

Libya in Iranian Foreign Policy after 1989: Strategic Cooperation, International Pressure, and the Limits of Rapprochement

Shaimaa Hakim Kadhim Jasim^{1*}, Prof. Dr. Ahmed Mohammed Tanash¹

^{1*}*Department of History, College of Education, University of Al-Qadisiyah, Al-Diwaniyah, Iraq*

¹Modern and Contemporary History (Shaimaa Hakim Kadhim Jasim) | Email: hist.edu.post24.3@qu.edu.iq

¹Supervisor (Prof. Dr. Ahmed Mohammed Tanash) | Email: Ahmed.Tanash@qu.edu.iq

***Corresponding Author:** Shaimaa Hakim Kadhim Jasim, Department of History, College of Education, University of Al-Qadisiyah, Al-Diwaniyah, Iraq | Email: hist.edu.post24.3@qu.edu.iq

Abstract

The article analyses how Libya has been seen as part of Iran's foreign policy since the end of the Iran-Iraq war in 1989 until it was undermined by its division in 2011 and its current partial reconciliation with Tehran. While there has been a considerable literature on Iran's regional strategy, and on Libya's trajectory after the fall of Mubarak, there is little that discusses the bilateral relationship between Iran and Libya as a logical basis for theorising the interaction between ideology, strategic interest and external constraint over a long-time horizon. The significance of the research problem is that it involves the presence of a systematic and theoretically sound account about why Iran and Libya have been simultaneously cooperating and antagonizing each other even though they have been consistently expressing anti-Western and anti-imperialist talk. The aim of the study is to analyse this development over three phases (1989-2003, 2003-2011, since 2011), to map out strategic, ideological, and geopolitical motivations for cooperation, and to consider the limits on this relationship imposed by international sanctions regimes or regional upheavals. The study identifies that cooperation has been opportunistic and strategic, not ideological or lasting; that the disappearance in 1978 of Musa al-Sadr, the U.S. secondary sanctions, and Libya's postwar institutional disintegration have challenged the relationship's limits on multiple occasions; and that cooperation has been limited in nature, without ideology, sustained engagement or unity. It is a methodological note that clarifies and mathematically evaluates how, and to which extent, Iran's cautious re-engagement with Tripoli in 2023-2026 is affected by domestic legitimacy politics in both countries, and how analysts should interpret bi-directional connections between Tehran and Tripoli in that period.

Keywords: Iran–Libya relations, neoclassical realism, foreign policy analysis, international sanctions, Middle East foreign policy, strategic rapprochement, Axis of Resistance.

Original Contribution

The existing literature on Iranian foreign policy after 1989 is extensive with respect to Iran's relations with Iraq, the Gulf Arab states, Syria, Lebanon, and, more recently, its wider 'Axis of Resistance' network (Middle East Institute, 2026; Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2026). The rest of the talk, however, is usually reserved for Libya—you never hear anything about it, unless it is in passing when talking about the Arab Spring of 2011, about NATO's response to Iran's troubles with its own troops, or about the uninvolved al-Sadr business. No study identified in the process of this research considers Iran–Libya relations as a continuous case throughout the Rafsanjani, Khatami, Ahmadinejad, Rouhani, Raisi and Pezeshkian era as well as links them to the rehabilitation process of the Gaddafi regime following the lifting of the sanctions in 2003, and link them to the split regime after the post-2011 revolution in Libya (Security Council Report, 2025; Arms Control Association, n.d.; Stimson Center, 2023). There's three parts to this article, that make it novel. First of all it does not regard Libya as a peripheral case in Iranian regional strategy; it considers them a 'hard case' just for this reason that the 'ideological affinities' (anti-imperialism, opposition to Western hegemony, posturing as non-aligned) are not paralleled by the similar strategic depth of the relationship so that the analysis can separate what is driving the cooperation beyond the shared rhetoric of anti-imperialism, opposition to Western hegemony or non-aligned posturing. Second, it shows an empirical illustration of the intertwining of strategic interest, ideological signalling, and international pressure and neither one nor the other was sufficient by itself to cause the two states to block cooperation: sanctions legislation like the 1996 Iran and Libya Sanctions Act (GovTrack, ...1996...), for example, limited states' room for maneuver together, whereas domestic disputes over cooperation (the disappearance of the al-Sadr) imposed an upstairs limit on cooperation, without successful concluding talks. Third, it provides a developmentally grounded

interpretation of the apparent post-2021 rapprochement between Tehran and Tripoli (Rose, 1998), drawing on a theoretical perspective that is concerned with identity and legitimacy (Erbas, 2022; Kovačević, 2023) politics, and focuses on the bounded, transactional nature of the relationship between the two rather than on the potential durability of the strategic relationship under conditions of continued deterioration.

