

Iran-US Relations Under Trump: Iranian Perspective

Rauf Rahimi

Assistant Professor of Political Sciences at the University of Bojnord, North Khorasan, Iran (Corresponding author).

r.rahimi@ub.ac.ir

 0000-0002-8447-4531

Sajjad Rezaei

Associate Professor, Department of Psychology, Faculty of Literature and Humanities, University of Guilan, Rasht, Iran.

sajjad.rezaei@guilan.ac.ir

 0000-0001-7292-9669

Abstract

The escalation of tensions between Iran and the United States stems largely from Iran's insistence on continuing uranium enrichment under strict IAEA monitoring, alongside the Trump administration's pursuit of a long-term agreement with Tehran. This study examines plausible scenarios for Iran-U.S. relations from the perspective of Iranian academic elites. Given the exploratory nature of the research, a qualitative approach based on thematic analysis was employed. Data were collected through semi-structured interviews with 25 Iranian academic elites. The findings identified four main scenarios: (1) escalation of tensions, identified by eight respondents (32%) as the most likely scenario with a probability of 70–80%; (2) "neither war nor peace," selected by seven respondents (28%); (3) a limited agreement, favored by six respondents (24%); and (4) peace and the full lifting of sanctions, identified by four respondents (16%). All scenarios were assigned a relative probability of 70–80% by their supporters. Among these, a limited agreement has long been considered an important objective for Iran because it carries relatively lower costs for both sides and could enable the United States to pursue its goals without military confrontation. However, the major obstacle remains U.S. opposition to Iran maintaining nuclear capabilities, driven by concerns over a possible shift toward nuclear deterrence and regional power rebalancing. Following the Twelve-Day War, the United States intensified efforts to resolve the enrichment issue and related disputes with Iran; therefore, until these issues are settled, the likelihood of escalating tensions remains high.

Keywords: Escalation of tensions, limited nuclear agreement, Iran, United States, maximum pressure.

Introduction

Some scholars argue that Iran–U.S. relations, given the numerous challenges they have experienced, are moving toward hostility and intensified rivalry by 2030 (Sazian & Shafiei, 2017, pp. 3–5). Another study identifies increased competition and antagonism as the preferred scenario for Iran's relations up to 2027, while conditional engagement and compromise are considered possible alternatives (Nikunhad et al., 2022, pp. 7–8). Other researchers suggest that the scenarios facing Iran and the United States include a return to negotiations, a military strike, or a prolonged stalemate and maintenance of the status quo (Sharif, 2025, pp. 2–3). Additional studies identify potential scenarios such as continuous escalation of tensions, an agreement based on concessions by one party, Iran's rapid move toward nuclear weapons, and Iran's strategic patience accompanied by a pivot toward the East (Toossi, 2025, pp. 3–5). Other scholars emphasize that any potential agreement must rest on two core pillars: ensuring the peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear program and the complete removal of sanctions imposed on Iran (Inat et al., 2025, p. 3).

Based on the existing literature, Iran is currently facing the challenge of Donald Trump's second presidential term. With the shift of power in the United States, Tehran is weighing the potential benefits of engagement against the risks of confrontation. A review of the literature indicates that no study has yet examined the possible scenarios of Iran–U.S. relations during Trump's second term, particularly from the perspective of Iranian academic elites after the Twelve-Day War (Rahimi & Izadi, 2026; Choudhury, 2025). This study seeks to fill this gap by identifying the plausible and preferred scenarios of Iran–U.S. relations based on interviews with experts. The final research question aims to classify these scenarios following the activation of the snapback mechanism. Accordingly, the study addresses several key research questions: what impact does the activation of the trigger mechanism have on Iran's nuclear file and the future of Iran–U.S. relations; is there a possibility of renegotiation during Trump's second term despite the activation of the trigger mechanism; does the activation of the trigger mechanism lead to greater flexibility, or do tensions increase; can a change in Iran's regional approach encourage the Trump administration to reduce sanctions and pressure; how does the current "neither war nor peace" atmosphere affect relations between the two countries; how can Iran manage the post-trigger mechanism situation to prevent another war with Zionist Regime

and the United States; what are the most likely scenarios for Iran–U.S. relations after the activation of the trigger mechanism; and what is the preferred scenario?

Methodologically, this research utilized a thematic analysis approach based on Braun and Clarke's (2006, pp. 77–101) framework. Given the exploratory and predictive nature of the study, a qualitative and inductive approach was adopted to extract patterns, themes, and possible scenarios from textual data obtained through in-depth interviews with Iranian academic elites. Thematic analysis was selected because of its flexibility and suitability for the study's scenario-oriented objectives. Since the analysis was not guided by a predefined theory, the primary aim was to organize experts' perspectives and identify meaningful patterns rather than develop an entirely new theoretical framework. To validate the coding alongside other researchers, the data were returned to interview participants to ensure validity and reliability. Additionally, the scenarios derived from this research are consistent with the structures or cultures of Hobbesian, Lockean, and Kantian international relations theories, thereby confirming the alignment of the research findings with established theoretical frameworks (Wendt, 1999, p. 382; Wendt, 2015, p. 62). In other words, the thematic analysis process in this research was documented with reference to these theories.

The study employed a mixed sampling strategy combining purposive and snowball sampling. Purposive sampling was used to select participants based on the researchers' knowledge and understanding of the target population, while snowball sampling involved participants introducing other qualified experts. The researchers first identified subject-matter experts through the scholarly works of faculty members at Iranian universities and then asked them to recommend additional participants. Although 33 faculty members were initially approached, eight declined to participate. Data were ultimately collected through semi-structured interviews with 25 faculty members specializing in political science, regional studies, international relations, and international economics. The study faced certain limitations because interviewees were drawn from universities in several Iranian cities, including Tehran, Isfahan, Shiraz, Mashhad, Rasht, and Kermanshah, creating coordination challenges due to the geographically dispersed sample. Nevertheless, the combined purposive–snowball strategy proved suitable for accessing Iranian university faculty members. Existing professional familiarity and academic cooperation among faculty

members, together with assurances of confidentiality, also facilitated informed consent and voluntary participation.

