

## Examining the European Union's Normative Approach Toward Iran (1993–2024)

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### Abstract

The relationship between Iran and European countries dates back centuries, rooted in a long history of interaction shaped by mutual interests and shifting geopolitical contexts. Given this deep historical background and their unique strategic circumstances, both parties remain vital to one another. The evolving landscape of opportunities and threats in Tehran–Brussels relations has led both Iran and the European Union to consistently reassess their bilateral ties. In this context, Iran and the EU take into account Europe's economic, political, and security capabilities, alongside the broader trajectory of their longstanding relationship. A critical turning point in these relations has been the European Union's strategic shift from a normative approach—grounded in the promotion of values such as human rights and democracy—towards a more security-oriented posture. This transformation has significantly influenced the nature of Iran–EU engagement. This article addresses the central question: Why has the EU's strategy toward Iran shifted between 1993 and 2024? To answer this, the study adopts a comprehensive approach, drawing on the theoretical frameworks of Neorealism and Constructivism. It argues that while the European Union has historically positioned itself as a normative power—basing its external actions on shared European values—external pressures, including the 2008 financial crisis, migration flows, and the rise of right-wing populism, have increasingly pushed the EU toward prioritizing security concerns. The research employs a qualitative methodology to analyze this shift, offering insights into how structural and ideational factors have shaped the EU's evolving stance toward Iran.

**Keywords:** Neorealism, Constructivism, Iran, European Union, Normative power, Security.

## Introduction

The European Union (EU) is one of the most crucial actors in the international arena. It has created original discourses on various issues, including human rights, individual and social freedoms, and security issues. This discourse has been a source and inspiration for many thinkers, scientists, and politicians. Considering the sociopolitical factors in this Union, one of their unique points of view has been the importance of human rights and maintaining and increasing their related capacities. Europeans dominated the discussion of norms during the 1970s to 1990s with an extraordinary point of view, which led to the inclusion of standard norms such as human rights and freedom clauses in all European recommendations or resolutions with emphasis, which has been defended by many. This explanation and other normative issues emphasised by the EU, such as proposals related to dealing with the death penalty or humiliating and violent punishments or recommendations related to preventing armed and inhumane conflicts, all contribute to creating, strengthening, and spreading European normative power. (Peshkopia, & Trahan, 2022, p. 757) A characteristic of this Union is that it has become normative in that its emphasis and follow-up have always been part of the EU's demands, resulting in the EU gaining its normative status worldwide.

Historically, the relationship between Iran and Europe has attracted the attention of politicians and scientists. This attention is specifically when past kings, especially Mohammad Reza Pahlavi Shah, enjoyed good and almost continuous relations with European countries. This is also true after the Islamic Revolution of Iran and the formation of the EU in its current form, which has had many ups and downs. From the hostage crisis, Salman Rushdie's murder Fatwa and the Mykonos court to the nuclear debate and JCPOA, however, the beginning of the coherent EU's approach to Iran was in the early 1990s, following the end of the eight-year war and the sacred defence, during which the EU began critical dialogue with Tehran (Adebahr, & Alcaro, 2021, p. 378). This time has affected two general areas of Tehran-Brussels policy: human rights and nuclear proliferation. At this time, the EU, as one of the leading supporters of human rights and human-friendly norms in the world, has adopted a cautious approach towards Iran in such a way that, by compiling and repeatedly sending recommendations and proposals, they requested the creation of a favourable environment for human rights in Iran, although these proposals were never implemented. It did not work to

send a letter against Iran. (Kienzle, 2012, p. 84) However, since Iran's nuclear program was introduced in 2002, human rights issues have been overshadowed. The revelation of Iran's nuclear activities in August 2002 led to a gradual deterioration in relations between Iran and the European Union. During this period, the EU made an increasing number of statements condemning the situation of human rights. (Bostani, 2021, p. 25) Still, the EU refrained from compiling these statements and refusing to implement extreme measures. This is the beginning of a period during which the EU has been worried about possible hostile activities in the name of Iran and is attempting to prevent any possible violent actions by Iran against European countries by controlling the nuclear issue to the best of its ability. In June 2009, this was particularly evident following the Iranian presidential elections.

As mentioned, relations between Iran and European countries are several thousand years old, so there have been ups and downs and different approaches. Nevertheless, because this article has attempted to study Iran-EU relations from 1993 to 2024 and focused on normative behaviours, it should first discuss a brief history of these relations. This will explain the formation and interaction between the two sides during the abovementioned period. It will also discuss the European approach to norms and then will discuss the reasons for choosing this approach, explain it from a European perspective, and examine the Iranian reaction. As a final note, we will explain why this issue has faded in today's process of negotiating European treaties.

Some International Relations scholars believe that the European Union was founded on the principles and norms accepted in Europe, including human rights, freedom, freedom of expression, democracy, and respect for the law. (Jenichen, 2022, p. 8) In the EU's approvals, contracts, and resolutions, emphasis was always placed on the observance of such cases. In the 1990s, human rights clauses became integral to EU contracts. It was necessary to approve such legal and normative matters, especially after a significant increase in European economic cooperation, establishing it as an important economic power. The EU, emphasising such norms and values, can be seen as a normative power. This power, as proposed by Ian Manners, a University of Copenhagen professor, in 2002, is a result of the EU's intellectual and practical characteristics, which attempt to publish and spread its approved values and norms based on its rules and performance (Manners, 2002, p. 246). Following Ian Manners' theory of normative power, the EU has the