Introduction

Background

The modern dimension to Iranian–Libyan relations began to emerge after the 1969 coup in Libya by Muammar Gaddafi, driven by his Sunni, pan-Arabist and later pan-Africanist nationalism, sparing the other the sectarian and ideological divide of their own Shia-revolutionary Islamism (NamuWiki, 2025; Wikipedia, n.d.-b). Bilateral trust was poisoned early in 1978 when a long-standing case of the Iranian-born leader of the Amal movement in Lebanon, Imam Musa al-Sadr, disappeared in the port of Tripoli, to this day unresolved and influencing trust relations more than a quarter century after the event (Britannica, 2009; Middle East Monitor, 2021; TMJ News, 2025). The Iran–Iraq War, ended in 1989 and followed by Iran's 'reconstruction' era (1990–) under Hashemi Rafsanjani, offers a natural starting point and point of analysis, as Iran transitioned from its previous emphasis on revolutionary export to a more pragmatic 'national interests' based foreign policy since that time (GlobalSecurity.org, n.d.).

Importance of Libya in Iran's Regional Foreign Policy

Libya never held a pivotal position in Iran's regional priorities, a position that long favored the Levant, Iraq and the Gulf (Critical Threats Project, n.d.; Iran Primer, 2011). However, Libya's rhetoric is greater than its significance, because of three factors. First, Libya's own journey has provided Tehran with the same story to echo with its own reasons for continuing its own nuclear program and regional posturing: the rogue revolutionary state became an ally of the West under arms control agreements after it rejected WMDs in 2003, only to collapse in 2011. Libya offers Tehran a familiar reference case, and its transformation from pariah to WMD renouncing ally to an arm wilting state in 2011 was always cited by officials as evidence of its failure. (Atlantic Council, 2025) Second, Libya's energy resources and location on the Mediterranean have thus far made it a potent economic and geopolitical object for which the Iranians have sought to capitalize at times, including in 2007, when they formed a joint investment funds with Libya, and via oil/gas talks in 2010, to its current reopening of the Tripoli embassy and resumption of shipping ties between the two states (Critical Threats Project, n.d.; LibyaReview, 2023b; Libya Herald, 2024). Third, the post-2011 division in Libya between the Tripoli-based Government of National Unity and the eastern Government of National Stability under Khalifa Haftar (Security Council Report, 2025) leaves a space open for lesser engagement by outside powers, such as Iran, without entering a trade of the type Iran offers the remnants of the Syrian regime or Iraq's militias (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2026).

Research Problem

Iran and Libya have not converted rhetorical threats against the West into long-term strategic cooperation, although diplomatic overtures have been made in each direction over the past 35 years. The research problem is to explain why this gap between ideological affinity and strategic shallowness persist and to also detail the conditions within which limited cooperation has happened.

Research Gap

Books and monographs on Iran's regional approach overwhelmingly focus on the Axis of Resistance in the Levant and Iraq (Middle East Institute, 2026; The Soufan Center, 2025) and main books and monographs on U.S. sanctions policy for Iran encompass (Survival, 2021; Washington Institute for Near East Policy, n.d.). The two works cited here on Libya's WMD rollback (Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists, 2018) and its post-2011 civil war (Fund for Peace, 2021; House of Commons Library, 2026) touch on Libya or the Libyan Syrian conflict only indirectly and lightly and limit their focus specifically to the war between its two sibling states. What lacks is a work that combines together these literatures, within a theoretical framework that can explain the re-occurrence of overtures and the sustained shallow nature of them as it concerns the dyad of Iran and Libya.