Interviews were conducted face-to-face and online until theoretical saturation was reached. Face-to-face sessions were documented through detailed notes, while online interviews were audio-recorded with consent and transcribed for analysis. Interview durations ranged from 30 minutes to one hour, and all responses were anonymized using coded identifiers. Despite differing interview modes, a uniform protocol was applied across all participants, including rapport-building, informed consent, and adherence to ethical and methodological guidelines. Accuracy was ensured through repeated review of audio files and transcripts, followed by member-checking in which key concepts were returned to participants for confirmation. Thematic analysis followed Braun and Clarke's (2006) stages: familiarization with the data through repeated reading of interview transcripts and note-taking; generating initial codes by identifying key meanings at the sentence or paragraph level; reviewing themes to ensure adequate coverage and avoid overlap, merging or dividing them as needed; and defining and labeling each theme with a precise conceptual description. The unit of analysis in this study was sentences. Interview responses were carefully reviewed to identify participants' orientations toward plausible and preferred scenarios in Iran–U.S. relations during Trump's second term. Two researchers participated in the coding process, one specializing in political science and the other in psychology. Initial coding was conducted by one researcher and reviewed by the second, while discrepancies were resolved through discussion and consensus meetings. The identified themes and scenarios were systematically organized into four tables to enhance clarity and facilitate comparative analysis. All coding and analysis were conducted manually without the use of software. The final report presents these themes narratively and analytically, supported by direct participant quotations.

1. Research Finding

Characteristics of Participants The interviewees ultimately identified four recurring scenarios in Iran–U.S. relations during Trump's second term. Eight of the 25 participants (32%) considered escalation of tensions the most likely scenario, assigning it a relative probability of 70–80%. Seven participants (28%) favored the "neither war nor peace" scenario, six (24%) supported a limited agreement, and four (16%) preferred peace and the lifting of

sanctions. While each participant selected one preferred scenario, the remaining scenarios were generally viewed as plausible alternatives. Interview responses were analyzed and grouped according to conceptual similarity through coding and operationalization of concepts. The four scenarios emerged from clear patterns of convergence and divergence in participants' responses. Internal coherence was ensured through systematic review and independent coding by two researchers followed by consensus. Given the qualitative and interview-based nature of the study, the analysis relied on relative frequencies and percentages rather than statistical measures such as means and standard deviations. The four scenarios were further confirmed through direct interview questions in which participants referred exclusively to these scenarios and assigned their preferred option a relative probability of 70–80%.

a. Scenario of Escalating Tension and Continued Maximum Pressure

The first scenario, escalating tension and continued maximum pressure, was identified by eight participants as the most likely outcome. Interviews conducted with participants about this scenario explored what university professors understand from it and what examples they know of the mentioned scenario. The statements of the interviewees were categorized into 40 concepts, 11 initial themes, and 5 main themes. Table 1 summarizes the concepts, initial themes, and main themes for this scenario.

Table (1): Concepts, Initial Themes, and the Main Theme of the Scenario: Intensify Tension and Continue Maximum Pressure

Concepts	Initial themes	Main Themes
Intensifying unilateral sanctions, implementing financial, banking, trade, maritime, and insurance sanctions, Reducing oil exports, weakening financial resources through the implementation of multi-lateral sanctions.	Unilateral and Multilateral Restraint	Isolating the Iranian government and breaking internal resistance
Increasing pressure on Russia and China to reduce cooperation, complicating the nuclear issue with the implementation of the trigger mechanism, limiting arms purchases through the implementation of the trigger mechanism, attempting to	Limiting cooperation with countries worldwide	

Concepts	Initial themes	Main Themes
seize state and non-state commercial ships		
Increasing inflation rates and the dollar rate through sanctions, attempting to add to the economic pressure on people, putting people against the government, intensifying the sense of danger, and disrupting societal peace.	Weakening of state governance in Iran	
Hit to the axis of resistance, weakening power elements, weakening the deterrence position, adopting opposing regional policies.	Efforts to change internal and regional behavior	America's opposition to the export of revolution and the increase in Iran's deterrence power
Opposing the political structure, requesting the recognition of Zionist Regime, compelling negotiations and agreements to accept America's demands.	Effort to change the political identity of the Islamic Revolution	
Continuation of nuclear activities, preservation of nuclear ambiguity, continuation of missile production and regional activities contrary to America's wishes.	Taking inflexible stances against America	Iran's opposition to America's policy of supporting Zionist Regime and America's presence in the region.
Insisting on continuing enrichment for existential and deterrent reasons, efforts to strengthen power elements, strengthening air defense and reviving deterrence, rejecting negotiations with America if maximal demands are raised.	Opposition to surrender to America	
Weakening regional position, beginning enrichment, seizure of ships at sea, decisive victory in Venezuela, continuity of Netanyahu's power, and the Republican victory in the 2026 American elections as factors intensifying tensions.	The actions of America and Zionist Regime include aerial, maritime, and cyber-attacks.	Limited War
Miscalculations regarding the opponent's action, efforts to respond to Zionist air attacks, attacks on US bases in the region, threats to close the Strait of Hormuz, attacks on America's regional allies.	Retaliatory actions	

Concepts	Initial themes	Main Themes
Achieving nuclear weapons, attacking American bases, attacking America's allies in the region such as Zionist Regime, withdrawing from the NPT.	Iran's crossing of America and Zionist Regime's red line	Full-scale war
The severe disruption of the power balance in favor of Zionist Regime, the assassination of key figures, the attack on vital and strategic targets, and the endangerment of the survival of the Islamic Republic.	America and Zionist Regime crossing Iran's red line	

Source: Research Findings

Within this scenario, participants identified several key dimensions. First, regarding the isolation of Iran domestically and internationally, interviewees stated that the activation of the trigger mechanism and the end of the JCPOA have placed the nuclear, missile, regional, and Iran-Zionist Regime hostility issues on the agenda of Trump's second term. As one interviewee (code A) stated: "The activation of the trigger mechanism will return Iran's nuclear file to before the JCPOA, and of course, this file will move from the political phase to the legal phase." Another participant (code B) noted that "the impact of the trigger mechanism depends on the conditions. It can lead to either more flexibility or more tension. It depends on what threats the Islamic Republic's decision-making system receives, how intense they are, and to what extent it can cope with them. These threats can be internal, such as economic pressure, or external and security-related, like a military attack."