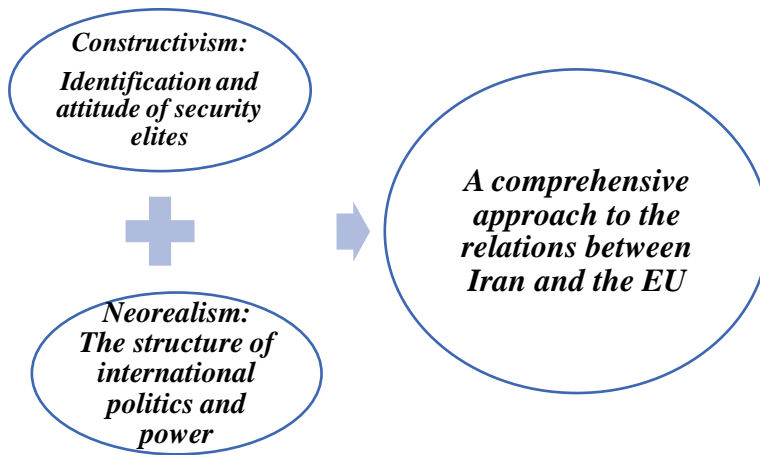
potential to influence the international environment through its values and normative principles as a kind of “Normative Power.” The author of this theory distinguishes between “Military Power” and “Economic Power” and argues that European influence is primarily based upon values such as peace, human rights, democracy, the rule of law, freedoms, liberty, peace, and respect for human dignity. This theory emphasises that instead of using hard power, the EU seeks to influence through soft power and apply norms that cause change and transformation at the international level.(Manners, 2001, p. 11) This article discusses the EU's concerns about normative issues, including human rights, and their impact on the relationship between the EU and Iran and the Iranian response to such actions. Moreover, it will examine why Norms and Security are increasingly essential and prominent within the EU and why their position is always rotating. The primary objective of this article is to answer the fundamental question of “Why has the EU's strategy towards Iran changed from 1993 to 2024?” and analyse and evaluate its policy.

### **1. Theoretical and Conceptual Framework**

The complex relationship between Iran and the EU and its various levels has been better understood by applying a hybrid theoretical framework. To address all aspects of Tehran-Brussels relations and to take into consideration the inadequacy of one theory in general and the lack of precise explanation of such vital matters as this decades-long and ups and downs relationship, this article is based on combining two theories known as “Neorealism” or “Structuralism” and “Constructivism”. This issue will be examined with greater precision and meticulousness with these two theories, as two camera lenses are used to explore the issue. Because of the involvement of many material and spiritual factors, the relations between the EU and Iran are highly complex and have extraordinary subtleties. This issue needs to be examined more closely and more precisely than others. The meaning of using these two theories in the present text does not mean that they are simultaneously combined and integrated into one another; instead, one can look at the problem in question from a specific perspective and give it meaning. Due to their multi-dimensionality, combination, and complexity, International Relations gaps require a comprehensive examination. The theories presented in this article are like coloured lenses: if placed in front of eyes, they perceive the world differently. Although some aspects of the world appear similar, such as shapes,

many features, such as light and colour shading, seem very different. These features represent alternate universes in some ways. (Dunne, 2024, p. 11 )

Additionally, in strategic security documents in the EU, terrorism, mass killings, and organised crime are highly emphasised and considered dangerous. (Valentino, 2005, p. 174) As Iran constantly strives to remain strong in front of others, European officials have paid attention to these issues in the relationship between Europe and Iran. Furthermore, the concepts of national security, power, and the international system are fundamental in this regard, and they should be considered from a neorealism perspective. Neorealist theories provide a comprehensive understanding of the importance of power and its role in issues and conflicts, and they also give the researcher a correct understanding of issues like State, Survival and self-help, so many of the researcher's problems are related to weapons and military or nuclear power issues. (Waltz, 2015, p. 624) By combining these two theories, as shown below, we obtain a complete picture of the set of relations between the two sides, bringing it closer to the mind and the turning points of these relationships. As evident in this figure, on the one hand, using the neorealism theory of political structures and international power, or in other words, the complex foundations of research are studied, and on the other hand, utilising constructivism to examine different identities and attitudes. A deeper analysis will be conducted by analysing the issue from the perspective of the elites, and more comprehensively, the soft foundations of the research will also be examined. A comprehensive perspective will be presented as a consequence of these two theories. This will lead to a better understanding and clarification of the dark corners of the complex relations between Iran and the EU.



**Figure (1): Hybrid model**

Years after realism's hegemony over the knowledge of International Relations, realists experienced changes to their internal structure, dividing them into several groups, including Structural, Neoclassical, Defensive, and Offensive Realists. (Meibauer, 2023, p. 350) The goals of structural realism are defined and expressed here in the following speeches and research. A fundamental objective of structural realism or neorealism is to achieve balance in international policies and international structure analyses and ensure that countries seek to maximise their relative abilities to attain national goals. (Edinger, H, 2022 p. 1887) In reality, after the decline in the persuasive power of realists, Kent Waltz explains a new way to demonstrate realism intellectually. In scientific communities, this innovation has been termed "Structural Realism" or "Neorealism." Waltz's emphasis on structure can explain this name. Rather than creating a new theory, this new line of thought established by Kent Waltz aims to establish a new and structural approach to realism. (NYE and Rosecrance, 1988, p. 237) Due to this new thinking, the researchers took on a different perspective regarding the international system and its new forces. In Waltz's view, an influential theory demonstrates the systemic nature of international relations because countries' behaviour influences each other. (Kuhn, 1986, p. 15) This new type of realism, Contrary to his old model, he decided to take an internal look at the diagnosis of the problems of the international system and provide solutions, as opposed to classical approaches that have an external view, and this provides a better understanding of how the global structure and



changes affect international units. (Waltz, 1990, p. 33)