Research Significance

This study has three audiences of concern. It provides a formalized test of the ability of neoclassical realism to account for a low salience, occasionally activated bilateral interaction instead of the high-salience alliances about which it is more often tested. For Middle East policy analysis, it offers an evidence-based description of Iran's "rapprochement" with Tripoli in 2023–2026, which offers insights into Iran's "post-Soleimani, post-Gaza-war reconciliations" in the region (Stimson Center, 2026). For experts on Libya, it places Tehran's involvement in the country in perspective with the functioning egregions of the country's domestic regime: the Tripoli-based GNU or the Haftar-supported eastern authority. (Security Council Report, 2025; Libya Economic Review, 2025).

Study Objectives

- To examine the evolution of Iran's foreign policy toward Libya from 1989 onward.
- To analyze the strategic, ideological, and geopolitical factors that shaped Iran–Libya relations during different political periods.

- To evaluate how international pressures and regional developments influenced the extent and limits of strategic cooperation between Iran and Libya.

Research Questions

- How has Iran's foreign policy toward Libya evolved since 1989?
- What strategic, ideological, and geopolitical factors have shaped cooperation between Iran and Libya?
- How have international pressures and regional developments limited the prospects for long-term strategic rapprochement between the two countries?

Organization of the Paper

Following this introduction, the article reviews the relevant literature on Iranian foreign policy, Libyan foreign policy, and bilateral relations; presents the neoclassical-realist theoretical framework; details the qualitative methodology and data sources; presents chronological findings for 1989–2003, 2003–2011, and post-2011; discusses these findings in relation to theory and prior scholarship; and concludes with policy implications, limitations, and directions for future research.

Literature Review

Iranian Foreign Policy after 1989

Conventionally, the advent of each new era in Iran's post-1989 foreign policy is viewed through the lens of the political terms of those years: pragmatic reconstruction under Rafsanjani (1989–97) when Tehran sought “normalised relations” with Gulf Arab states and Europe – but faced renewed U.S. containment pressure, including the 1996 Iran and Libya Sanctions Act – Detente under Khatami (1997–2005); Confrontational populism under Ahmadinejad (2005–18) when Iran began openly criticising U.S. intervention in Libya; the era of negotiated opening under Rouhani (2013–2021) culminating in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (2015); “maximum pressure” led by Trump (2017–2021), followed by contested initiatives for concessions under Biden, and pressure again later (al Jazeera Centre for Studies 2021; Survival 2021; Alexander Hamilton Society 2024). Higher incidence of such scholarship has documented Iran's pivot to BtW 'strategic depth', through the Axis of Resistance, since 2023 (2026, Special Eurasia; 2026, Center for Strategic and International Studies), and the shock to BtW that occurred with the fall of Assad regime in 2024 and that was exacerbated by the conflict between BtW and Israel – US in 2025–2026, (2026, Stimson Center; 2025, The Soufan Center).

Libya's Foreign Policy under Gaddafi and after 2011

Libya's foreign policy, in the era of Gaddafi, was very personalized, ideologically eclectic, shifting in orientation from pan-Arabism to pan-Africanism, and proved to be a favorite among U.S. secondary sanctions policies of the 1990s and beyond (Legamart, 2025; Congress.gov, 1996). Libya's decision in December 2003 to abandon its WMD programs, in return for a relationship reset with both Washington and London, is well documented in contrast to comparable WMD voluntary disarmament exercises documented in other countries' scholarship on nonproliferation, rather than by others (Arms Control Association, n.d.; Stimson Center, 2023; The Nonproliferation Review, 2009), and has been cited for comparative purposes, most recently in a recent discussion comparing Iran's nuclear diplomacy to that of Libya (The Conversation, 2018; Atlantic Council, 2025). The month-by-month forecast reports of the UN Security Council Report (2024, 2025), the ACCORD report (2016) and the Fund for Peace study (2021) – for the most recent years, the UN House of Commons Library study (2026) – have noted that the country remains split between two governments in Tripoli and the east, based on the Government of National Unity and the Government of National Stability, respectively, which support the head of the Libyan National Army, Khalifa Haftar.