According to the interviewees, the United States and Zionist Regime view the current situation as the most opportune moment to strike Iran. They believe that unless Iran is further weakened and the foundations of its regional power are dismantled, Iran will naturally be able to regenerate its power in the future. One participant (code F) stated that "if the United States and Europe attempt to create difficulties for Iranian vessels in international waters—given that existing resolutions authorize inspection and seizure—they may classify the materials as suspicious for Iran's nuclear and missile programs, a development that would lead to heightened tensions." The interviewees also noted that under maximum pressure, Iran's financial activities in Turkey and the United Arab Emirates could be severely restricted. In addition, a potential trade agreement between China and the United States may reduce Iran's oil exports to China,

increasing the U.S. dollar exchange rate and inflation. Under such conditions, Iran's fragile economy could heighten the risk of domestic unrest. The January 2026 protests in Iran reflected these dynamics, as Iran has faced severe U.S. and United Nations sanctions for over two decades, negatively affecting livelihoods and social stability. In this regard, interviewee R argued that "the core objective of U.S. sanctions is to restrict financial resources in order to weaken a country's capacity to resist and ultimately compel compliance."

Regarding America's opposition to the export of the revolution and the increase in Iran's deterrence power, interviewees noted that the United States insists on the complete abandonment of Iran's uranium enrichment. If Iran does not relinquish enrichment, U.S. pressure and threats against Iran are expected to intensify. One participant (code E) stated: "According to Trump, Iran has lost many of its regional cards. They have been hit on Iran's proxies in Lebanon, Yemen, and Iran's nuclear facilities have suffered serious damage. Therefore, based on the damage they have caused to Iran, Iran has few winning cards. The Trump administration, in the current conditions, is trying to bring Iran to its knees with maximum pressure, ensuring that the range of its missiles is not more than 500 kilometers. It wants Iran to give up enrichment and end its support for groups under its influence." Some officials of the Islamic Republic believe that America is hostile to Iran and seeks to change its regime, as evidenced in the pressure and sanctions. If America agreed to lift sanctions, it would indicate a lack of hostility and a willingness to change the regime (Mottaqi, 2006, pp. 1–2). Interviewee G stated: "According to officials, with the Islamic Revolution of 1979, Iran has been placed on America's list of enemies, and therefore strengthening Iran should not occur, and since reaching an agreement and lifting sanctions would strengthen the Islamic Republic, they do not agree with Iran or, if they do, they back out."

In the view of interviewees in the scenario of escalating tension, no agreement will be reached. Iran will continue to oppose and adopt an inflexible position, stating that Trump's demands are unacceptable because Iran has been bombed and faces serious threats. Interviewee H observed: "One cannot analyze the relations between Iran and America optimistically. Because the Leader of Iran has said that the problem between Iran and America is inherent and based on the Leader's statements, the conflict between Iran and America is an identity conflict stemming from the political identity of the Islamic Revolution of Iran." In the opinion of interviewees, if

both sides remain inflexible and do not concede, it will lead to a continuation of tension, unless Iran changes its approach under intense U.S. pressure. Another interviewee stated: "America is putting pressure on Iran to recognize Zionist Regime. If Iran were to accept this, it would conflict with the political identity of the Islamic Revolution in Iran; because Iran has been proud for 47 years of fighting against the American-led system of domination. Given Iran's political structure, there will be no significant change in Iran's position during Trump's second term."

The third dimension within this scenario concerns the possibility of a limited war. According to interviewees, there is a possibility of air or cyber-attacks during Trump's second term, as long as all issues between the two countries are not resolved. In this regard, interviewee Q stated: "The first scenario depicts a situation that is precedent in America's and Iran's foreign behavior and occurred in June 2025. Therefore, the escalation of tensions and war can be considered a reasonable scenario in the current relations between Iran and America." Interviewee W added: "Many variables influence the likelihood of another war between Iran and America. However, if the West perceives that Iran resumes enrichment or gets closer to developing nuclear weapons, the option of war becomes plausible." Regarding retaliatory actions of the Iranian government, interviewees stated that Iran's current strategy is survival, and the next step is to restore deterrence. However, efforts to restore deterrence and increase power may provoke Zionist Regime and lead to another war. Interviewee Y noted: "I don't think Iran will change its approach under pressure. Although there have been back-channel negotiations with America; however, given the leader's stance toward America, peace and reconciliation are not currently feasible between Iran and America; but the Trump administration is not seeking to overthrow the Islamic Republic through war."

The fourth dimension within this scenario concerns the possibility of a full-scale war. According to the interviewees, both sides have specific red lines that they should be aware of through information tactics. If the parties cross each other's red lines, there is a possibility that the limited war will lead into an all-out war. Interviewee U stated: "The greatest risk is a miscalculation by either side. One side may mistake the other's reaction and, as a result, turn a limited attack into a full-scale war." Interviewee I added: "If Iran, under pressure during the second term of Trump, changes its nuclear doctrine and pursues nuclear weapons to create deterrence, and as a result, the power balance between Iran and Zionist Regime is disrupted in Iran's

favor, this would be a red line for Zionist Regime and the United States, and they would take action with a full-scale attack." The actions of America and Zionist Regime include aerial, maritime, and cyber-attacks, while Iran's retaliatory actions could include attacks on US bases in the region, threats to close the Strait of Hormuz, and attacks on America's regional allies. Achieving nuclear weapons, attacking American bases, attacking America's allies in the region such as Zionist Regime, and withdrawing from the NPT would constitute Iran crossing America and Zionist Regime's red lines, potentially triggering a full-scale war.

b. Scenario of Neither War nor Peace or Status Quo with Fluctuations

Interviews were conducted with academics from universities to understand their perspective on the scenario of "neither war nor peace or status quo with fluctuations" and to identify examples of such a scenario. The statements of the interviewees were categorized into 34 concepts, 9 initial themes, and 4 main themes. The thematic structure of the "neither war nor peace" scenario is presented in Table 2.

