Administration, the United States officially reestablished diplomatic relations with the Holy See on January 10, 1984, with the appointment of William A. Wilson as ambassador (United States, 2022, para. 1). To this

day, there is political debate as to whether these formal diplomatic relations are permissible under the First Amendment which separates church and state. But again, ambassadors are appointed largely because of the undeniable invaluable significance the relationship can bring to political stability and influence.

I contend that the Iranian relationship did not force the U.S.'s hand. But plausibly, in a time of religious movements and deadlocked divides (e.g., the Israeli–Palestinian crisis as well as the Shi'a–Sunni rift, just to name two in the Middle East, not to mention countless other religiously rooted disputes around the world), a relationship with the Vatican was probably inevitable. It suggests that the U.S. founders may have been shortsighted about the global demand for the divine to be inextricable from the political bodies that are responsible for Earthly order.

A Stalemate

The Iran–Iraq War continued to degrade into a casualty-heavy, civilian event on both sides. Desperate to avoid an Iranian victory, the U.S. and other Western powers turned a blind eye to Iraq's increasing use of chemical weapons in their offensive. This of course, took a heavy toll on both military targets and civilians. The lack of global outrage as this conflict raged on is, to this day, a disappointment to many. Incalculable loss increased when the U.S. “mistakenly” shot down civilian Iran Air Flight 655 in July 1988, resulting in 290 deaths. Given the ever-rising civilian death toll coupled with political pressure in Tehran, at this point “the US may have played a critical role in bringing the bloody Iraq–Iran War to an end by convincing the Iranians that their activities in the Gulf were counter-productive and costly” (Murray, 2010, p. 61).

On August 20, 1988, the war officially concluded after the UN successfully brokered a ceasefire between the two countries. While officially the war was deemed a stalemate, some saw Iraq as more emboldened, while Iran was disappointed in the outcome. More than anyone, Khomeini expressed his disappointment at the abandonment of the mission.

What this stalemate really left was a challenged perception of U.S. strength in the region, and an emboldened, even empowered, Iran and Iraq. Both countries believed that “Reagan displayed a humanitarian impulse that served only to reinforce the perception of weakness” (Murray, 2010, p. 62). Murray described post war Iran as “certainly back on the radar screen but the US was no better prepared now to confront this threat” (2010, p. 62). Later that year a new U.S. president, George H. W. Bush was elected, and he would face, yet again, an unpredictable Iraqi regime.

Closing out the 1980s, Iran suffered more than a political loss. It suffered the loss of their leader, Ayatollah Khomeini, who was immediately succeeded by Ayatollah Khamenei.

Chapter V.

Building Iran's Resilience through the 1990s into the Post-9/11 Years:

Rebalancing the Middle East and a Shift in Vatican Relations

Before turning to the period following the attacks of September 11, 2001, I want to briefly highlight the decade of the 1990s. For Iran these years, despite ups and downs, were largely a period of building resilience.

Building Resilience

Following the conclusion of the Iran–Iraq War, I suggest that the U.S. was equally focused on both Iraq and Iran. However, the continued fear of Iran exporting its revolution still proved to be the paramount concern of the U.S., meaning Iraq was not seen as the greater threat. Thus, the U.S. continued its convenient support of the questionable Hussein regime. Post-war, however, there existed a brief opportunity for relations to improve between the U.S. and Iran. A new religious leader as well as a new moderate Iranian president, meant there was some possibility. But progress was again deterred by a hostage situation.

The point of contention was the release of U.S. hostages held outside of Iran but by Iranian-backed organizations. Thus, the U.S. continued to double down on the Iraq relationship “in hopes of moderating its behavior and offsetting Iranian power” according to then National Security Council Staff Director Richard Haass (2010, Gulf War section, para.1).

The tides severely turned, and the U.S. became far more consumed with Iraq when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait in August 1990. Emphasis was now placed on the coalition powers, led by the U.S., to ensure that Hussein's erratic actions were contained in order to stabilize the entire Middle East, which was a target for Iraq. The new U.S. president, George H. W. Bush, now had to tend to what became known as the Gulf War, while Iran's new Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Khamenei and newly elected President Rafsanjani, needed to ensure stability within Iran's borders. This opened a "rare moment of seeming agreement" for Iran-U.S. relations (Haass, 2010, Gulf War section, para. 3). Haass observed that thanks to the U.S., "Iran's leaders simply waited for the coalition to weaken its primary rival for regional power" (para. 4). Once the Gulf War ended with Iraq expelled from Kuwait, peace was on the horizon, which posed a risk for Iran, since allies like Syria and Lebanon would have been subject to improved Western relations.

Further to the argument that the 1990s were a period of building resilience, Iran saw fit to invest more heavily in revolutionary-minded groups that the U.S. deemed terrorist groups, such as Hamas, Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and Hezbollah, and even more with other Islamists movements in Egypt and Algeria (Haass, 2010, Madrid Peace Conference section, para. 4).

Ultimately, efforts toward further regional peace were foiled, and Iran's strategic investments paid off. Despite the U.S. finally taking a position of opposition to Iraq, Iran-U.S. relations remained largely stagnant throughout the rest of the decade through the double term of U.S. President Bill Clinton and into the close of the decade when George W. Bush assumed the presidency.

And, it should be noted, while the U.S. intensified its sanctions on Iran aimed at stifling the nation's growth and creating economic hardships, Iran learned to be more resilient and self-sustaining than anyone thought possible. Remarkably, throughout this decade, when most world powers turned away from Iran, the Vatican and Iran maintained friendly, positive relations, still underpinned by common themes, and during this time some notable collaborations and events occurred.

In the mid-1990s, "the Vatican and Iran formed the core of what was dubbed at the time an "unholy alliance," effectively blocking proposals during UN-sponsored conferences in Cairo and Beijing to install abortion as a new "right" under international law" (Allen, 2024, para. 15). There was continued participation in interfaith dialogue, as mentioned, designed to protect the religious freedoms of each party's adherents, especially those of eastern Christians.

Pope John Paul II invested heavily in this relationship when he met with Iranian President Mohammad Khatami in March 1999 at the Vatican during a state visit. The visit between these two powers is a significant turning point, not merely symbolic. The U.S. would have had strong feelings regarding the event, since it marked the first time a Western leader of this level met with a post-Revolution leader from the Islamic State. Given the political climate, the U.S. would likely have preferred that the most recognizable religious leader on the planet not give a warm welcome and global platform to a leader from what they considered to be a hostile country.

While together, both leaders engaged in a highly positive exchange, which the Pope called "an important, promising day"; Khatami went so far as to ask for the Pope's prayers stating, "the hope is for the final victory of monotheism, morality, peace and

reconciliation” (CBS News, 1999, para. 5). Most important may be the joint call by Khatami and the Pope for a “dialogue of civilizations.” While the intent was to bring closer ties between Islam and Christianity, the principle is that openness toward the world’s faiths, not political inflections, is the key to collaboration.

With many challenges facing an ever-evolving world, the dot-com boom, and explosive gains in technology, we may assume that the global community was not at all prepared for the events of 2001. These would shape the world for years to come.