In contrast to traditional realism, which placed power at the centre of its goals and justified any means to obtain it as the highest value in international relations, neo-realists use power only to pursue it. Security is essential to them because it ensures the survival and security of a political unit, and they believe that increasing power is somewhat negative since it leads competitors to increase their power, which in turn causes the “balance of power” to be restored, which is dangerous for the world. (Juncos & Joseph, 2020, p. 293) When Kenneth Waltz presents his material scientifically, he points out two major points that are among the most significant points of difference between classical realism and neorealism. These two points are: a) ensuring that systemic analysis and international system structure are considered. The importance of government as an analytical unit needs to be recognised.

As a result of this theory, in which the international system is based on the logic of chaos and how power is distributed on a systemic level, states have a considerable influence on their options and possibilities when attempting to maintain or increase their power. Among the most widely accepted theories of international relations, his hegemony has been widely spread and is widely considered the most popular theory around the world (Waltz, 1979, p. 144).

There has been a new discourse among international relations scholars since the mid-1980s that is challenging many of the traditional concepts of international relations, a movement known as structuralism. International relations scholars have greatly benefited from the development of this theory to such a degree that there has been an assertion that the “structural-ideological turn” has influenced the development of this theory of world order and has moved the boundaries of international relations (McCourt, 2022, p. 140). Nicholas Onuf was the first person to scientifically introduce the term constructivism into international relations literature in the 1980s (Onuf & Klink, 1989, p. 153). In contrast, Alexander Wendt promoted and narrated this type of attitude most effectively, and Wendt made the most significant effort to illustrate this theory (Wendt, 1999). The structuralist approach focuses on the constructive role of government interaction in the international system and describes constructivism as a bridge between logical and reflective thinking. By addressing issues that were less discussed in international relations, constructivism sought to address unanswered questions. By emphasising the entry and study of non-material parts

of existence, they highlighted the importance of this particular non-material part. The main difference between constructivist and traditional views is the importance of these Ideasa (McDonald, 2023, p. 56).

There is a consensus among constructivist thinkers that the most crucial principle in international relations goes beyond material and social factors. The building norms of a society, one of the most important social elements, have always been at the centre of attention and form the basis of relations between countries. It is the same as playing chess, in which the player must have a specific plan for his moves, and the opponent can plan and respond to the opponent's moves accordingly. Unlike the realists, who placed a higher value on power and interests, they have reread the norms and examined their relationship to government national interests. Smith focuses most on the historical norms of nations and the social complexities associated with them. In his book "The Moral Purpose of the State," which is his doctoral thesis under the supervision of Peter J. Katzenstein, one of the most prominent theorists in this field, he analysed He deals with the norms of different societies, and his intellectual foundation is that throughout history, nations have chosen their interests and values as their goals and strived to achieve them (Reus-Smit, 1999, p. 15). One of the most important points emphasised by constructivists is "Identity". Identity is one of the immaterial yet extremely influential topics in this theory. Identities have been forged by influencing governments' behaviour and based on the internal norms of governments. These norms are a fundamental component of establishing the interests of a government. A key element of constructivism is the concept of the "Axis." The constructivist approach to security studies emphasises that security and insecurity arise from how we think about these issues. The constructivist security approach stresses that security originates from mental factors before material factors (Samoudi Pilehroud, 2019, p. 47). The constructivists provide three essential opinions that sum up their ideas: a) Governments serve as the primary units for international analysis. In the international system, the main structure is the norms of nations rather than the materiality of subjective subjects. c) State identity and interests are derived from these norms (Lawson, S., 2023, p. 1976).

As Ian Manners (2002) introduced the concept of "Normative Power Europe", it has been widely discussed in research concerning the foreign relations of the European Union. NPE argues that the EU is distinct from traditional powers by its normative nature, one



of the central ideas. Manners asserts that to achieve its power and legitimacy, it places norms and values such as peace, freedom, democracy, the rule of law, and respect for human rights at the heart of its relations with the rest of the world. (Manners, 2002, p: 244) European countries have always promoted NPE. We might encounter three approaches that call for the extension of accepted European norms. For example, Costa (2019) calls for revising the assumption that external norm promotion always relies upon shared domestic values. Normative power is not undermined by a view that non-compliant behaviour results from conflicting norms but is an integral part of it. Nevertheless, many uses of NPE and studies of EU foreign relations generally assume that the EU's international actions are guided by norms and values (Costa, 2019, p. 793). A different perspective is taken by Diez (2013), who, relying on Gramsci's concept of hegemony, contends that power in NPE is determined by ideas and consensus rather than material power (as in traditional realist conceptualisations). It is a constant struggle among social forces for hegemony. To achieve hegemonic status, social forces must demonstrate leadership within the broader economic and social discursive contexts. Based on Diez's argument, attention needs to be paid to the EU foreign policy and the involvement of non-state actors in the process of political struggles. (Diez, 2013, p. 200). At last, Wagner re-states NPE as a "Liberal European Power" by drawing upon liberal research agendas. He identifies interest groups, including business and non-governmental organisations (NGOs), as internal sources constraining the EU decision-makers' behaviour and institutional rules. Thus, he emphasises that "the EU policies are independent of a set of liberal norms." In reality, they are the result of political struggles in which coalitions of member states and non-state actors face off against each other. (Wagner, 2017, p. 1406)

Providing a framework for research in this field, Manners (2002) articulated the values of the European Union and theorised the channels through which they may be projected. He explained that the EU has five core values (Peace, Liberty, Democracy, Human Rights, and the Rule of law), four minor values (Social Progress, Antidiscrimination, Sustainable Development, and Good Governance), and five minor values. Because of their ubiquitous nature, Manners strongly emphasises the importance of human rights, which are the focus of most of this article. (Manners 2002, p. 242).