Table (2): Concepts, Initial Themes, and the Main Theme of the Scenario: Neither War nor Peace, nor the Continuation of the Status Quo with Fluctuations

Concepts	Initial Themes	Main Themes
Return to containment; keeping Iran weak; Zionist Regime's lack of readiness for a new war; and the high costs of war	Focus on competition with China and the economy	Trump administration's low appetite for war with Iran due to achieving goals in the 12-day war.
Damaging nuclear facilities, Distance from nuclear weapons, Rejection of the right to enrichment, Continuity of the negotiation deadlock	Opposition to the revival and expansion of nuclear and missile activities	
Disarming Hamas, Disarming Hezbollah, Weakening anti-Zionist groups in the region, Solving the Palestinian issue	Desire for stability	Shaping a new order in the Middle East by America and regional countries
Economic prosperity, attracting foreign investment, implementing the new European model	De-ideologization and prioritizing the economy	
Temporary halt to enrichment,	No provocation of	Iran's efforts to

Concepts	Initial Themes	Main Themes
managing conditions of sanctions, strengthening defensive capabilities, reduction of rhetoric against America and Zionist Regime, reduction of missile drills and tests, and cooperation with the International Atomic Energy Agency.	Zionist Regime and America	return to the status quo ante bellum (before the 12-day war)
The government's move toward good governance, establishing national cohesion, and not restricting the fundamental freedoms of the people.	Gaining public satisfaction domestically	
Maintaining nuclear ambiguity, selling oil to China, encouraging China to implement a 25-year contract, strengthening economic, political, and military cooperation with Russia, reviving deterrence, and strengthening air defense.	Cooperation with China and Russia	Administration of Donald Trump's Second Presidential Term
Increase domestic production and non-oil exports, control exchange rates and inflation, managed and limited support for groups aligned with Iran, reduce tensions with Zionist Regime, strengthen relations with neighboring countries.	Reduction of tensions and increased cooperation with regional countries	

Source: Research Findings

Interviewees stated that the atmosphere of neither war nor peace has created distrust and closed the window of diplomacy. This environment needs a spark to turn into a gray war. The Trump administration may allocate less energy and resources to the Iran file and handle it as a matter of management. One interviewee noted that if the West does not feel threatened by Iran or believes it is far from having a nuclear bomb, it may lean toward neither war nor peace. The first main theme within this scenario concerns the Trump administration's low appetite for war with Iran due to achieving its goals in the 12-day war and its consequent focus on competition with China and the economy. Interviewees argued that Iran needs to strengthen its military to maintain the scenario of

neither war nor peace and the current status quo, though efforts to enhance military power may instead become a trigger for war. As one participant (code P) stated: "Overall military capabilities need to be strengthened. For instance, developing new air defense systems creates insecurity for F-35s, also declaring that such a defense system or maintaining ambiguity in its nuclear program creates deterrence. However, these actions by Iran do not eliminate the possibility of a new attack by the United States and Zionist Regime." Opposition to the revitalization and expansion of Iran's nuclear and missile activities remains a central feature of this scenario. Interviewees noted that the United States continues to oppose the revival and expansion of Iran's nuclear and missile capabilities, insisting on keeping Iran weak and maintaining containment. Zionist Regime's lack of readiness for a new war and the high costs of such a war further reinforce this dynamic.

The second main theme involves shaping a new order in the Middle East by America and regional countries, driven by a desire for stability and de-ideologization. Interviewees stated that the United States is attempting to pressure Iran into changing its behavior through maximum pressure, with the aim of achieving stability in the Middle East. Efforts to disarm Hezbollah and Hamas are part of this strategy. A situation of neither war nor peace would erode the resilience of society, and not just the political system but the entire Iranian society would fight for survival. One participant (code S) observed: "The 12-day war was an exception, and Iran and the United States will return to a state of neither war nor peace. During this period, changes in government in Iran and the United States and certain external factors such as the influence of hardliners in both countries could increase tensions, but it is unlikely to lead to another war." Arab countries, based on Saudi Arabia's Vision 2030, are seeking to de-ideologize the region and prioritize the economy. This approach is supported by the United States and Zionist Regime. The same participant added: "The 12-day war was an anomaly, and Iran and the United States will return to a state of neither war nor peace. Changes in government in Iran and the United States, and certain external factors, could escalate tensions, but it is unlikely to result in another war".

The third main theme concerns Iran's efforts to return to the status quo ante bellum (before the 12-day war). Interviewees stated that Zionist Regime has messaged Putin that it will not initiate another war against Iran, indicating that Zionist Regime is currently not prepared for another war with Iran. One participant

(code J) stated: "Given that a war occurred between Iran and Zionist Regime, and the U.S. also attacked Iran's Fordo nuclear site and Trump claimed to have destroyed the nuclear facilities, it is unlikely that the second Trump administration will give Iran a positive signal regarding nuclear. The Iranian government also continues its nuclear ambiguity, and as a result, the scenario of neither war nor peace is likely in the near- and medium-term future." Regarding gaining public satisfaction domestically, interviewees stated that Iran is seeking to buy time and maintain the status quo. After the 12-day war with Zionist Regime, Iran should move toward fundamental reforms in its domestic policy. As interviewee K stated: "Iran's success in the scenario of neither war nor peace lies in preserving its military power while fostering internal cohesion, i.e., gaining the satisfaction of the Iranian people. Internal reforms and increased people's participation in governing the country can create a basis for relative public satisfaction. The key issue is for the Iranian government to decide to overcome inefficiency, take corruption seriously, and provide people with benefits within the country".

The fourth main theme involves the administration of Donald Trump's second term, including cooperation with China, Russia, and regional countries. Interviewees stated that Iran's three power levers currently are nuclear ambiguity, 408 kilograms of enriched uranium, and missile power. These three power levers are not strong enough to deter the other side from greed. If Iran succeeds in importing fighter jets from China and Russia, it can make a portion of its sky safer. Also, expanding cooperation with regional countries and reducing tensions with them can help Iran partially meet economic needs. One participant (code L) observed: "Currently, the atomic bomb is not accepted in Iran's military strategy; it is appropriate to strengthen various types of weapons and military equipment. Iran should strengthen its offensive power with its defensive power. It should also adopt techniques and tactics that are not foreseeable to the opponent, or if foreseeable, not predictable. Diverse science-based arms with different technologies are necessary for Iran to perform better in both offensive and defensive capabilities."

c. Scenario of The Limited Agreement in the Nuclear Domain

Interviews were conducted with academics to understand their perspective on the limited agreement scenario in the nuclear domain and to identify examples of such a scenario. The statements of the interviewees were categorized into 33 concepts, 8 initial themes, and 4 main themes. Table 3 provides a detailed breakdown of the concepts and themes underlying the limited agreement scenario.