The 9/11 Terrorist Attacks and the U.S. War on Terror

Two and a half years later, on September 11, 2001, the U.S. was the target of the deadliest terror attacks in history. Four commercial airlines filled with passengers, were hijacked and repurposed midair as flying bombs. Two made successful impact with the two World Trade Center towers in New York City, a third airplane with the Pentagon in Washington, DC, and the last crash landing in a field in Pennsylvania thanks to the heroic actions of the passengers on board. Nearly 3,000 people perished in this tragic event, undertaken at the hands of 19 al-Qaeda hijackers. Here I focus on the period following the 9/11 terrorist attacks and its aftermath.

The U.S. Perspective

The U.S., more than any other nation, became hyperfixated on combating terror. As such, more than ever, information has been kept secret in order to secure the homeland, which means the availability of information began to diminish. Instead of

attempting to cobble information that the U.S. government believes is suitable for release, it is easier to focus on what is known.

Unarguably, the U.S. entered a period immediately following 9/11 in which it needed to effect as much stability in the Middle East as possible. This was not a change from its past stance, but in the wake of such a monumental terrorist attack, pressure from the American people to stabilize the region through an offensive posture rose to its peak. But for the U.S. stability is not always in the normal meaning of the word. When a country like Iran stabilizes, it produces regional power. I have covered this at length; the U.S. and other Western powers have always feared Iranian strength and that fear exponentially increased post-Revolution. Candidly, any regional hegemony is dreaded by the U.S. if it lies with an actor with whom the U.S. disagrees or lacks significant means to control.

Saudi Arabia is a perfect example. It has endless financial means but significantly less power without the U.S. than it has with them. The same is true of many other Gulf States, as well as European and South American allies.

However, at the time of 9/11, the Islamic Republic of Iran had now survived 22 years since the revolution. It had proven capable of stabilizing its government, held elections, survived a nearly eight-year war with Iraq, and managed to continue despite significant sanctions imposed by the U.S.

My objective in this thesis is to establish the credibility and stability of a country that has been an island since 1979. It is the continued miscalculation of the effect of sanctions, the misunderstanding of cultural sensitivities, the incomprehension of the strength of the nation's religion, and the countless missed opportunities to align—all of

which inadvertently strengthened Iran by continuing to build its resilience even as the rest of the world saw what it interpreted to be instability to the brink of collapse.

Simply put, this is where the reader should begin to see the clarity of the picture intensify as to where the West (in effect the U.S.) errs continuously, administration after administration, international event after event. The U.S. political posture toward Iran appears to be a secondary element to the underlying disposition that has existed since the revolution. This is perhaps a backward approach to understanding, but this lack of understanding, and forced isolationism, actually bolsters Iranian strength and drives its incomprehensible resilience.

This same condition opens a gap as it relates to alliances. And here again comes my argument that the Vatican continues to fill a diplomatic void that exists with the democratic West. It is a political vacuum that enables the space to be filled by a spiritual occupant such as the pope and other official channels of Vatican diplomacy.

All of this to say: this is a period as charged as that immediately following 9/11, when the whole world (albeit erroneously) generalizes that the entire Muslim world is a potential harbor of terrorists, and that the U.S. critically has missed opportunities to stabilize one of the largest powers in the Middle East.

While I have framed my research in the post-9/11 years, I want to briefly call attention to BBC Monitoring Middle East, which acquired an article from an IRNA news agency in Tehran just six months prior to the attacks of 9/11.⁴ While the subject matter of the article is not entirely relevant, the context is very important. In Tehran, the Vatican's foreign minister, Jean-Louis Tauran, officially praised existing friendly relations between

⁴ *BBC Monitoring* allows international news that they deem valid and pertinent, to be captured, translated, and disseminated.

Armenians and Muslims in Tehran (“Iran: Visiting Vatican Minister,” 2001). Following 9/11, the West began a much harsher narrative of the oppression of Christian minorities in Iran and other neighboring regions. But this disposition immediately prior to the attacks strengthens in the years following the attacks. Turan was the highest-ranking Holy See official to visit Iran since the revolution. Furthermore, during this time he met with his Iranian counterpart, Kamal Kharrazi, to discuss bilateral relations and the Middle East crisis; also with Iran’s Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei and President Mohammad Khatami. Religiously and politically, this red-carpet reception furthers my position that not only have ties remained strong, but they were in fact strong leading into the new era post-9/11 when Western rhetoric intensified.

In the immediate wake of the 9/11 attacks, yet another opportunity emerged to mend relations between the U.S. and Iran, which in parallel would have brought about a peace that was desired most certainly by the Vatican. Barbara Slavin (2021) of the Atlantic Council and previous director of the Future of Iran Initiative, as well as lecturer in international affairs at George Washington University, published an article two decades later describing how the “global war on terrorism” wrecked relations with Iran. She wrote:

The most fundamental strategic error of the George W. Bush administration following the September 11, 2001, attacks was launching a “Global War on Terrorism” that failed to distinguish properly between those responsible for the 9/11 attacks and other US adversaries (para. 1).

Understandably, a grieving U.S. may not recall all the outreach received from other countries, but in fact “Iranians showed sympathy to the United States after 9/11, holding candlelight vigils on the streets of Tehran” (para. 2). This is quite a juxtaposition for a country that had painted the U.S. for years as the “Great Satan,” still held strong

resentment for the downing of an Iranian Air flight 13 years prior, and even counted many citizens who remembered the failed and later successful coups of the 1950s. The point is, progress had been made—not entirely through a budding relationship with the Catholic Church but plausibly a more progressive and open Iran, guided by religious morals, who saw the wrong in what had occurred. And again remember, in the scheme of the Muslim religion, the Shi’a branch is the far more liberal sect than Sunnism.

In the context of the 9/11 attacks, more importantly, I would submit that Iran was able to relate to what had happened. Iranians knew all too well the suffering that the U.S. was enduring. The U.S., similar to Iran but through different means, had found themselves on a barren island in the global arena. A cloud of vulnerability had descended on them just as it had for years on Iran.

More significant than candlelight vigils was the cooperation that occurred as the U.S. mobilized its offensive. Much like the alignment that existed between Iran and the U.S. once the U.S. position toward Iraq shifted from friend to foe in Operation Desert Storm, “the Iranian government cooperated indirectly with the U.S. military to topple the Taliban regime in Afghanistan and worked openly with the State Department to stabilize a new government in Kabul” (Slavin, 2021, para. 2).

Also, let us not forget that because the Taliban was a mutual enemy, Iran was able to align pragmatically with the U.S. to support their removal given their longstanding disdain toward the Shi’a. Some political analysts have argued that without Iranian cooperation, the U.S. objectives and outcomes in Afghanistan and later Iraq could have looked much different.

The Iranian Perspective

For transparency, I will present the narrative from the Iranian point of view.

Iranian citizens largely rallied behind the U.S. during this time of need, and the people of Iran gave their sympathies. Iran President Khatami, remarked outwardly to the world, during an unprecedented interview with CNN's Christiane Amanpour (2001):

I express my deepest condolences to the nation of America, and express my sorrow for the tragic event of September 11. What occurred was a disaster. . . .