Iran–Libya Bilateral Relations

Direct scholarship on the Iran–Libya dyad is thin. Roughly, these are documents on the reporting of periodic high-level contacts involving Foreign Minister Mottaki's visit to discuss oil and gas cooperation (Critical Threats Project, n.d.), Iran's rhetorical backing of the Libya uprising of 2011 against Western involvement (Iran Primer, 2011), and the periodicity of ambassadorial exchanges, embassy reopening, and attendance at ambassadorial-level meetings of the trade committee between Tehran and the gov in Tripoli after 2021 (prepare documents: LibyaReview, 2023a, 2023b, 2025; Tehran Times, 2024; Libya Herald, 2024). Journalists and think-tank analysts agree that the lack of resolution in the al-Sadr affair is a reoccurring incordial issue that could still stall events of diplomatic normalisation should it become a political and sectarian topic of contention post-war, as occurred after the 2011 allegations by Libyan Grand Mufti Sadiq al-Ghariani that Iran was ‘spreading Shiism’ within the country, which resulted in the closure of Iran's embassy, and a car-bomb attack on the Iranian ambassador's residence in 2015 (LibyaReview, 2023b).

Regional Geopolitics

The bilateral relationship is not disconnected from regional geopolitical shifts and developments: Libya's divisions have exposed interesting opportunities for the infiltration of multiple states, such as Turkey, Russia, Egypt, the

UAE, France, and Italy as external patrons of one or other of the Libyan factions, while the relative insulation of Iran offers minimal opportunities for its own evangelization. But Iran's regional strategy has been shifting with the collapse of the Assad regime in Syria and the anticipation of a direct confrontation with Israel and the U.S. in 2025-2026 that offsets the traditional Axis of Resistance model and gives Tehran more reasons to diversify partnerships, such as reestablishing ties with previously feuding countries, like Libya (Stimson Center 2026; Middle East Institute, 2026).

International Sanctions

The most direct institutional connection between the two states in U.S. policy is the 1996 Iran and Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA), which continues to subject both countries to petroleum-sector investments restrictions until their removal from the bill in 2006 as a result of their own rollback of WMDs (GovTrack, 1996; Iran Watch, n.d.; U.S. Department of State, 1998). However, unlike other countries, Iran has consistently had an escalating sanctions regime, first from the period of relief during the JCPOA agreement (2015-2018), up to the 'maximum pressure' phase following the U.S. withdrawal in 2018 and the challenging partial easing of the sanctions regime in 2021 (Survival, 2021; Stanford University Program on Iranian Studies, n.d.; Brandeis University, n.d.). This imbalance (Muammar's Gaddafi's post-2003 (and now, more or less, un-sanctioned) return to the international system is, to some degree at least, a structural constraint on economic possibilities between the two countries.

Previous Studies and Existing Research Gaps

Together, the literature reviewed reveals three gaps that this study covers: (a) There is no periodized, theoretically grounded account of Iran-Libya relations in the past 3 decades, 1989-Present; (b) Despite the fact that ILSA targeted both countries, the sanctions literature remains poorly integrated with the bilateral-relations literature; and (c) The post-2021 rapprochement between Iran and Libya has received little attention, generally, and has been overlooked in the study of Iran's broader post-2023 recalibration of its regional interests, which is the greatest lacuna this study addresses using the latest (2023-2026) open-source reporting available.

Theoretical Framework

The theoretical approach used in conducting this research is the neoclassical realism (NCR) as the main theoretical approach, complemented by the Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA) and constructivism approaches. Compared to David Lapie's (1979) work on Neoliberal structuralism, Rose (1998) made a theoretical step of including intervening variables at the unit level between material power within the international system and observable output of its foreign policy, which he referred to as factors of the state-society relations, domestic political institutions, and leaders' perceptions. Later elaborations retain this parsimony while emphasizing that NCR is best used to trace, through detailed process narratives, how relative power is translated into foreign-policy behavior in specific historical episodes rather than to generate law-like predictions.

This case is best understood in terms of neoclassical realism because of three factors. First of all, Iran policy has never depended solely on material strength or ideology, but has been shaped not merely by the assessments of threat made by the various governments it has encountered during its years in power, but by the value the various governments put on their image as a player in a "rewarded" or "punished" Libya game. Second, NCR's focus on intervening variables captures how these factors are used as a filter with respect to cooperation in both Tehran and (post-2011) Tripoli, reflecting FPA's "actor-specific, decision-maker-centered" approach to study (Hudson & Day, 2020). Third, NCR does not require that shared ideology leads to a shared sense of alignment—which is, again, consistent with the empirical model of this exercise: a higher degree of strategic opportunity has been correlated more closely with cooperation here than with rhetorical affinity.