Table (3); Concepts, Initial Themes, and Main Theme of the Scenario: The Limited Nuclear Agreement and De-escalation of Tensions

Concepts	Initial Themes	Main Themes
Trump's personality as an opportunity for Iran, the economy as the government's priority, Trump's incentive to negotiate, and America's first strategy.	Emphasis on lifting sanctions against Iran in the event of an agreement	The Trump administration's desire for peace
Trump's lack of adherence to structural constraints, relying on his power and influence, the majority presence of Republicans in Congress, Trump's ability to lift some sanctions.	The ability to synchronize with Congress itself.	
The need for adjusting positions, taking concessions without war, changing Iran's behavior, not the regime.	Addressing the resolution issues and exiting the security situation	Trump's desire to solve all America's issues with Iran
The region's countries' interest in resolving the two countries' issues, limiting nuclear and missile capabilities, setting aside ideological issues in the region, and encouraging prioritizing the economy.	Emphasize increasing cooperation instead of conflict.	
The need for a change in the nature of negotiation after the 12-day war, the need to set aside Zionist Regime's threat to destroy without the need for identification, the acceptance of limited enrichment in exchange for the partial lifting of sanctions, and the necessity of diplomatic capabilities.	Interest in reducing alignment between America and Zionist Regime	Political will in Iran for a fair agreement
Commitment to not building nuclear weapons, the need to adjust positions, the demand for security assurances against further attacks, the need for one-sided concessions to the other side, the need to prioritize	Efforts to secure nuclear rights and regional status	

Concepts	Initial Themes	Main Themes
Trump's vital interests.		
The need to establish a balance in relations with the East and West, considering geopolitical realities, understanding Trump's approach based on economic goals, providing economic incentives, and attracting foreign investment.	Solving issues with America within the framework of fair solutions	Iran's Desire to exit International Isolation
Reviving relations with Egypt, restoring ties with Bahrain, enhancing relations with countries bordering the southern Gulf, reducing influence in Syria following Bashar al-Assad's downfall, Shaping the conditions of the Middle East region	Interaction with East and West based on geopolitical requirements	

Source: Research Findings

The first main theme within this scenario concerns the Trump administration's desire for peace. Interviewees noted that Trump is an exception in terms of personality and sometimes pursues policies in ways that do not align with America's political and legal structures, as seen in his actions regarding various international issues. In the case of Iran, he could potentially take actions at odds with the basic structure of U.S. foreign policy. For instance, during the Iran-Zionist Regime war, Trump suggested that Iran could sell more oil for reconstruction, but when Iran declared its position in the war, it angered Trump, leading to increased pressure. One participant observed that Trump generally does not adhere to a fixed roadmap during his second term as president. Interviewee Z stated: "Trump has specific personality traits that present opportunities for Iran to reach an agreement with him." Regarding the ability to align Congress with itself, interviewees stated that America's official policy has not been to change the regime in Iran. Even during the Trump era, this policy has remained in place. Currently, Iran has set the precondition for negotiation as the guarantee of no further attack on Iran, though the United States does not provide this guarantee. In international relations, power imbalances render guarantees ineffective. Interviewee X stated: "Trump is unpredictable, and even for Iran's verbal support for Gaza peace, he valued it greatly and said Iran is joining the Abraham Accords. That is, he went from

zero to one hundred in his stance toward Iran. These personality traits and his influence within the Republican Party could be effective in aligning Congress with the Trump administration if Iran and the United States reach an agreement to lift sanctions on Iran".

The second main theme involves Trump's desire to solve all American issues with Iran. Interviewees stated that peace in Gaza can be a model for Iran. Although security guarantees were not provided, the current situation in Gaza is better than before the agreement. While a two-state solution has not been reached, a fundamental political agreement has been established that created better conditions for Gaza. Participants noted that regional leaders have called Trump and indicated that Hamas has accepted conditions for the release of prisoners. Trump immediately announced this on social media. Such actions demonstrate the acting roles of Donald Trump that can also be repeated for Iran. Interviewee C stated: "Trump is also forward-thinking and wants America to maintain control over energy and global markets and wants America to be strengthened financially domestically and internationally. Therefore, he is putting pressure on world countries to get benefits." Regarding emphasizing increased cooperation instead of conflict, interview participants stated that the United States is seeking to reduce conflict and normalize relations between Iran and Zionist Regime. The United States and Zionist Regime believe that without normalizing relations between Iran and Zionist Regime, Iran will still pose a complex and long-term threat to Zionist Regime. Interviewee V, in response to the clauses of a limited agreement, stated: "In the scenario of a limited agreement, both parties may reach a deal that includes a gradual reduction of tensions and sanctions, along with confidence-building measures. This agreement could involve Iran's nuclear program for a specified period in exchange for the lifting of some sanctions".

The third main theme concerns the political will in Iran for a fair agreement. Interviewees stated that Iran has only one way forward: instead of abandoning Trump alongside Zionist Regime, Iran should position Trump between Iran and Zionist Regime, and this is achieved through direct negotiations with Trump. Interviewee M stated: "If Iran does not learn how to deal with Trump and does not enter direct negotiations and does not find a solution to the crisis in relations between the two, the situation in Iran-U.S. relations will move in the direction desired by Zionist Regime." Regarding efforts to secure nuclear rights and regional status, according to interviewees, Iran is a medium power, and the United States is the sole global

superpower, meaning there is no power balance between Iran and the United States. However, power imbalance does not prevent an agreement, as Iran has previously had agreements with the United States and can have another one now. Interviewee Q stated: "If Iran is given only the right to enrich and some sanctions are lifted, security and capital for development will be provided. If Trump announces his willingness to negotiate with Iran's right to enrich, Iran is ready for an agreement. However, Zionist Regime and some countries insist on a zero-enrichment option and prevent Trump from granting this concession to Iran." The need for a change in the nature of negotiation after the 12-day war was emphasized, along with the need to set aside Zionist Regime's threat to destroy without the need for identification. Interviewees highlighted the acceptance of limited enrichment in exchange for the partial lifting of sanctions and the necessity of diplomatic capabilities.