What has saddened us more is that the machine of war and terror did not stop in the year 2001, which was designated as the year for the dialogue among civilizations. The September 11 attack was the ugliest form of terrorism ever seen. (paras. 3, 4)

This was a nod to the ongoing dialogue between the Catholic Church and Iran, rather than what existed between Iran and the U.S.

Ayatollah Khamenei, while seemingly sympathetic, was less gracious. He remarked openly that these types of events, although tragic, were largely self-inflicted, given the U.S. meddling in foreign affairs and postures toward exporting democracy. He did provide other, more sensitive, comments that should not be overlooked.

In a House hearing before the Subcommittee on National Security and Foreign Affairs in November 2007, Hillary Mann Leverett, CEO of Stratega, a political-risk consulting firm, and lecturer at American University, remarked:

Khamenei took the extraordinary step of unequivocally condemning al Qaeda and its attack on the United States in a Friday prayer sermon that was broadcast to tens of millions of Iranians and Shiite followers throughout the Middle East. . . .

Iran was prepared to offer unconditional cooperation to the United States . . . and did not ask the United States for anything up front in return for its cooperation with Afghanistan. (Leverett, 2007, p. 19)

Here all three categories of Iranian culture—political, civilian, and spiritual—aligned in their support of opposition to these egregious acts.

In line with the notion that Iran wanted “progress” in the wake of these events, President Khatami engaged a trusted relationship the following month. As reported by the *Washington Post*, “In October 2001, shortly after the Sept. 11, 2001, terrorist attacks in the United States, Khatami telephoned John Paul and told him that the ‘massacres’ showed that there was a need for ‘collaboration between Islam and Christianity to save humans and establish a real peace in the world’” (Taylor, 2016, para 6.). Underscoring the developing diplomacy, a Western diplomat was quoted in the same article remarking that the Pope and the Iranian president were “people who respect each other” (2017, para. 6).

Ironically, while respect is at the forefront of the Vatican–Iran peace diplomacy, it is (at best) set aside in relations between the U.S. and Iran. In the same month, October 2001, the U.S. launched Operation Enduring Freedom, to oust the Taliban, destroy al-Qaeda, and instill democracy in Afghanistan.

The Effects of a “Global War on Terror” and New Alliances

The effects of the U.S. invasion into Afghanistan and, soon thereafter, Operation Iraqi Freedom which began in March 2003 extend beyond this thesis, but it is important to call out the feeling this created for Iran: of being surrounded by enemies on all sides. Multiple aggressive campaigns on the borders of the Iranian state ensued for nearly 20 years. This unsettled environment set the stage for the continuing position Iran would take in its quest for respect, recognition, and a seat at the power table.

The shot at progress was wiped away during George W. Bush's State of the Union Address in 2002, where he coined the label "Axis of Evil" in which he grouped Iran, Iraq, and also North Korea. As suggested by Barbara Slavin, this was an unfortunate mistake. Possibly it was a lapse in geopolitical judgment, but there was a larger issue: a lack of general knowledge, not only among the American people but also in the political ranks, as to the history and drivers behind Iran. It may be an altered version of the facts, but generally speaking, the Iranian population has a broader and deeper understanding of at least the culture behind the American people than the American people have of Iran. Given this gap, it is less damaging when an American president villainizes a country, its government, and its citizens during a time of need when those whom you are evangelizing lack basic education regarding the other party.

As the U.S. pursued aggressive and destructive military engagements, followed by highly ambitious restructuring of the political structures and elected classes of both Afghanistan and Iraq, Iran lay low. I believe they deliberately chose to evade the U.S. spotlight during the following decade because it would bring undesired attention at a time of regional instability. Even U.S. Secretary of State Mike Pompeo admitted openly that there was no evidence that Iran helped plan or had knowledge of the acts of 9/11. This is not to say, however, that there was not some unofficial, tacit support of al-Qaida (Pompeo, 2021). Rather, I argue they doubled down on the relationships that could make them stronger.

Amid the turmoil in the Middle East, and a worsening situation in the Levant, Pope John Paul II passed away in 2005. Incredibly, President Khatami traveled to Rome, along with other dignitaries from around the world, to attend the funeral and pay respect.

Optics are important. There are few events in history where foreign leaders set aside their aggressive rhetoric and sit beside those with whom they routinely and historically have not agreed. The funeral of a pontiff is just one of these events.

American politics ebb and flow (as do those in Iran), but the arc of the pendulum is far broader for Americans than Iranians. When all mostly share a common theocratic guidebook, a hardliner Iranian president and a more liberal Iranian progressive still believe that above all, *Vilayat-e Faqih* (guardianship of the Islamic jurist) should prevail. American politicians and diplomats have proved they really do not have a guidebook for interfaith dealings despite acknowledging the separation of church and state. Almost every U.S. President, at some point in their candidacy or during their term, is forced to choose between their personal religious beliefs and their political stance to adhere to those beliefs. The point is, throughout history the ruling pontiff often has grievances with the West's "democratic principles" of conflict resolution, as they often opt for a show of power through war and aggression over humility through dialogue and peace. Thus, the optics of an Iranian president being worthy of the honor of attending such a funeral signifies a different path to a "seat at the table" on the global stage.

It is obvious the Church does not advocate for armed conflict over peace, but the levels to which the Vatican was willing to go in conjunction with the Iranians is notable. *JP2 Online* is an official Poland-sponsored archive of documents, audiovisual materials, and texts from Pope John Paul II. The following excerpt best captures the resolve of that pontiff and other advocates, some faith-opposed, others politically opposed, to the continued U.S. forced, unilateral conflict proposed in 2003 against Iraq:

In February 2003, the American Ambassador to the Holy See organized a symposium at the Vatican to convince John Paul II to bless the war in

Iraq. However, no such thing happened; on the contrary, in the pope's eyes, the Americans with their theory of preventive war became "a new danger that threatens peace and which must be reported in the light of the social Christian order.

Instead of endorsing American policy, in February John Paul II undertook an intensive campaign for peace. In three weeks, he met with six politicians or activists, including U.S. allies British Prime Minister Tony Blair and Spain's José Maria Aznar, as well as senior representatives from Iraq and Iran. He also sent representatives to George Bush and Saddam Hussein. Saddam's reaction is unknown, while Bush, according to media reports, put the letter down on his desk without even reading it.

To the very end, John Paul II tried to point out to world public opinion the threat of war in the Middle East. During the Angelus prayer on March 16, 2003, he predicted the extremism that would be spawned by the aggression of Western countries. A day later, Bush issued an ultimatum to Saddam Hussein, and three days later the war officially broke out. (JP2online, 2003, para. 6)

Both Iran and the Vatican found moral common ground in opposition to this war, although this is an example, yet again, where in many ways Iran did not seem to mind the U.S. doing their bidding. Although Iran was skeptical and completely mistrustful of the relationship (or lack thereof) with the U.S., if the U.S. wanted to eliminate the man and government that had recently been responsible for an eight-year war, countless deaths, and oppression of their Shi'a brothers and sisters, so be it. A weaker Iraq was not a bad thing for Iran. What would emerge, however, was the greatest political unknown.