Since the beginning of convergence, the EU has placed much emphasis on issues related to human norms, such as human rights,

in a very different way than on other topics, which has continued until now. This Union has an exceptional mechanism regarding human rights violations compared to others. Based on these norms and values among European human communities, which have consolidated especially after the world wars and after observing the devastation caused by vile human behaviour, this emphasis can be attributed to them (van Dijk, van Hoof, 2023, p. 283). From this point of view and due to the importance of human rights for European countries, they have always stressed the importance of human rights in the founding treaties of the Union, from the first founding treaty to the parliament (Treaty on the European Union) and other cases. As an example, Article 2 of the Treaty establishing the European Union, emphasising human rights, emphasises human rights as one of the principles of its formation, and this insistence continues until Article 6, which states that the same fundamental and fundamental rights are expressed in the legal principles of the European Union. Velluti considers joining the European Convention on Human Rights a mandatory obligation for all member states, and the defence of fundamental rights is one of the core principles of the EU (Velluti, 2016, p. 43).

Europe's fundamental rights and values are, in fact, the rule of law, freedom, democracy, equality of all before the law, and respect for human rights, which European elites have emphasised due to their importance and unique position. The EU has placed a high value on fundamental rights issues, to the extent that in the 1992 Treaty of Maastricht and its Article 3, one of the objectives of its foreign and security policy is to safeguard human freedoms, strengthen human rights, promote democracy, and ensure the respect of human rights. Under the headings of the United Nations Charter, the European Union's relations with other actors are based on eliminating poverty and protecting human rights. The Treaty establishing EU also mentions these principles in Article 21, including "the rule of law, protection of human rights and fundamental rights, respect for human dignity, and respect for and equality with the UN Charter." (European Parliament: 2018, p. 1). Immediately following these cases, the Council of Europe published a "Strategic Framework on Human Rights and Democracy" in 2012 as well as prepared an operational plan for its implementation, which was made available to all members and other countries in which the plan and program outlined the principles, structures, and priorities of EU for improving performance and efficiency over the next ten years. They will be sanctioned if they violate the European

Union's rules. The Amsterdam Treaty of 1998 legalised and approved this decision. The Nice Treaty of 2000 confirmed and strengthened it (Chalmers et 2024, p. 28). Eleven official executive instructions have been published in this collection of European Union activities since 1998. These instructions include action plans, strategies, approvals, and other official documents. Although they are not binding from an executive point of view, this document is intended to be sent as a recommendation and suggestion to all representatives of this Union worldwide. The Common European Policy, the Council of Europe, is primarily responsible for normative issues and, as an executive body, also handles EU external relations. In addition to adopting conclusions, recommendations, decisions, and sanctions on armed conflicts, human rights issues, terrorism, and nuclear proliferation, the Council also takes operational measures in this area as part of the European Security and Defense Policy. As part of its mission to maintain peace, build states, and establish the rule of law in countries with unstable political environments, it may send civilians, police, and military personnel. As the highest representative of the EU in foreign affairs and security policy, he is responsible for implementing these policies. He oversees the EU's diplomatic agency, the Foreign Service. As a final step, the Council also takes critical formal decisions on the accession process of new member states by establishing that countries are candidate members and determining their accession process following the Copenhagen criteria.(Lelieveldt, & Princen, 2023, p. 276). It can be divided into the following categories:

- a) Dealing with the death penalty or humiliating punishments
- b) Topics related to human rights, children's and women's rights
- c) Increasing individual, social, and religious freedoms
- d) Supporting spreading democracy (European Parliament, 2018, p. 2).

The table below refers to the numerous resolutions the EU issued against Iran between 2008 and 2014 to illustrate the importance of this issue and the European Union's human rights position.

**Table (1): Resolutions issued by the European Parliament on human rights in Iran between 2008 and 2014.**

	Subjects	Title	Date	Number-Reso
1	The situation of human rights in Iran (death penalty and execution, stoning, prohibition of freedom of speech, ban on freedom of opinion, prohibition of freedom of religion (especially Bahais and Sufis)) represents the nuclear issue of relations between Iran and the European Union.	The situation in Iran	January 31, 2008	P6-TA-2008-0031
2	Discrimination against women, particularly when it comes to marriage, divorce, inheritance and the non-appointment of women as judges in Iran, as well as gender discrimination and punishment by stoning.	The status of women's rights in Iran	April 24, 2008	P6_TA (2008) 5018
3	The procedure for convicting juvenile offenders and imposing the death penalty	Execution of Juvenile Offenders in Iran	June 19, 2008	B6-2008-0327
4	Iranian legal convictions and the death penalty	Death penalty in Iran	September 4, 2008	P6-TA-2008-0412
	Demanding the release of Baha'i political, religious, and minority prisoners	The case of Shirin Ebadi	January 15, 2009	P260-0T9A-0029
5	Human rights, the core issue of Iran-EU relations, are covered by most of the resolution's clauses (including 12 clauses) (freedom of prisoners, political activists, women's rights defenders, journalists, and bloggers after the 2009 elections).	Iran's situation	February 10, 2010	P7-TA-2010-0016
6	Human rights violations against these two extraordinary individuals	The case of Zahra Bahrami and	September 8, 2010	P270-1T0A-0310