The fourth main theme involves Iran's desire to exit international isolation. According to interviewees, Iran seeks limited enrichment without sanctions; however, Trump has not accepted this so far and considers it equivalent to the POA. Trump wants a different agreement that secures all his demands regarding Iran. Interviewee D stated: "Iran could declare it is not seeking nuclear weapons, making it a clause in the agreement, as that aligns with its strategy. Iran can also include the peaceful enrichment right in another clause, stating that it is not aiming to deviate from the nuclear program. Another clause could be that Iran temporarily suspends enrichment as long as it does not need fuel. Because this clause is also on the table now and Iran is not enriching. Iran is currently paying for an activity it is not doing. For example, Iran could say it is not providing fuel for its nuclear program and has a practical need for fuel. Here, Trump could argue that Obama made a 15-year deal with Iran, but he has achieved an endless deal with Iran. Iran can also claim to have preserved its right to enrichment. However, as it currently does not need fuel, it has temporarily suspended enrichment. Regarding Zionist Regime, it could also commit not to attack each other's interests and allies in the region. If Iran was sure this plan would be accepted by the Trump administration, it would have reached an agreement today." Regarding interaction with the East and West based on geopolitical requirements, interviewees stated that the geopolitical reality of Iran requires it to maintain a balance in its relations with the West and East. Iran's tilt toward Russia and China is due to unresolved relations with the United States and in order to meet Iran's needs. Iran is seeking time to reach

consensus internally regarding its relations with the United States, a complex and key issue. However, the January 2026 protests indicate that economic problems in Iran have intensified as a result of sanctions. Interviewee E stated: "Trump might be willing to reduce the maximum pressure against Iran in exchange for some commitments from Iran, and reach a limited agreement with Iran, while not completely abandoning the pressures, sanctions, and restrictions on Iran. Therefore, a new nuclear agreement might be reached within this framework." Interviewee R added: "Iran needs to maintain internal cohesion; increase trust and political participation within the country; and enhance the people's influence within. These actions will have a reflection at the global level that the Iranian people have national cohesion and do not have a rift with their political system. This will lead to America having no desire for even limited war and focusing more on agreement".

d. Scenario of Peace and Tension Relief

Interviews were conducted with academics from universities about the peace and tension relief scenario, exploring their understanding and identification of the scenario's instances. The statements of the interviewees were categorized into 30 concepts, 8 initial themes, and 4 main themes. Table 4 is dedicated to the concepts, initial themes, and the main theme of the peace and tension relief scenario.

Table (4): Concepts, Initial Themes, and the Main Theme of the Scenario: Peace and Tension Relief

Concepts	Initial Themes	Main Themes
Lack of a unified strategy, the time-consuming formation of a unified attitude, the lack of necessary effort to resolve artificial dualities such as criticizing the international system or being peace-seeking, neutralizing the efforts of one faction by the opposing faction, labeling each as foreign or retrograde agents.	Some political currents perceive America as an enemy. Some political currents view America as a provider of the necessary technology and capital.	Lack of consensus within Iran on adopting a unified strategy toward America.
Emphasis on ideological conflict, lack of input from experts to provide appropriate solutions, tying America's interests to the lifting of sanctions, non-participation of the private sector in engaging with America's private sector.	Perception of America as a threat to the values of the Islamic Revolution	Lack of a peace-seeking approach based on economic development in Iran

Concepts	Initial Themes	Main Themes
Failure to take effective action despite the detrimental current situation in relations with the United States, refusing to prioritize the economy, continuing the confrontational approach with the United States and Zionist Regime, and opposing the global and regional order led by the United States.	America's perception as a supporter of Zionist Regime and global arrogance	
Continuation of tension, refusal to recognize Zionist Regime, support for actions of aligned groups against Zionist Regime, persistence of anti-American and Zionist slogans	Enhancing regional influence to counter America and Zionist Regime's interests	Lack of political will in Iran to shift from tension management to improving relations with America.
Tendency toward China and Russia instead of America, insistence on continuing nuclear and missile activities, preference for war over surrender, lack of trust and suspicion of America's intentions, viewing America as an existential threat	Perception of America as a threat to the survival of the state	
Power imbalance, persistence of broad sanctions, insistence on surrender, rejection of vital interests and real needs, failure to recognize regional and international standing.	Perception of the Iranian government as a threat to interests	Lack of political will in America to solve all issues based on identifying Iran's interests.
The hardline approach by Congress and the government, the lack of effort to build trust, the welcoming of both domestic and foreign opponents, harsh rhetoric against Iran's ruling body in media and political institutions.	Rejection of Iran's ideological identity and position	

Source: Research Findings

The first main theme within this scenario concerns the lack of consensus within Iran on adopting a unified strategy toward America. Interviewees raised the question of whether economic reforms can address economic challenges without resolving foreign policy

challenges and lifting sanctions. They stated that the reality is that to solve economic challenges in Iran, the current war-like and hostile conditions must be removed, because with the preservation of war-like and hostile conditions at the international level, economic reforms within the country are not possible. Without economic reforms, managing the country is also difficult. The Trump administration has set two conditions to end hostility and war conditions—war or submission—and these two conditions are unacceptable for Iran. One interviewee stated that the current dominant political current in Iran, in the face of war and military preparation for defense, prefers resistance over submission. Based on this, if Iran and the United States do not find a third way with mutual flexibility and do not make concessions to each other, war is inevitable, because for them, submission is a worse option than war. Regarding some political currents in the United States as the provider of the technology and capital needed, interviewee T observed: "The reformist current believes that an agreement with the United States can help solve part of the country's problems by lifting sanctions. Another part will be achieved by relying on experts and loyalty to the development plan." Interviewee Y added: "Both countries need to be flexible, which means both countries need to speak a new language. Iran's issue is to lift sanctions without surrendering. Currently, the JCPOA is also over. The Iranian Foreign Ministry needs to create an opportunity for the Iranian Chamber of Commerce, traders, and the private sector to talk to the American side. Perhaps through this channel, they can find a solution other than surrender and war to resolve the country's issues".