Furthermore, the moral conflict for the Shi'a country was, and still is, a sincere consideration that posed a conflict of interest. For my purpose here, all this means is that nothing is ever black or white. Just as democracy is not the only key to solving world peace, a total focus on religious jurisprudence is not a full equation either. These are just elements in a complex web of human instance.

Most important is: who is aligned the most? Which allies stand the best chance of positive and peaceful outcomes? I contend that this is more so the Iranian and Vatican

relationship. It did not win out in this instance because the U.S. is a superpower that plays by different rules and is willing to throw the moral compass out the window when convenient. It is an immense question of protection of the state over protection of global citizens. The U.S. has increasingly adopted a posture that while humanitarianism is key to a fair democratic hegemony, protection of that sovereign country's citizens comes above all. Given the conflicts of the past two and a half decades, that seemingly disregards consequence to others.

Impacts of the Arab Spring

Given the importance of mentioning how this boiling pot spilled over into the rest of the Middle East and the Arab world, I briefly review the events of the so-called "Arab Spring" in 2010 since their context is relevant to this chapter and to the instability created by U.S. operations in the region. (In the next chapter, I will review the foundation of what brought Iran to the negotiating table under the Obama presidency, which will take us backwards chronologically, but on different subject matter.)

While Iraq and Afghanistan were in various levels of revamp, tensions increased across the entire Arab world, arguably exacerbated by the actions of the past nine years. By December 2010, the phenomena of the Arab Spring were underway, beginning initially in Tunisia. Just as in 1979, citizens of strong beliefs, disappointed in their government, took to the streets (and other means) to bring about change to their way of living. Nearly 31 years had passed since the Iranian Revolution, but this type of forced turn of the political tides was long from forgotten. I call attention to what this meant for the Iranian-U.S. relationship, whether perceived or real.

Former U.S. ambassador to the Holy See, Francis Rooney (2013), refers in his memoirs to the Arab Spring this way:

Soft power is most effective when it reaffirms what people already believe, then provides those people a community and platform to cultivate and exercise their beliefs. . . .

When certain social network sites (such as Facebook) and certain physical locations (such as Tahrir Square) became places where antigovernment protestors convened and organized . . . no international institution, nor any social network, brings people together more effectively than the Catholic Church. (p. 166)

His statements imply that the Catholic Church can be an extremely effective agent of social change, which is something feared by government.

And just as this principle applies to the Catholic Church, it applies to Islam, particularly to the relationship between the Shi'a community and the ruling ayatollah. What Ambassador Rooney is signaling ties into the theme that the masses are controlled by their core beliefs, and religion is better poised to activate those beliefs to drive social change than are political ideologies that ebb and flow over time.

Thus it was imperative that the U.S. determine the best way to capitalize on that ability to mobilize and at least somewhat control the outcomes of these seismic events. Clearly, the hope was that an equally valuable seat at the table could be achieved by the U.S. relative to its diplomatic attachment to the Holy See during the 2000s and 2010s.

On the contrary, in response to the "Islamic Awakening" (the term more commonly used by the Ayatollah), Khamenei outlines the following evidence of the rise of Islam during this period, inspired still by the victory of the Islamic Revolution:

(1) Iran's development, (2) Islamic influence, and (3) Islamic identity. Most notable is his position on Islamic influence, which led to multiple Arab uprisings:

The leaders of global arrogance thought Islam's influence had diminished and become almost negligible, yet it has risen due to the victory of the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the 'Islamic Awakening' all around the world The major indication resulting in the latest developments in the Arab world is the failure of United States dominance Today the capitalist system has reached a complete deadlock. (Maleki & Tirman, 2014, p. 46.)

This sentiment does not need much explanation: Iran walks away from this decade feeling rather emboldened by the changing tides and the perceived failure of the U.S. policy in the Middle East.

A brief news release from the FARS News Agency (an IRGC-controlled agency) on June 9, 2013—12 years after 9/11 and after the events of the Arab Spring had subsided—emphasizes that a recent visit between the newly appointed Iranian Ambassador to the Vatican and Pope Francis yielded outward desire from both sides for the “need to bolster and reinvigorate mutual cooperation between Tehran and Vatican” (“Iran, Vatican Keen,” 2013). Yet again, more than 30 years past the Revolution, Iran still displays all indications of a stable government with stable relations.

To further the Iranian desire for continued bilateral support, the Iranian envoy underscored that “talks between Islam and Christianity provide a proper opportunity to review global problems and work out solutions to the existing problems” (“Iran, Vatican Keen,” 2013). No doubt this is a knock at the ongoing cost of the wars waged by the U.S. and at subsequent climactic Arab uprisings witnessed during the preceding three years.

At this point, there is a clear and obvious trend to consistently put forth religion as “the answer.” I would ask skeptics to reflect on the fact that a recent Gallup International poll reported that 72% of the global population believes in a higher power (Gallup, 2023). Given this majority, is it not at least plausible, regardless whether one supports the logic behind it, to assume that most of the world's population would turn to religious guidance

to mend times of crisis before it would turn to secular government? The ability of religion to solve problems that traditional politics cannot is a key tenet of my entire argument.

Clearly, Western and Iranian means of communicating are strained, and mutual understanding is wholly lacking. Religious motivations, however, speak to what is supranatural, to what politics cannot touch, and to what democracy has trouble conquering.

Chapter VI.

The Nuclear Effect, Obama and the JCPOA, the Trump Presidency:

From Hope to Division

The military engagements of the 2000s that embroiled Iraq and Afghanistan, and ravaged much of the Middle East, had a less lethal yet profound impact on the inflicting body: the United States. George W. Bush was in a challenging position from the start of his presidency. After all, he was in office only 234 days before he was faced with the deadliest terrorist attacks on American soil against the iconic World Trade Centers. Bush, with moral conviction, did what any young president would do: he responded, proportionally, and with force, as he faced a devastated and grieving nation. This manifested in the form of immediately invading Afghanistan.

According to a Gallup article by Brennan (2022), “Shortly after the war began in October 2001, the U.S. public largely supported it, and in early 2002, a record-high 93% of Americans said it was not a mistake to have sent troops to Afghanistan” (para. 3). While this staunch support ebbed and flowed as the war became costly and prolonged, at the time it was simple: the American people demanded action for the aggrieved.

Setting the Stage for Dialogue with a New U.S. Administration

To set the current context, recall that Iraq under the Saddam Hussein regime had over time increasingly exhibited a blatant willingness to break with international rules of engagement, invade sovereign territories, violate human rights, and use unethical force

(e.g., chemical weapons). Thus, in the spirit of a “global war on terror,” it was not long before the U.S. shifted its sight from Afghanistan to Iraq. A corrupt, unpredictable regime that did not play by the rules became ripe for U.S. attention in a post-9/11 world. The notion that Iraq might possess significant reserves of weapons of mass destruction was ultimately the tipping point for concern. Twenty-six months after his inauguration into office, President Bush officially launched the U.S. invasion into Iraq with Operation Iraqi Freedom. Although it was a shorter engagement than the Afghan invasion, the U.S. was now fully entangled in two costly wars.