Constructivist concepts are employed secondarily and as a supporting information. In Constructivist approaches, national identity and norms influence which types of partnership a state's leadership deems legitimate to engage in, and how role conceptions (Iran's own conception of itself as a leader of an anti-imperialist 'Axis of Resistance', or Libya's ever-shifting conception of itself as a vanguard revolution) shape the types of partnership cooperation that are imaginable at a given moment (Erbaş, 2022; Kovačević, 2023). This employment of rhetorical overtures is descriptive, because it explains why they are repeated despite a comparatively weak strategic pay-off; NCR works primarily as explanatory to account for why overtures bear fruit in terms of material cooperation and why they don't.

Research Methodology

This study adopts historical analysis, qualitative content analysis and process tracing to combine in a single research design with a single case (dyadic) approach (Hudson & Day, 2020). It then analyzes the key points in the official statements, diplomatic communiqués and secondary reporting through qualitative content analysis to uncover common themes across the study period (Rose, 1998: 272–275) (these are also evident in the findings outlined above), as well as the consequences of the Iranian and Libyan policies. To identify recurrence of themes across the study period (strategic cooperation, ideological signalling, security concerns, and international constraint) in the Iranian and Libyan policy choices, it also uses qualitative content analysis of the official statements, diplomatic communiqués and secondary reporting findings that are outlined above, while the Iranian process involved a sequence of domestic changes that lie at the heart of neoclassical realism.

This study focuses on the period between 1989 to 2026, which weaves through the reconstruction phase of Rafsanjani's foreign policy and ended with the commencement of the Iran–Iraq War. This study encompasses a period that spans from the end of the Iran–Iraq War in 1989 to the year 2026, the latest year for which open-source reporting was accessible at the time of writing. The reason for this endpoint is two-fold. First, it is the latest empirical challenge to the study's core theme on the permissible extent of rapprochement, which took the form of the Tripoli-based Government of National Unity's reengagement with Iran (2023-2026). Second, because data is available, it is a legitimate endpoint.

Data Collection

Primary Sources

- U.S. legislative hearings and official transcripts: Iran and Libya Sanctions Act of 1996 (Congress.gov, 1996; GovTrack, 1996).
- Statements and fact sheets provided by the U.S. Department of State implementing sanctions (U.S. Department of State, 1998).
- Libyan government-affiliated news agency releases (Libyan News Agency) and Iranian government affiliated news agency releases (Tehran Times) reporting official visits, statements and agreements.
- Forecasts on the political situation in Libya, produced every month by the United Nations Security Council Report (Security Council Report, 2024, 2025).
- Arms control monitoring records of Libya's WMD disarmament process (2003) (Arms Control Association, n.d.).

Secondary Sources

- Peer-reviewed and academic sources on neoclassical realism, foreign policy analysis, and constructivism (Rose, 1998; Hudson & Day, 2020; Erbas, 2022; Kovačević, 2023).
- Theories and policies from the Center for Strategic and International Studies, the Stimson Center, the Middle East Institute, the Atlantic Council, the Washington Institute for Near East Policy, and the Fund for Peace.
- Specialist news and monitoring outlets on Libya (LibyaReview, Libya Herald, the Libya Observer, the Libya Economic Review) and Iran (the IranWire, Iran Watch, Tehran Times).
- Monograph of Ajami dealing with the Musa al-Sadr affair and further historical and journalistic remembrances.

Data Analysis

Themes from the sources were classified into eight analytic categories corresponding to seven of the study's goals plus an analyst-adducted eighth category—strategic cooperation, political relations, economic diplomacy, security considerations, ideology influences, international sanctions, regional geopolitical change, and the limits of rapprochement. These categories were followed in the three chronological periods identified in the Results section, revealing patterns, such as the fact that economic-diplomacy initiatives (including joint investment funds, oil and gas projects and shipping cooperation projects) were repeated in each period, but do not always make it to the next due to the political ruptures following them, while security considerations (including the al-Sadr affair, allegations of Shia proselytization) became a constant constraint, regardless of period.

Results

This section presents findings chronologically across three periods, supported by a comparative summary table and a policy matrix.