The second main theme involves the lack of a peaceful, development-based approach in Iran. According to interviewees, countries like Vietnam, which previously had tensions and conflicts of identity, ideology, and interests with the United States similar to Iran today, have undergone transformation in the last 30 years. The first transformation occurred in Vietnam's governance; that is, a unified approach was adopted by the governance system toward America, and this approach also pursued the people's demands. Interviewee U stated: "Iran's decision-making system is composed of a group of individuals who have conflicting strategic interests. That is, Iran's political decision-making system fundamentally disagrees on the choice of a specific strategy, for instance, hijab, social media filters, and relations with America." Regarding America's perception as Zionist Regime's supporter and global arrogance, according to interviewees, the strategic conflict between

Iran and America is divided into two parts: ideology and conflict of interests. Interviewee I stated: "Between 2,000 and 3,000 government officials in Iran are involved in the strategic conflict, and they have created the main problem for the country." The problem in Iran is the lack of consensus among political elites regarding the country's issues and solutions. Therefore, as long as there is no consensus in Iran about issues and their solutions, it is impossible to propose a solution to issues in Iran-America relations. To solve issues with America, interests must be found, because with conflict of interests, a ceasefire is possible, but issues are not resolved. A ceasefire represents a situation of neither war nor peace, maintaining the current situation. The situation of neither war nor peace is fragile; in such a situation, crises cannot be resolved, and the continuation of the state of neither war nor peace is difficult for Iran's economy. The decision-making system in Iran is composed of conflicting elements, and such a decision-making system does not have the capacity to solve problems.

The third main theme concerns the lack of political will in Iran to shift from tension management to improving relations with the United States. Iran views the expansion of regional influence and support for various regional groups as a means to counter threats from America and Zionist Regime against itself and to ensure security. Zionist Regime, in turn, has characterized these actions as an Iranian threat to itself. Interviewee O stated that "despite numerous obstacles, including Zionist Regime, Iran and the US could achieve peace. He advocates for a scenario of agreement and lifting sanctions; he attributes this to Iran's internal necessities and the strategic interests of the Trump administration." Regarding the perception of America as a threat to Iran's survival, Iran believes that America aims to weaken Iran's power structures and ultimately overthrow the Islamic Republic. Therefore, due to Iran's concerns about its survival, it cannot currently limit its capabilities as requested by Trump, especially regarding the missile issue. Interviewee I stated: "The chance of peace and the lifting of sanctions on Iran is completely weak. As long as the current leaders of both countries are in power, the likelihood of a comprehensive agreement and the lifting of sanctions is low; because it requires the normalization of relations between the two countries and the removal of the wall of distrust in their relations. One can find survival without relations with America, but development without relations with America is difficult".

The fourth main theme involves the lack of political will in

America to solve all issues based on identifying Iran's interests. Interviewees stated that America's inflexibility is due to its belief that Iran threatens its interests in the region and globally. Interviewee A stated: "The conflict of interests between various groups and their respective ideological issues prevent consensus on the concept of national interests and the welfare of the people. If governance systems are not coordinated, not only do they not reinforce each other, but they will also disrupt the administration of the country." When asked about the mission of foreign policy, interviewee L stated: "The mission of foreign policy should be to attract foreign investment and acquire technology to ensure the welfare of the people. Iran can be at peace with the world and criticize the international system or pursue a market economy; at the same time, it can consider social justice. These issues are not in conflict with each other. We need to move away from the duality." Regarding the rejection of ideological identity and Iran's position, according to interviewees, a structure has been created in America and Iran that rewards the creation and expansion of hostile relations between Iran and America. Disrupting this structure requires political will, organization, and considering each other's legitimate interests. An effort should be made to reward a structure that promotes friendship between the two countries, not the opposite. Interviewee S stated: "Any agreement on any issue depends on whether Iran and America want to change the current state of their relations or not. If the approach of the two countries remains the same, no agreement will be reached in any domain. Iran and America need to make tough political decisions to change their approach toward each other on various issues to reach agreement and improve relations. Such a determination does not exist at present."

2. Discussion

The primary objective of this study was to analyze plausible scenarios in Iran–U.S. relations during Trump's second term from the perspective of Iranian academic elites. Based on theoretical literature and field evidence, the four scenarios reflect perceived probabilities among interviewees rather than predictive forecasts. Rising tensions have been driven by the 12-day war, the U.S. attack on Iran's Fordow nuclear facility, continued U.S. support for Zionist Regime, efforts to disarm Iran's regional allies such as Hezbollah, and persistent threats by the Trump administration. The international system has entered a new phase in which the taboo against direct conflict between Iran and Zionist Regime was broken in 2024 and 2025, making renewed confrontation between Iran and

Zionist Regime or Iran and the United States increasingly plausible. If the current situation is not managed and a fundamental agreement is not reached, the fragility of relations following the January 2026 protests, combined with the risk of miscalculation, may lead to war. Three pathways exist to prevent Iran from acquiring nuclear weapons: complete dismantlement of its nuclear program; maintaining nuclear power while eliminating enrichment; or allowing limited enrichment under strict verification. The third option is more favorable to Iran but is rejected by Trump. Accordingly, at the core of the escalation and maximum economic and military pressure scenario—identified as most likely (70–80 percent) by 8 of 25 participants—the United States pursues isolating the Iranian government, weakening domestic resistance, opposing the export of revolutionary values, and limiting Iran's deterrent capabilities. These findings align with previous studies (Esfandiari & JamshiLi, 2015). Iran, in turn, emphasizes opposition to U.S. support for Zionist Regime and to the U.S.-led regional order. These contradictory positions, rooted in ideological, identity-based, and interest-driven conflicts, have intensified tensions during Trump's second term. Under current fragile conditions, crossing red lines could also trigger aerial and cyber-attacks. Beyond the nuclear issue, Iran's domestic protests in January 2026 contributed to heightened tensions amid intensified hostile rhetoric. Iran seeks to return to the pre-12-day war "neither war nor peace" scenario that long defined bilateral relations; however, international, regional, and domestic developments have made this increasingly difficult. Consequently, the risk of war rises in the absence of an agreement. Continued maximum economic, political, and military pressure—further intensified by the snapback mechanism—may push Iran toward diplomatic efforts to pursue a third option: neither war nor surrender, but a fair agreement based on mutual interests, facilitated by regional mediators such as Turkey and Qatar. According to interviewees, a limited agreement requires flexibility and reciprocal concessions from both sides. However, intervening factors such as hardliners in both countries and Zionist Regime complicate negotiations, explaining why only 6 of 25 participants favored this scenario. Previous studies suggest that changes in Iran's regional approach could encourage negotiations and sanctions relief (Rahimi, 2019; Rahimi, 2024), while others argue that the Trump administration seeks behavioral change primarily through pressure and threats (Sazian & Shafie, 2017), consistent with the first scenario. Interviewees identified the lack of political will in both