	<b>Subjects</b>	<b>Title</b>	<b>Date</b>	<b>Number-Reso</b>
	(Zahra Bahrami and Sakineh Mohammadi Ashtiani) include the death penalty, stoning, prohibition of freedom of speech, ban on freedom of opinion, and prohibition of freedom of the press.	Sakineh Mohammadi Ashtiani		
7	Several freedoms are associated with political prisoners, journalists, and human rights defenders, such as Nasrin Sotoudeh's freedom of expression and opinion.	The case of Nasrin Sotoudeh	January 20, 2011	P270-1T1A-0021
8	Iranian internal circumstances, Iranian nuclear affairs, human rights, the majority of its clauses (including 27 clauses), severe discrimination against women in terms of their political and social rights, and executions of Baha'i minorities, human rights defenders, lawyers, students, and journalists.	European Union's approach towards Iran	March 10, 2011	P7-TA-20001916-
9	Releasing prisoners, political activists, and human rights defenders is particularly important.	Violation of human rights in Iran	November 17, 2011	P270-1T1A-0517
10	There are violations of human rights in Iran, including freedom of speech and opinion, freedom of the press, and the death penalty in Iran's nuclear debates.	The status and nuclear program of Iran	February 2, 2012	P7_TA (2012) 002 4
11	Human rights violations, such as the prohibition on freedom of expression, opinion, and assembly, and the discrimination against Baha'is and Sufis regarding their social, political, and cultural rights.	The situation of ethnic minorities	June 14, 2012	B7-2012-0311

	Subjects	Title	Date	Number-Reso
12	Azadi Nasrin Sotoudeh and Jaafar Panahi (winners of the 2012 Sakharov Prize)	The release of political prisoners and human rights defenders, the acceptance of the human rights situation in Iran (emphasis on the issue of group execution and the death of the Iranian blogger, Sattar Beheshti)	November 22, 2012	B7-2012-2877
13	Human rights and regional issues (violations of human rights in Iran, including prohibitions on freedom of expression and opinion, freedom of information, freedom of assembly, freedom of civil movement, violations of women's rights, the death penalty, unfair trials and criminal law, discrimination against women and those of a particular gender or sexual orientation). There is also the nuclear issue from the perspective of Iranian relations with Europe.	European Union strategy towards the Islamic Republic of Iran	April 31, 2014	B7-0279/2014

## 2. Iran–EU Relations Through a Normative Lens (1993–2015)

According to traditional theories such as realism and liberalism and some non-traditional theories such as constructivism, the most influential role at this level is that of the State since international relations are the field of action between actors at this level. To analyse their unique contributions, the researcher must consider their knowledge. The two theories considered in this study, namely



neo-realism and constructivism, have always stressed that the role of the State cannot be replaced, and, on the other hand, their role in international relations is defined by the exchange of messages between these political units in international relations. (Kauppi, and Viotti, 2023, p. 210). In this case, understanding each actor from others depends on the behaviour that the other shows and the behaviour that he presents to others. Thus, this continuity and continuous movement establishes a system where each output is transformed into another input. This results in a feedback system that can be observed. Consequently, each unit's behaviour plays a crucial role in identifying each political unit as an individual. Therefore, we will briefly examine the physical relationships between the two parties from a normative perspective. The constructivist theory and cognitive approaches can fully explain such an approach.

The EU's standard foreign policy and security aims to resolve conflicts and foster international ties by relying on diplomacy and respecting international law ,and internationally, the EU has a significant role in trade, humanitarian assistance, and development cooperation. The primary objective of the EU's standard foreign and security policy is to maintain peace, strengthen international security, promote international cooperation, and promote and enhance democracy, respect for human rights and fundamental freedoms, and the rule of law (Ahadi, 2022, p. 27) Therefore, when looking at the relations between Iran and the European Union, one may understand the relationship as one influenced by the norms desired by Europe. (Mahmoudi, 2023, p. 10) Normative elements have existed throughout this process. Accordingly, a scientific study of Tehran-Brussels relations can only be conducted considering European norms.

After the hostage crisis of 1979, the Iran-Iraq war, and the Fatwa regarding the killing of Salman Rushdie, European positions towards Iran and specific issues related to it began to increase. Due to the lack of coordination and cooperation between the governments of Europe and the United States, most of their attention was devoted to normative issues surrounding Iran and the revolution that had just occurred. Most discussions during this period focused on the imposed war, and Europe attempted to mediate the conflict. In light of issues such as the attack on the American embassy and its capture, as well as Imam Khomeini's Fatwa regarding the killing of Salman Rushdie, European countries have tended to approach human rights discussions more cautiously

and to emphasise this issue more strongly (Hashemi, and Navazeni, 2022, p. 44).

During this Critical Dialogue, Iranian participation in international forums and discussions about human rights and peace in the Middle East increased, and the fight against terrorism took place after the Edinburgh Conference of 1992. Iran has come out of previous isolation and has had a significant emergence. Furthermore, after the first Persian Gulf War ended, European countries sought to assume more impact in the international arena. They attempted to establish themselves in this arena robustly and away from the shadow of the United States. (Ali, 2021, p. 210) Additionally, Iran is a significant source of energy as well, and they showed great interest during the negotiation period. In this period of talks, the European Union, from its perspective, has placed a great deal of emphasis on the preservation and expansion of human rights and has viewed Iran's disregard for them as a form of non-compliance with international norms.