1989–2003: Pragmatic Cooperation and Post–Cold War Diplomacy

In this period, Iran's reconstruction-era leadership pursued normalization with Gulf Arab states, Europe, and international organizations while facing renewed U.S. containment (GlobalSecurity.org, n.d.). Libya, meanwhile, was itself the target of UN sanctions over the Lockerbie bombing and, from 1996, joint U.S. secondary sanctions with Iran under ILSA (Congress.gov, 1996; Iran Watch, n.d.). Both states therefore shared a structural position as sanctioned or semi-sanctioned outsiders, but this shared position produced largely parallel rather than tightly coordinated behavior: each pursued its own track toward rehabilitation (Iran through European dialogue and Libya through the Lockerbie settlement and eventual WMD disclosure) while nonetheless building a documented, if modest, layer of bilateral cooperation beneath that structural parallelism.

Diplomatic and consular records from this sub-period, compiled in an unpublished manuscript on Iranian–Libyan relations, show that cooperation was concrete and recurring rather than merely declaratory ("Impact of Iranian Foreign Policy," n.d.). Iranian Foreign Minister Ali Akbar Velayati visited Tripoli in November 1991, per a Libyan memorandum dated November 12, 1991, meeting Gaddafi along with senior officials Abu Zeid Omar Dorda and Omar Muntasser; the visit produced agreement to activate a bilateral Joint Economic Committee covering the oil and construction sectors and technical exchange. A further Iranian delegation visited Libya on January 9, 1992,

for direct talks with Gaddafi on developing relations, and in July 1993 Libyan authorities approved the appointment of Colonel Fereydoun Shams as Iran's military attaché in Tripoli, indicating a sustained institutional channel rather than a one-off gesture ("Impact of Iranian Foreign Policy," n.d.).

Economic cooperation had a distinct multilateral dimension through OPEC. Libyan Oil Minister Abdullah Salem al-Badri visited Tehran on November 9, 1994, at a time when he chaired OPEC's ministerial conference; Rafsanjani confirmed Iran's readiness to draw on Libyan expertise in the oil industry, and the two sides coordinated positions to support oil prices and defend their shared interest in economic independence from Western markets ("Impact of Iranian Foreign Policy," n.d.). This pattern of reciprocal support extended to multilateral diplomacy more broadly: Libya backed Iranian candidacies for the Executive Board of the UN International Fund for Agricultural Development (per Libyan memorandum no. 1186) and for the Governing Body of the International Labour Organization (per Iranian memorandum no. 128, dated April 14, 1993), part of a wider convergence of positions at the UN Commission on Human Rights and other bodies where both states sought to resist what they characterized as Western-dominated agendas ("Impact of Iranian Foreign Policy," n.d.).

Beneath these higher-profile exchanges, routine consular and administrative cooperation is also documented: correspondence between Libya's General People's Committee for Foreign Liaison and International Cooperation and the Iranian Embassy in Tripoli in 1992–1994 addressed embassy real-estate arrangements, proposals to relocate diplomatic missions to Ras Lanuf, staff housing allocations, and the handling of the death of an Iranian national in Benghazi in 1993 — the ordinary administrative substrate of a functioning, if modest, bilateral relationship ("Impact of Iranian Foreign Policy," n.d.).

This operational cooperation coexisted with, and was persistently constrained by, two recurring frictions. First, the unresolved 1978 disappearance of Musa al-Sadr remained a live issue rather than settled history: both Khamenei and Rafsanjani are reported to have raised the matter directly with Gaddafi during this period, without any Libyan acknowledgment or resolution, and the file continued to condition Iranian trust in Tripoli even as routine diplomacy proceeded ("Impact of Iranian Foreign Policy," n.d.; Middle East Monitor, 2021). Second, the 1988 Lockerbie bombing and the UN Security Council's 1992 Resolution 731 sanctions on Libya created a genuine dilemma for Tehran: Iranian officials publicly criticized the resolution as biased and expressed solidarity with Libya against U.S. pressure, yet Libya's own shifting and at times contradictory public statements about the incident — including an early, later-retracted suggestion implicating Iranian and Palestinian actors — left Tehran wary of being drawn into an affair it had not caused ("Impact of Iranian Foreign Policy," n.d.).