By the 2008 presidential election, the U.S. was facing an extreme financial crisis, with the U.S. population frustrated with the continued investment and toll that the war on terror was causing on the home front. The effects of 9/11 were far from forgotten, but an overall demand for a shift in policy became apparent. On November 4, 2008, the U.S. elected the Democratic candidate, Barack Obama, with a clear mandate to usher in change and stay away from furthering the policies of George Bush which might have occurred with Republican nominee John McCain. Obama ushered in an era of dialogue and diplomacy that ultimately lead to the JCPOA, a cornerstone achievement not only for the Obama administration’s policies toward Iran but also for his entire two-term presidency. First, however, let us consider the implications that Vatican–Iranian relations had on this position.

A Return to Conservatism: Pope Benedict and President Ahmadinejad

After Iranian President Khatami attended the funeral of Pope John Paul II, diplomatic progress between Iran and the Vatican lessened but was not absent in the

coming years, given new, more traditional heads of state. After John Paul II, the Catholic Church pendulum swung back, electing the far more conservative Pope Benedict in April 2005. Two months later, Iran also made a political volte-face with the election of hard-line conservative President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. The election of these two less progressive, less liberal leaders did not mean a reversal in relations. While rhetoric at times may have been controversial and/or contradictory, the two did share some similarities that may have garnered mutual respect. Needless to say, the genesis of each position is different.

The Foundation of Dialogue

Context is vital to the importance of the Obama presidency and the JCPOA. The work surrounding a negotiated nuclear agreement originated well before 2013 when the JCPOA talks actually began. The U.S., under global pressure to encourage diplomacy rather than further military action, came around to the idea of talks with Iran—if Iran would meet certain conditions. In hindsight, these initial requests were probably farfetched, but given Iran’s desire to lessen sanctions, decrease its isolation, stave off direct invasion, and keep the Middle East stable, these initial talks were a necessary steppingstone to progress. The U.S., in conjunction with the full support of the UN Security Council, formed a coalition comprised of the UK, France, Germany, Russia, and China (hereafter referred to as the P5+1). This coalition was formed in 2006 “following concerns over Iran’s nuclear ambitions after the discovery of secret facilities in 2002” (Sheposh, 2023, para.1).

Some brief points are in order about Iran's nuclear program until this time. In the 1950s, the U.S. was the original facilitator of Iran's nuclear program, extending the technology necessary for civilian energy. The Iranian Revolution took a toll on the progress of the program, but largely the Iran–Iraq War and the mark that it left on Iran, coupled with knowledge of Saddam's desire to pursue weapons of mass destruction (WMDs), led to Iran's pursuit of weaponized nuclear capabilities. Following 9/11, Iran (like Iraq) was said to have been pursuing a nuclear bomb, which was largely substantiated via inspections by the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) which found evidence to support this claim (Sheposh, 2023).

But here is the critical juncture for Iran and the U.S. in 2006. The U.S. found itself politically divided over continuous wars. Iran, on the other hand, was leery of U.S. trustworthiness, yet eager to not be invaded by a country still fraught by grief and fear. The Vatican, despite a new pontificate, had consistently encouraged Iran to seek diplomacy over conflict and opposed its nuclear weapon development. The Vatican had no direct role in the negotiations of the P5+1, but there were relations prior to Obama assuming office and the U.S. adjusting its policy.

Prior to the P5+1 officially extending an olive branch to speak, Ahmadinejad was also in the process of offering up a few of his own: two letters, one to President Bush and one to Pope Benedict. The letter to Bush was sent in early May 2006 and was largely touted as bizarre. Murray, referencing the letter, wrote: "Pundits argued over whether it had been designed to provoke or, in the most inept way, was a gesture intended to initiate a dialogue" and further highlights its "strong religious focus" (2010, p. 136). Although Bush did not respond to the letter, by extension the move by the P5+1 in June 2006 to put

forth a framework of incentives to draw down Iran's enrichment program suggested that dialogue was within reach. However, this glimmer of hope was short-lived. In July 2006, the UN Security Council adopted Resolution 1696, which legally required Iran to suspend enrichment and related activities. Not surprisingly, it was rejected by President Ahmadinejad and the Iranian regime in August (Davenport, 2023), who argued that this same enrichment was needed for production of material required for peaceful nuclear power.

Here is where the timeline takes an interesting turn. On December 23, 2006, the UN Security Council imposed sanctions prompted by Iran's now illegal actions in failing to comply with the July resolution (Davenport, 2023). Interestingly, despite outward differences between Pope Benedict and Ahmadinejad, common underpinnings prevailed when, just four days after the Security Council vote, Ahmadinejad had a letter delivered to the Pope. While the contents of the letter were not released, it was reported to have focused on the vote that approved sanctions against Tehran. But it also focused on the importance of establishing new political and human relations based on the commonalities of world religions (Radio Free Europe 2016, "Iranian President Sends Message"). NBC News (2006), referring to the Vatican following the meeting with the Pope and Iranian officials including the Iranian foreign minister who presented the letter, stated that the Pope

reaffirmed the role that the Holy See intends to carry out for world peace, not as a political authority but as a religious and moral one . . . so that peoples' problems will always be solved in dialogue, mutual understanding and peace. (para. 5)

Ahmadinejad was a controversial and unpredictable character, but he was not unintelligent. While his actions were routinely unjustifiable and extreme, many analysts

and academics contend he knew exactly what he was doing, perhaps even, did not believe the arguments he was making (e.g., denial of the Holocaust), but did so to prove that if a point can be argued, who is the U.S., in all its might and authority, to dismiss the argument? Bear this in mind: The president of a pariah state has just had further sanctions imposed and legitimized through global legislation, then four days later sends representatives to meet with the leader of the Catholic Church, not just to opine on the resolution but to request further interreligious dialogue.

Ahmadinejad's outreach was calculated, and garnered several important checkmarks: (1) as a recently sanctioned country he immediately received a global audience with one of the most respected global authorities; (2) he knows the Vatican has a vested interest in preserving the safety and stability of Christians in Iran, and further sanctions could have impact on them; (3) it is not a far leap to infer that he is suggesting the Vatican may be one of the only authorities capable of having dialogue because commonalities enable it to understand the motivations and needs of Iran, and (4) I believe Ahmadinejad fully knew all his actions would be under special scrutiny immediately following the ruling, to determine what his next steps could be. He did not choose to reach out to one of the United States' most feared adversaries, but instead immediately to a figure highly respected not only by political leadership but by the global populace. Ironically, this outreach came after earlier that year, Pope Benedict had made remarks that were construed as offensive to the Muslim community. Perhaps this shows dialogue over war can heal wounds.

Nuclear talks continued into 2007 and 2008 under the UN Security Council. The U.S. pushed in the background but was removed from direct participation without Iran's

compliance and the administration's hardline but futile stance to try to force Iran to the table.

Meanwhile, the Bush administration was under pressure for its poor approval ratings and frustrations which had now bled into the economy. Ahmadinejad remained resolute in his country's right to pursue a nuclear program in whatever way it saw fit, even amid reports that suggested Iran had put its nuclear weapons program on the back burner. Most construed this as positive, but underneath the politics of the Bush administration, I am not sure they saw it as such. They needed to be right, and to be right would have meant Iran continued to go against international requests to cease development. If they had indeed ceased development back at the invasion of Iraq (recall that the U.S. and Iran even cooperated), then this tells the story of a more tolerable, amenable Iran and a more petulant U.S. Regardless, the Bush administration really just did not know what to do with Iran. In light of that, sanctions were their best bet.