The government of Hashemi Rafsanjani, who was managing a war-torn country with many disasters, decided to establish relations with other governments and invite them to attend and invest in Iran to meet the economic needs and inject capital into the country's economy. Therefore, European governments would be one of the most appropriate options for entering Iran's capital market and providing Iran with financial and material resources. Although this period saw the expansion of economic relations and the increase in trade relationships, from the West's point of view, it was one of the worst periods for human rights in Iran (Afshari, 2011, p. 167).

After this period, which was accompanied by the presence of Seyyed Mohammad Khatami in the presidency of Iran, the relations between them improved, and Iran's positive response and cooperation accompanied the legal-normative concerns of Europe. In response to past events, Iranian de-escalation policies were followed by positive responses from Europe, and the two countries strived to become closer, particularly regarding human rights concerns. In response to this issue, Europe continued to resist war and embargo in the face of the United States and emphasised dialogue-oriented positions, evident after September 11 (Petito, 2004, p. 15). Europe was able to continue these coordinations until 2002, following the disclosure of Iran's nuclear program. However, after that, it had to simultaneously maintain two positions in its relationships with Iran: first, normative issues such as good governance and human rights, and second, issues related to Iran's

nuclear program and whether it is peaceful or dangerous. Accordingly, these years indicate the beginning of a shift in the European approach of the past few decades. As a result, Europe, which has always taken a normative approach as well as a legal-ethical approach to its issues, has now been confronted with new challenges, such as Iran's nuclear weapons and terrorism. Even though these issues are new for Europe, they also raise alarm bells because a dangerous nuclear power could emerge near the eastern borders of Europe and pose a threat to the interests of Europe in West Asia. While these possibilities were fragile at the beginning of the nuclear crisis and during its early years, and Europe wanted to relax and there was no reason for this issue to be prolonged and critical, the negotiations on Iran's nuclear case became one of the most complex due to lack of mutual understanding and existing inconsistencies. Ultimately, the cases became the most critical political (Kaye & Wehrey, 2023, p. 115).

Throughout this period and during the comprehensive dialogue, Europe focused on normative issues and fundamental rights, such as individual and social freedoms, execution disputes, stoning disputes, and the like.

- a. Human Rights
- b. Democracy
- c. Terrorism
- d. Weapons of mass destruction

With the emergence of the nuclear issue and Iranian problems, this type of dialogue, conducted in good faith and with commitment, became increasingly important for both sides and could result in significant progress. High Representative of the EU and responsible for direct negotiations with Tehran, Xavier Solana, emphasised the importance of improving human rights issues when establishing relations between Tehran and Brussels. However, other issues, such as fighting terrorism and promoting peace in the Middle East, were also frequently discussed during the meeting. Meanwhile, other issues were discussed on the sidelines besides human rights. In the meantime, two cooperation agreements between Iran and the EU pushed relations toward convergence (Malakoutikhah, 2018, p. 7). First, there was a trade and cooperation agreement. Then, there was an exceptional human rights dialogue. Since this year, the discussions between Iran and the EU have mainly taken place within the framework of these two agreements, and they have been conducted under the same headings in the meetings. (Ali, 2021, p. 712) Even though all efforts were made to remove the barriers to

dialogue and to ensure that both sides were satisfied during this period, the European side repeatedly expressed regret by emphasising that Iran does not fully respect human rights. The resolution and its declarations were officially acknowledged, with this type of official declaration only reaching eight cases during the presidency of Seyyed Mohammad Khatami, including:

- a. European Parliament resolution on relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran in 2001.
- b. The resolution of the European Parliament regarding the Islamic Republic of Iran on January 13, 2004.
- c. European Union statement on human rights violations in Iran, June 20, 2004.
- d. Statement of the European Union towards Iran on March 25, 2004.
- e. Declaration of the European Union on Iran's November 24, 2004 arrest.
- f. European Union Statement on Freedom of Expression of November 23, 2005.
- g. Annual report of the European Union in 2005.
- h. Statement of the European Union on human rights situation, December 20, 2005.

### **3. From Norms to Security: The JCPOA and Its Aftermath (2015–2024)**

After the talks between the representatives of the EU and Iran did not reach a conclusion, and at the same time as Mahmoud Ahmadinejad came to power in Iran, and as a result of the fundamental changes in the discourse and foreign policy of Iran, particularly towards Israel and Western countries, both sides have adopted very different positions. Iran's government expressed a sense of justice and a lack of trust in the West during this period. On the other hand, it never considered European countries as human rights advocates and adopted policies from the past, such as those of the 1980s, which increased tensions in the region. Due to this transregional nature, Iran's relations with the EU became cold (Vague, 2024, p. 60).

As Iran distrusted Europe during this period, the EU issued several statements and resolutions opposing the violation of human rights, resulting in significant damage to relations between the two parties from various political, economic, security, and normative perspectives. There needs to be preparation for progress. In the second term of Ahmadinejad's presidency, this distance increased