Tehran and Washington as the main obstacle to achieving comprehensive peace and de-escalation. The absence of domestic consensus in Iran, a unified strategy toward the United States, a development-oriented peace approach, and motivation to shift from tension management to relationship improvement were cited as secondary barriers, rendering this scenario unlikely during Trump's second term. Iranian officials argue that the United States is unwilling to recognize Iran's regional and international status, consistent with earlier findings (Alizadeh, 2009, pp. 103–104). The exploratory scenarios are partially consistent with Abu al-Qasim and Al-Sulami (2025) (Abu al-Qasim & Al-Sulami, 2025, pp. 5–8). The four core themes—escalation (Hobbesian culture), neither war nor peace (Lockean culture), limited agreement (Kantian–Lockean culture), and peace and de-escalation (Kantian culture)—are consistent with Alexander Wendt's theory on the forms of interstate relations.

Conclusion

The realization of any scenario in Iran–U.S. relations during Trump's second term through 2028 depends on multiple interacting political, strategic, and domestic factors. Based on the interviewees' assessments, 8 of 25 participants (32%) identified escalation of tensions and war as the most likely scenario, assigning it a relative probability of 70–80%. Seven interviewees (28%) considered the "neither war nor peace" scenario the most probable outcome, while 6 participants (24%) favored a limited agreement and 4 (16%) viewed peace and de-escalation as the most likely scenario, though all other scenarios remained plausible alternatives with lower probabilities. In the context of the January 2026 protests in Iran and growing U.S. and European pressure, the findings suggest that Tehran faces a narrowing strategic space. Under such conditions, Iran may seek a revised policy agenda aimed at de-escalation and sanctions relief without capitulation. The incorporation of academic policy proposals could help shape a third pathway—neither war nor surrender—in Iran's approach toward the United States. At the same time, continued hostility and the fragile strategic environment increase the risk of escalation and miscalculation. From a cost–benefit perspective, prolonged confrontation appears unlikely to serve the long-term interests of either side. Economic cooperation and sanctions relief mechanisms may therefore create opportunities for diplomacy and improve the prospects for peace and de-escalation.

References

- Abu al-Qasim, M. H., & Al-Sulami, S. (2025). *The future of Iran's nuclear program under Trump's coercive diplomacy*. Retrieved from <https://rasanah-iiis.org/english/wp-content/u>
- Alizadeh, A. A. (2009). The roots of the conflict between Iran and America. *Bi-Quarterly Journal of Religious Anthropology*, 6(21). Retrieved from https://raj.smc.ac.ir/article_2613.html (In Persian)
- Braun, V., & Clarke, V. (2006). Using thematic analysis in psychology. *Qualitative Research in Psychology*, 3(2), 77–101.
- Choudhury, J. U. (2025). Strategic patience or strategic shift? Analyzing Iran's regional diplomacy in the post-Abraham Accords era. *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs*, 15(2), 351–368.
- Esfandiari, H., & Jamshidi, M. (2015). Discursive conflict in the fundamentals of foreign policy of the United States of America and the Islamic Republic of Iran. *Quarterly Journal of Islamic Revolution Studies*. Retrieved from https://irsj.ihu.ac.ir/article_200194.htm (In Persian)
- Inat, K. & et al. (2025). *Iran-US negotiations: Core dynamics, expectations, and scenarios*. Retrieved from <https://www.setav.org/en/iran-us-negotiations-core-dynamics-expectations->
- Mottaqi, E. (2006). The conflict of two ideologies: Examining the pattern and process of American confrontation against Iran. *Zamaneh Quarterly*, 5(44). Retrieved from <https://www.noormags.ir/view/fa/articlepage/> (In Persian)
- Nikunhad, A. & et al. (2022). Future scenarios of Iran-US relations in a five-year horizon based on a scenario writing approach. *Quarterly Journal of Future Studies of the Islamic Revolution*, 2(3). Retrieved from https://fsir.ihu.ac.ir/article_206921.html (In Persian)
- Rahimi, F. S., & Izadi, F. (2026). Iran-United States relations after the Islamic Revolution: A failure of detente. *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs*, 16(1), 35–54.
- Rahimi, R. (2019). Trump's nationalism in the context of the Jacksonian tradition and its impact on Iran-US tensions. *Quarterly Journal of World Politics*, 8(3), Serial 29. Retrieved from https://interpolitics.guilan.ac.ir/article_3910.html (In Persian)
- Rahimi, R. (2024). Analysis of America's containment policy toward Iran with emphasis on the Biden era. *Politics Quarterly*, 54(2). <https://doi.org/10.22059/JPQ.2024.338979.1007927> (In

Persian)

Sazian, M. R., & Shafiei, N. (2017). Outlook for Iran-US relations until 2030: Possible scenarios. *World Politics*, 6(4). Retrieved from https://interpolitics.guilan.ac.ir/article_2789.html (In Persian)

Sharif, H. (2025). *Exploring possible scenarios for Iran's return to nuclear negotiations*. Retrieved from <https://futureuae.com/azdare.php/Mainpage/Item/10102/t>

Toossi, S. (2025). *Four scenarios for war and peace with Iran*. Retrieved from <https://responsiblestatecraft.org/us/US-Iran-war/>

Wendt, A. (1999). *Social theory of international politics*. Cambridge: Cambridge University Press.

Wendt, A. (2015). *Quantum mind and social science*. London: Cambridge University Press.