More importantly, the U.S. had shown it did not understand Iran, which Iran certainly knew. Murray (2010) wrote that U.S. official William Burns who later joined the nuclear negotiations with Iran, pointed out that "the US had very little to go on because of its severed ties with Iran" and that Secretary of State Rice "went further and admitted that she could not figure Iran out: 'I think it's a very opaque place and it's a political system I don't understand very well'" (Murray, 2010, p. 137). Murray summarized her feelings thus: "If America's top diplomat and the president's closest adviser did not understand Iran, it was hardly surprising that the administration had struggled to produce a coherent policy" (2010, p. 138). The U.S. wanted to influence the

Middle East, but in doing so it had lost its ability to understand the country George Bush labeled the greatest threat to America.

Each round of unsuccessful compliance with the Council's demands brought about more and broader sanctions against Iran, despite small bits of progress along the way. I believe military escalation was unlikely unless Iran did something drastic, given that the hands of the U.S. were tied and knowledge was at a low. But Iran is certainly more paranoid than I am in their threat assessment, and rightfully so.

Before pushing into the new era of talks under the Obama administration, I call attention to a *TIME* magazine article of late November 2007, titled "Iran's Secret Weapon: The Pope." This came out shortly after there were three rounds of talks with the UN Security Council, the IAEA, and Iran, in which they did "agree on a 'work plan' for Iran to answer long-standing questions about their nuclear activities" (Davenport, 2023). The *Time* article reported that at this time,

according to several well-placed Rome sources, Iranian officials are quietly laying the groundwork necessary to turn to Pope Benedict XVI and top Vatican diplomats for mediation if the showdown with the United States should escalate toward a military intervention. (Israely, 2007, para. 1)

Further, a senior Western diplomat in Rome said of the Iranian leadership that "the Vatican seems to be part of their strategy . . . and they know an intervention of the Vatican is the most open and amenable route to Western public opinion" (Israely, 2007, para. 1). Much of what I have suggested is corroborated in the remaining paragraphs of the *Time* article, confirming that the second-ranking official at the Iranian embassy to the Holy See considered relations to be very good, which aided in the release earlier that year of 15 British sailors held by Iran. Called by Ahmadinejad "an Easter gift," it only occurred after the Pope sent a letter asking for their release (Israely, 2007, para. 3). Vice-

Ambassador Ahmad Fahima stated publicly: “There was respect for the request of the Pope,” noting that “the policy of the Holy See is important throughout the whole world” (Israely, 2007, para. 3).

A few key themes in this article have genuine downstream implications. First, officials on both sides are willing to share publicly their respect for one another, as well as their mutual goals aligned by their beliefs systems. Second, both sides clearly expressed disappointment in how the West has pursued engagements in the Middle East and the air of mistrust toward them. This is not a revelation, but in such a public, Western-centric forum, it is notable (especially considering Western views of Iran during this time) for the Vatican to provide their support to Iran. Third, both sides expressed doubt in the ability of the U.S. to resolve key regional issues in the Middle East without the help of Iran. If this statement remains true, it makes complete sense as to why all U.S. tactics following the Iranian Revolution continue to fail and fall short of straining Iran to the point of collapse. By the end of the Bush terms, it was clear the Islamic Republic of Iran concealed a more resilient structure than Western bodies had believed possible.

The Obama Presidency and the JCPOA

Sworn into office January 20, 2009, President Barack Obama ushered in what many perceived to be new era of possibility for the relationship between Iran and the Middle East. I believe this to be true, at face value, but with several caveats. As stated, my intent is to convey without political bias how the current political climate can and did alter the trajectory of Iranian policy, with and without the intervention of third parties like

the Vatican. Any conclusion that Barack Obama's policies favored cooperation with Iran should be evident, or not, from the presentation of facts.

At this point it may appear that I intend this section on the JCPOA to be of paramount importance, that I may frame it as a turning point to show how the Obama administration's openness to dialogue ultimately led to a successful negotiated outcome. However, my take on the matter is slightly different. In lieu of an account of the extensive efforts to bring about a negotiated nuclear agreement, the JCPOA, finalized on July 14, 2015, and six and a half years after Obama took office, it is sufficient to know its negotiations were protracted and expansive. Also important is that according to the IAEA, conditions were largely complied with by the Iranians despite a few "slip-ups."

However, the essence I want to convey is much less cumbersome than chronicling the countless meetings and drawing conclusions as to how Iran continued to leverage and backchannel with their allies, at times Vatican diplomats and at other times the Pope. Despite the most progressive approach to U.S.–Iranian foreign policy, with perhaps the most open-minded administration, all the positive intentions ultimately still fell short.

I submit that during this time, it is crucial to realize that while Iranian-Vatican relations improved, especially following Pope Benedict's passing and the installation of Pope Francis on March 13, 2013, contrarily U.S.-Vatican relations contracted. Rooney (2013a) remarked that cordial relations continued under the Obama administration but then cooled, with only one visit to the Vatican made by President Obama (p. 229). In fairness, this observation was made at the time of Rooney's writing; Obama did visit the Vatican again during his second term for an audience with Pope Francis. Five years after his service, Rooney wrote that the Obama administration "seems to exhibit little more

than a perfunctory interest in the Holy See's diplomatic role in the world," which he describes as regrettable, considering "U.S. foreign policy has much to gain from our relationship with the Holy See, and vice versa" (Rooney, 2013a, p. 229). Alas, cooled does not equate to nonexistent, and that they prevailed given that Obama's political positions were perceived as conflicting with the Catholic faith (elements of the Affordable Care Act, abortion, family unity, etc.), shows the respect that existed.

During the extensive time it took to reach a mutually accepted agreement on the JCPOA, the unofficial labors by the Vatican served as the biggest global boon to its success, both for legitimatizing the Iranian state and for driving toward the very outcomes that the U.S.-led coalition desired. It seems the Obama administration did not see a formal role for the Vatican throughout the negotiating process, perhaps an element of control this liberal administration did not feel comfortable giving to a conservative religious body. But considering informal support directly contributed to getting it executed, formal engagement may have made the deal stick into the next administration (at least from the American side). I consider this a missed opportunity, with unrealized potential and value—dare I say, a shortcoming of Western democracy.

Given its stance against the proliferation of nuclear weapons, the Vatican is a founding member of the IAEA. The Iranian government and spiritual leaders respect the Vatican and always have. That respect means they care about what outcomes they want, perhaps even more than Western powers like the U.S., despite their keys to the lessening of sanctions. The countless speeches, addresses, letters, and yes, prayers offered by the Vatican advocating for a peaceful and negotiated outcome to the nuclear agreement cannot be overstated. It inarguably cradled a dialogue that propelled the deal forward.

The U.S. certainly had an expanded and admirable relationship with Pope Francis, who captivated world audiences the extent to which likely was a global admiration that arguably has led to a Catholic revival. But perhaps the U.S. and Iran have something to gain in the form of “soft power.”