significantly, and with the support of European countries to the protesters in the 2018 elections, this distance reached its maximum level. Both parties expressed their displeasure with the other party's behaviour during this period by sending different messages and attempting to control the other party's actions. By establishing independent European sanctions and supporting numerous UN sanctions, the EU exerted considerable pressure on Iran to control its behaviour to a great extent. Conversely, at this time, when there have been some security threats to European nations and with Iran's nuclear issue becoming more complex, the primary concern regarding Iran has shifted from human rights to nuclear matters. As a result, the EU also changed its approach to Iran and considered Iran a troublesome actor, unlikely to make unexpected moves (Warnaar, 2013, pp. 127-130). It was necessary to change the primary approach and movement, as now, due to international problems such as Terrorism, immigration, and Economic crisis, the international system is also moving towards security, and this change implies the centrality of security issues instead of normative issues. It has been noted that this change occurred around 2007 (Fayos, 2016, p. 33). According to what has been said, Europe took a very normative approach after the Islamic Revolution, particularly after the EU was established in 1992. Instead of intra-region and extra-regional treaties or proposals, their resolutions emphasised preserving, expanding, and protecting human rights. This was one of their main objectives and responsibilities in the world. Due to the international system's structure and the power that the West gained after the collapse of the Soviet Union, the European Union has been attempting to spread its culture and ideas without a dangerous enemy. Since then, however, European policies toward Iran have changed significantly due to increased security issues. According to foreign policy studies, democracy and norms are influenced and affected by security and economic factors in most cases. For example, the EU prioritises its security interests over its norms, especially when norms are not sufficiently influential. Direkli and Asheikh argue that Europe's security agenda generally influences Europe's normative approach, indicating an apparent conflict between normative and security approaches from a realistic perspective. (Direkli, & Ashiekh, 2022, p. 110).

As a result of Ahmadinejad's presidency, Tehran-Brussels relations diverged, and Europe imposed security pressure on Iran. Legal and security relations have been published in the past, and security concerns have always influenced these relationships. Even

discussions about human rights are security-oriented. While the European Union has issued numerous resolutions regarding the human rights situation in Iran at this time, it has expressed regret for the legal situation in Iran and expressed hopes for the continuation of the talks and improvement of the problem.

In the aftermath of Ahmadinejad's end of the presidency and the beginning of Hassan Rouhani's presidency, a clear difference emerged in the interaction between Iran and the European Union. Iran, which desired more interaction with Europe, induced a positive attitude toward Europe by announcing its readiness to participate in various negotiations. In the wake of the approval of the JCPOA and nuclear agreements, interactions between the two countries improved, and the security status of Iran's nuclear program also enhanced, as a result of which European governments' relationship with Iran has improved. Iran's political elites have been grappling with one of the most challenging issues in decades since the JCPOA implementation, with conflicting opinions based on their policies and discourse. On the one hand, there are numerous comments regarding JCPOA's successes. The majority of supporters, such as Hasan Rouhani, see it as "sunshine," Mohammad Javad Zarif as a "historical necessity," and Massoud Peshkani as "Fath al-Futuh." While opponents of the JCPOA, such as Saeed Jalili, consider it a "weak agreement," Ghalamoli Haddad Adel considers it a "Turkmenchai" that needs to be condemned immediately. (Masoudi and Hamiani, 2024, p. 61)

JCPOA is an international "treaty of contract" agreement approved by United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 2231, which provides member states with rights and obligations. JCPOA is an international agreement approved by the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 2231, specifying member states' rights and obligations. As the agreement does not contain a unilateral withdrawal clause, a withdrawal by the US would not constitute a breach. However, the Iranian activities do not meet the conditions required to achieve the agreement's objectives. It is not legally acceptable for other member states to initiate a re-establishment of the agreement as a result of the actions taken by Iran and the United States. This issue is not about the nature of the agreement but about Iran and the United States violating international law norms. (Gunawan, and et ,2022, p. 100)

As a result of Donald Trump being in the White House and the unofficial end of the JCPOA, this process was interrupted, and the cycle of the nuclear program being dangerous from Europe's point



of view was created twice. After some time in 2018, the European Union resumed its human rights sanctions against Iran (Council of the European Union, 2018). After the signing of the JCPOA, the two parties had high expectations for improving relations and reducing tensions, realising that Iranian nuclear issues had become non-security issues, and they used other means of communicating. Still, the suspension of United States cooperation in the JCPOA shattered these hopes. This issue means that the US withdrawal from the JCPOA and other decisions by Donald Trump, such as withdrawal from the Paris Accord, the Trans-Pacific Partnership, the UNE (United Nations Educational, Scientific and Cultural Organization), and the UNHRC (United Nations Human Rights Council), have resulted in systemic problems in the international order. Over the past fifteen years, various factors have severely shaken up the existing West Asian international order, which had been accepted for many years. The complexity of the nuclear issue in Iran and its securitisation, the changing views of European leaders of the Middle East, and the decisions of the United States presidents, which have undergone substantial changes from their predecessors, are among the most significant reasons. (Lechner, 2024, p. 75)

In 2021, Ebrahim Raisi was elected as the president of Iran. Before that, he was the former head of the judiciary and a member of the fundamentalist movement. Members of this stream are already strongly critical of the JCPOA. As a result of Iran's current economic crisis, it was expected that they would agree with the United States. An agreement was available for final signing as part of the transitional period between Raisi's and Hassan Rouhani's presidencies. In a meeting with former government officials on February 14, 2023, Rouhani, who is no longer at the helm of the government, addressed this issue. It was possible to revive hopes by cancelling sanctions in February 2010 and accepting the conditions for lifting some non-nuclear sanctions. Still, the approval of the nuclear bill prevented this from happening. The relationship between the Iranian government and the EU had been extremely cold at this time due to several factors, including the complication of the JCPOA issue and the withdrawal of the United States, Iran's discouragement from relations with Europe, reminders of the numerous breaches of Western promises, the Syrian war, and tensions. While President Raisi was in office, severe conflicts in the Middle East, as well as changes in the structures of the ruling powers on both sides, resulted in severe problems and obstacles to

relations. Increasing tensions result in relations being followed in a security-oriented, not normative, way, which is unexpected.