While the U.S. is assumed to be number one in its ability to influence others through dialogue rather than force, its record is subject to scrutiny. It is important to compare a nation’s ability to persuade someone to do something when it holds the keys to the largest nuclear arsenal on Earth, versus persuading them to do something because one’s divine moral code and conviction says it is the right thing to do for humanity. In a pointed statement, Rooney (2013b) comments

The Catholic Church is a powerful and unique source of non-coercive “soft power” on the world stage—it moves people to do the right thing by appealing to ideals and shared values, rather than to fear and brute force. . . America’s foreign policy is much more likely to succeed with the support of the Holy See. (Rooney, 2013b)

Quite fitting is the response to this quote in *USA Today* column from none other than the President of Iran in 2013, Hassan Rouhani. In reference to a *Washington Post* op-ed, Rooney buttresses his statement by noting that Rouhani decried the “framework that has emphasized hard power and the use of brute force” (Rooney, 2013b).

The Obama administration did employ the use of the Vatican while simultaneously executing the JCPOA in 2015—during which time there were three Americans imprisoned in Iran. While the two negotiations were said to have happened separately from one another, it was acknowledged that the hostages were a major source of friction between President Obama and Iranian leaders while finalizing the nuclear deal (Toosi, 2015). Ultimately, thanks to the strong diplomatic relations of the Vatican with Tehran, the U.S. was able to secure a peaceful release.

The Trump Reversal and the Effects of Western Democracy

The optimism surrounding the negotiated agreement with Iran in July 2015 continued into January of the following year, with reports that both sides were complying and moving forward. However, the United States was entering an election year, and political debates were thoroughly underway. Republicans had been notably critical of the JCPOA, and that narrative prevailed with the leading candidate, Donald Trump. It is hard to decipher if candidate Trump really had any means for determining the validity of the deal's structure. Regardless, he knew that most of his constituents wanted to see not only a departure from the current Obama administration but a full course reversal on all of the Obama landmark achievements.

Bearing in mind this mounting rhetoric, it would be naïve to believe the Iranians did not know what was coming. Topics like the JCPOA and Obamacare were at the top of a list of targets. The Arms Control Association cited a direct quote from President-elect Trump: “[My] number one priority is to dismantle the disastrous deal with Iran,” calling it the “worst deal ever negotiated” and saying he “would seek to renegotiate it” (Davenport, 2016, para.2).

Crux is an independent Catholic news agency known for an experienced Vatican reporting network. During Trump's 2016 campaign, it released an article titled, “The Bond Between the Vatican and Iran is a Partnership Destined to Endure,” in reference to Iranian President Rouhani's private audience with Pope Francis at the Vatican, the first of its type since President Khatami's audience in 1999.⁵ There are three short paragraphs that stand out, which I believe provide importance to my argument that Iran's relations

⁵ Khatami also visited the Vatican for Pope John Paul II's funeral in 2005 while president, and once again in 2007, after leaving office, he made a special visit to Pope Benedict.

with the Vatican have supported their resilience, more than ever at this specific point of the Trump era of 2016, 37 years post the Iranian Revolution:

From Iran's point of view, it aspires to being not merely a regional but a global player, and to do so it requires not merely "hard" power, to invoke the famous distinction of Harvard political scientist Joseph Nye, but also "soft," meaning moral legitimacy. The perception of being in dialogue with the Vatican is crucially important, counteracting Bush administration rhetoric about Iran being part of an "axis of evil."

As far as the Vatican is concerned, few geopolitical challenges these days loom larger than the future direction of Islamic societies, including the fate of the Christian minorities within those nations. Given the decisive role Iran plays in neighboring countries such as Syria and Iraq, the Vatican believes that engagement is critically important.

Ironically, some Vatican diplomats actually have greater confidence in the protection of Christians in the Middle East by Iran and Russia than by the Western powers, who, in their judgment, simply don't take religion seriously as a source of identity. (Allen, 2016, pp.13-14)

The impacts of these statements are profound: Could the Vatican really have greater trust in a country much of the world views as a terrorist state than in the democracies of the West? Does Iran care about a non-Islamic religious partner more than the most powerful democracies on Earth? What does this say about democracy? I am not arguing that democracy is not good. I am questioning its agility to evolve in the extremely connected global society we have become in the past century through communications, trade dependencies, and seamless transfers of basically anything: goods, humans, knowledge, and so on.

To make one final push for this point, a subsequent article about the same meeting at the Vatican, written by E. Pentin (2016) for the *National Catholic Register*, speaks to the Pope's sentiments on the Iranian nuclear deal, adding that

In contrast to many on the political Right, he has taken a positive view of the nuclear deal, telling diplomats earlier this month he hoped the agreement would "contribute to creating a climate of détente in the

region” and adding it was an “important step that will promote dialogue and cooperation on other issues.”

The writing was on the wall during that U.S. election year. If optics between the two parties were that crucial, it was important that both were seen embracing the deal publicly and together. This narrative prevailed among all parties, except for Trump, for the remainder of the 2016 election and until his inauguration in January 2017. European leaders including EU Foreign Policy Chief Federica Mogherini and French President Francois Hollande all voiced continued support, saying it was in “European interest to guarantee that the agreement is implemented in full” and that the deal “gives us all security” and the “absence of the accord would be very serious” (Davenport, 2016, para. 5). Even President Rouhani noted that his country intended to “continue abiding by the agreement” and that the agreement was “between a group of countries approved by the UN Security Council and who said that there is no possibility that it can be changed by a single government” (Davenport, 2016, para.6).

No one could have foreseen the power Trump would exude in his first presidency, and the way he chose to wield it. From his inauguration on January 20, 2017, Trump made it a mission to fulfill his promise to dismantle the nuclear agreement. Later that year, in an address to the United Nations General Assembly and after President Trump harshly criticized the agreement and Iran the day before, President Rouhani stated, “It will be a great pity if this agreement were destroyed by rogue newcomers to the world of politics,” saying further, “I declare to you the Islamic Republic of Iran will not be the first country to violate the agreement, but it will respond decisively and resolutely to its violation by any party” (Gaouette, 2017, para. 3).

What we witnessed was an agreement that was said to have been negotiated using “soft power,” fully coming under threat due to the new administration’s focus on leveraging “hard power.” These tactics fail to account for the cultural disposition of Iran, the spiritual conviction of the country, and the conditions it values in a diplomatic relationship. Trump had already alienated Pope Francis with his unChristian-like approach to immigration. And at a time where mediation may have served both parties, none was attempted, and likely none would have helped curtail the administration’s driving force.

On May 8, 2018, President Trump announced the full withdrawal of the U.S. from the JCPOA and, exercising the very hard power he so desired to wield, reinstated economic sanctions at the highest level (Davenport, 2023). The impacts not only were devastating to the Iranian people but also to global confidence in Western diplomacy. While the other parties remained in the deal, the construct suffered, and the accomplishments reached through peaceful dialogue unraveled.

Chapter VII.

Conclusion, and a Nod to the Current State of Affairs

To this day, the global political climate remains fractured, in part due to the erosion of character and lack of trust among what were once trusted nations and allies. The preceding chapter outlines how even the U.S. can suffer geopolitical fall-out following the switch of administrations, generating skepticism that takes years to repair.

I must point out, however, that this is a somewhat established trend for the U.S. Consider its alliance with the Shah of Iran, the U.S. support of Iraq, its support of the JCPOA, and such. All of these resulted in a reversal of course, and while we could debate the “why,” if one evaluates each scenario without bias, there is a clear degree of questionable trust. Regardless, this thesis did not seek to determine how what a country says versus what it does affects how others see it. Rather, I sought to outline the complex and strong relationship between two unlikely allies, Iran and the Vatican, to evaluate how that diplomacy between the U.S. and the Vatican has been little to nonexistent at times, and to deduce how the Iran’s poor U.S. relations but strong relations with the Vatican have bolstered its geopolitical standing and made it resilient and even resistant to collapse despite the many attempts of the U.S. to control the country.

All of these are missed opportunities for the powers at hand to find the very recognition, stability, and peace that all three desire. This conclusion speaks to why this remains such a difficult task.

I will start with two points. First, is Iran stronger because of its relationship with the Vatican? Through a Western lens, this country has been intentionally barricaded from the rest of the world, with a radical, unknown, theocratic government that by all estimations should have withered away decades ago but has not. There are numerous countries that Iran keeps on its list of strategic partners, chiefly China and Russia. Then there is the complex network of proxy states that Iran leverages to control the balance of power, given its disposition. But in light of its history, the Vatican may very well be its most formidable and substantive ally; indeed, the size of its diplomatic attachment would certainly support this claim. But the Vatican is more than an ally, it is also a door to the Western world. The Vatican's willingness and openness to engage with Iran gives it recognition on the global stage that it has sought as a Persian identity well before the Iranian Revolution.

Beyond this earthly position, the Vatican in many ways legitimizes Iran's ultimate political arm: religion. When through diplomatic means the Pope and the Ayatollah exchange writings, or the president of Iran and the Pope meet in the Apostolic Palace for a private audience, the world sees that the Catholic Church acknowledges and embraces all at face value—including those of other religions.

Equally so, in a time as tragic as that following the terror attacks of 9/11, the world says that it is this genuine respect and willingness to engage in spiritually rooted dialogue over the years that has aided Muslims across Iran (as well as the Middle East and the globe), showing sympathy to fellow human beings out of a compassion and respect for the dignity of the human life that had been lost, unjustly. Clohessy provided

powerful insight that captures the spirit of the relationship and the progress it continues to yield:

There is a love for God and genuine desire to submit to Him. You have this ancient Persian culture which colors and textures Iranian daily life even now and is always going to be part of what Iran is. At the same time, you have the disparity between religious leaders there who are ultra-conservative and others who favor a more open approach to the West and to dialogue with the West. So, there's nothing simple about the Iranian situation, and I think that our own ongoing dialogue between the Vatican and Tehran, which goes on year after year . . . has helped to educate, to temper some passion a little bit. To refine some of our understanding of each other, and even if it's a small group of us who are educating each other, I think we're making a difference. (Clohessy, pers. comm., August 7, 2025)

While Fr. Clohessy is referring to interreligious dialogue, he supports my theory that the path to political understanding in the case of Iran must originate with religious tolerance and respect. From that point only can relations lead to political progress.

Inarguably, the current level of diplomacy between the two entities, from an earthly political structure to an otherworldly theological point of view, is powerful. It is a type of diplomacy that breaks through walls that modern, secularized diplomacy struggles to do, given the structured political molds to which it must conform.

My second point is whether the U.S. and modern Western democracy as we know it, can be sufficiently agile to the extent needed to meet the demands of current global dynamics. I contend that while democracy is a beautiful form of government in theory, we may be witnessing a modern era wherein its formula for providing rights and freedoms needs to adjust.

Particularly in American democracy, the prerequisite for the separation of church and state served a purpose at its inception and largely continues to serve as a necessary domestic protection—as long as religious freedoms prevail as they generally have in the

West. But it does present a challenge for dealing in the most globalized environment in history. Extricating the principal element that much of the world chooses to subscribe to, religion, severely hinders the ability of a democratic nation to “understand” the fundamental principles that drive other states with dissimilar beliefs, and subsequently, alternate forms of government.

We have witnessed countless times that the export of democracy does not have the best results. Yet the U.S. still ponders, . . . why? More so, it continues to support dialogue that focuses on democratic supremacy and falls short of asking, “Please tell me about you and what’s important to your nation.” The inability of the most powerful government on Earth, which guides the largest economy on Earth, to engage in strategic organizational dialogue if religion enters the framework, is a shortcoming that I believe cannot be overcome. It requires council and partnership with those who can understand and bridge the gaps where democracy falls short. To do so requires openness and willingness to exhibit true “soft power,” well before the time comes to clench a fist.

While this thesis concludes its analysis at the point of the first Trump administration and the withdrawal of U.S. participation in the JCPOA, it is mainly because the seven years since have been regressive, and demand separate study and attention. The key takeaway is that the U.S. relationship with the Vatican is amicable but nonetheless strained due to extreme political rhetoric; that the optimistic U.S. relations of the last decade with Iran have reversed course and been sullied; and that Iran continues to find political and religious refuge in what most of the world seems to see as an unlikely ally, the Vatican.

With war raging between Iranian-backed Hamas in Gaza over the Palestinian state and its ability to coexist with Israel, the U.S. is yet again scratching its head as to how to manage and diffuse this situation. Both Pope Leo XIV, current Iran President Pezeshkian, and Ayatollah Khamenei would be poised for a dialogue. Given the interreligious dialogue that occurs between the two entities routinely, the foundation of a constructive and educated conversation exists in a way that the U.S. fails to be able to support.

Since Pope Paul VI, the Vatican has been put on a world stage, taking a respected seat at the table with commissions like the United Nations, and no longer viewed as a secret society; it has become more transparent (Clohessy, pers. comm., August 7, 2025).

Fr. Clohessy and I discussed that

people look at the Vatican, Iran for example, and realize it's got no political agenda of its own, it's got no army, it's got no desire to "steal my oil, it doesn't want to expand and take my territory" and as such it's "understood even by people who are maybe anti-Catholic . . . even those people understand that the Vatican, as a political entity is neutral and basically has proven to be trustworthy. (Clohessy, August 7, 2025)

Even countries with an areligious slant may be tempted to think that the Vatican just may have God on its side.

Ultimately, one can simply not remove religion from the equation in a crisis that originates on the religious front. Conflict derived from religious opposition cannot be deescalated through modern political channels. The only hope for peace is by appealing to the higher calling to which each side ultimately holds supreme accountability. Then, and only then, do I believe we will see true stability in not only the Middle East but in the entire multifaceted, multicultural, and pluralistic world. Citizens of the globe do not need to believe what the others believe, but co-existence starts and ends with tolerance and understanding.

Considering the recent politically motivated violence of 2025 that has marred the U.S. domestically, and divided its population through opposition and hate, I believe we are entering a time where Western democracy should consider a strong introspective review of whether it can withstand these pressurized times, both internationally and within its own borders.

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