Significant wars erupted in Eastern Europe and the Middle East during these times, presenting a significant problem. Iran's invasion of Ukraine on February 24, 2022, and its continued invasion after that, has led to a rise in pessimism and difficulties in relations between Iran and Europe. Through diplomatic and political means, the European Union is trying to dissuade Iran from selling Salah to Russia, claiming that Iran is on the opposite side of Ukraine in this war by exporting weapons to Russia. The Iranian side has responded to this claim in various ways, sometimes contradictory.(Alcaro, 2024, p. 104) There is no doubt that Europe is extremely angry with Iran regarding this matter. Furthermore, the resumption of intense clashes and war between Gaza and Israel on October 7, 2022, as well as Iran's moral support for the Palestinian fighters in the Gaza Strip and then Hezbollah in Lebanon, as well as the general support of European countries for Israel, have resulted in greater pessimism between the two sides. (Greene & Rynhold, 2023, p. 100) Iran and Israel have continued to attack one another's positions during this war, which has caused Europe to consider Iran's missile power as a very critical and severe problem. While the Iranian nuclear crisis has become increasingly complicated as the case of this war has grown more complex, Europe is becoming increasingly concerned about the maximisation of Iranian enrichment because the Middle East region has turned into a powder keg despite numerous wars in West Asia and Eastern Europe. In the Gaza-Israel war, the European Union was faced with its most serious conflict with Iran. This claim explains quite clearly what this article argues: when European countries face existential and survival crises, a normative approach is weakened and replaced by a security approach and security confrontations, leading to the securitisation of cases.

### **Conclusion**

The Iranian government is regarded as one of the most important actors in the West Asian region. European countries are forced to interact with this country, which has undergone fundamental changes since the Islamic revolution, which European elites find challenging to comprehend or deal with. Their initial relationship is cold with hostility, and they support a government invading Iranian territory. Consequently, the relations between Europe and Iran continue to be divergent. Europe emphasises the non-compliance of fundamental

rights in Iran as its first position. However, following the Iran-Iraq war, and with both sides attempting to meet their respective economic, political, and geopolitical requirements, they attempted to close the relations under the label of critical dialogue, which primarily dealt with financial matters, but at the same time, expressed European criticism of nonconformity European norms and human rights in Iran. European criticism of Iran continued to be strongly influenced by a variety of factors, including a fatwa against Salman Rushdie's murder, the Mykonos incident, and Iranian court rulings issued. At that time, Europe was attempting to transfer its accepted norms, including observing legitimate freedoms, gender equality, and confronting violent court rulings, to Iran and persuade it to follow them. At this time, the Iranian government was also frequently accused of violating human rights. The EU has not issued sanctions resolutions related to this norm until then. The reasons for this include the needs discussed previously. Immediately following the election of Seyyed Mohammad Khatami, Iran and the European Union enjoyed improved relations. Both sides began the convergence process during this period, characterised by comprehensive dialogue and interaction, but Europe stressed the importance of the EU norms, such as human rights. Iran was under pressure from the human rights movement, individual freedom, and social freedoms. During this time, Iran served as Europe's trade partner and energy source. Europe did not feel threatened by Iran, so it focused its attention primarily on Iranian norms. As Iran understood Europe's position in the international system, it pursued a non-conflicting and appropriate policy. The negotiation process began following the clarification of the nuclear program and the possibilities the Europeans had created in their minds during this period. Although these meetings and negotiations did not achieve the desired results, they did not lead to hostility either because of the behaviour of both parties. These discussions aimed to persuade one another and to calm the inflamed atmosphere that had developed.

Following the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and his precipitous international policy, Iran was defined as a regional problem and a troublesome actor on the international stage; for this reason, other countries, including regional and extra-regional ones, changed their attitudes toward Iran. This resulted in Europe turning its attention to a more critical issue, namely its security rather than human rights. The change of opinion coincided with the rise of younger and right-wing European officials, their alignment with the United States of America, and the emergence of powerful terrorist groups. However, after 2008, all these issues forced the EU to change

its usual practice of paying less attention to legal-normative issues and more attention to the security of the countries of the European Union, resulting in a change in its behaviour. This is quite evident in countries such as Iran, which they believe are causing problems. Constructivists propose that what makes a relationship vital is the thoughts of existence from both sides in the other's mind. These thoughts are "Me" and "Other." As a result, it was observed that during the administration of Seyyed Mohammad Khatami, Iranian-European relations were exceptionally close, but during the administration of Ebrahim Raisi, these relations deteriorated. Therefore, normative Europe considered the soft surface of Europe, is used for the accepted "Others" who are ontologically accepted but need to be modified. It has been understood, however, that since 2008, for several reasons: the immigration crisis, the economic crisis, the rise of right-wing parties and young politicians, and the start of wars, Europe's approach to Iran has wholly changed, transitioning from a normative approach to a security approach by 2024.

One of the most essential points in this issue that attracts the attention of researchers is the mental knots created for European intellectual elites. These knots are the fundamental reason that human rights and norms are becoming more or less important in the European Union's thinking. On the one hand, this makes it difficult for them to comprehend and predict Iranian behaviour; on the other hand, it is not worthwhile to ignore this problem. Similarly, when a political unit disturbs Europe's interests, its politicians will shift their focus from norms like human rights to other topics like security. On the other hand, whenever Europe's security and survival are ensured, the normative face of Europe will emerge. This issue is a mixture of neorealism and constructivism.

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