The sanctions dimension sharpened after the 1991 collapse of the Soviet Union removed a counterweight to U.S. influence and exposed both states to Washington's 'dual containment' strategy toward Iran and Iraq, alongside separate but parallel pressure on Libya ("Impact of Iranian Foreign Policy," n.d.). The U.S. Congress passed the Iran and Libya Sanctions Act on July 23, 1996, and President Clinton signed it on August 5, 1996, targeting foreign investment above a threshold originally set at \$40 million and later lowered to \$20 million in Iran's and Libya's petroleum sectors alike (Congress.gov, 1996; GovTrack, 1996; "Impact of Iranian Foreign Policy," n.d.). Iran pursued a parallel, non-Western track for its own strategic programs during these years, signing a nuclear-reactor cooperation agreement with China in 1990 that expanded in 1994, and concluding a \$780 million agreement with Russia in November 1994 to complete the Bushehr reactor, while Libya separately sought unconventional-weapons expertise from Moscow — a pattern that led some U.S. and European observers to describe Russia as a common patron positioning itself against Western hegemony in both Tehran and Tripoli, even though Iranian–Libyan cooperation on these programs was not itself coordinated ("Impact of Iranian Foreign Policy," n.d.). On balance, the double pressure of joint sanctions exposure and shared post–Cold War isolation drew Iran and Libya into a real but bounded rapprochement — one built on concrete ministerial visits, an active Joint Economic Committee, OPEC coordination, and reciprocal multilateral support, but never elevated into a stable strategic alliance ("Impact of Iranian Foreign Policy," n.d.).

Post-2011: The Libyan Crisis and Changing Iranian Priorities

The 2011 military intervention in Libya against Gaddafi caused immediate diplomatic upheaval, in which Iran publicly criticized western intervention as a "pretext" to "capture" Libya's oil, while rhetorically backing the uprising itself (Iran Primer, 2011), and then a closure of its embassy in Tripoli after allegations from the Libyan Grand Mufti that Tehran was promoting Shiism in the country and attacks by cars to the home of the Iranian Ambassador (LibyaReview, 2023b) in 2015. Relationships were at the chargé d'affaires level for approximately ten years as the country was beset by competing governments and militia groups in Libya (IranWire, 2024; Fund for Peace, 2021; ACCORD, 2016). After the resumption of diplomatic contacts, Iran's domestic political tensions have led to the need for international legitimacy — a visit by the Libyan Foreign Minister, Najla Mangoush, to Iran in 2023, which coincided with a public revelation of her secret meeting with Israel's foreign minister Amiram Bitans, was followed by her resignation (IranWire, 2024), itself shaped in part by Libya's own fractured and complex diplomatic context. Despite this, the whole situation was a genuine and though limited progression towards normalization in 2023–2025, including the revival of Iran's attempt to get a formal meeting with Libya via its 'strong intention' (Libya

Observer, 2023), the appointment and credentialing of Iran's new Ambassador as well as a renewal of IRISL shipping to Misrata (LibyaReview, 2023a, 2023b), and the holding of a joint economic committee (Libya Herald, 2024) and discussion of Technical Cooperation in health and science (LibyaReview, 2025). They have only tried through the Tripoli-based GNU, and not through the eastern government backed by Haftar, highlighting the limits to, and reliance on, Libya's ongoing political dysfunction (Security Council Report, 2025).

Table 1 Comparative Summary of Iran–Libya Relations by Period

Period	Dominant Iranian Posture	Dominant Libyan Posture	Key Constraint	Level of Cooperation
1989–2003	Pragmatic reconstruction; cautious normalization	Sanctioned pariah state (Lockerbie, ILSA)	Joint U.S. secondary sanctions; unresolved al-Sadr affair	Low — parallel, uncoordinated
2003–2011	Nuclear-driven isolation deepens	WMD rollback; Western rehabilitation	Divergent international standing	Low-to-moderate — episodic economic talks
2011–2021	Rhetorical solidarity, no material follow-through	State collapse; civil war; dual governments	Embassy closure; security incidents; fragmentation	Minimal — frozen at chargé d'affaires level
2021–2026	Post-unrest search for legitimacy; regional recalibration	GNU seeks diversified partners amid stalemate	Haftar-aligned east excluded; unresolved al-Sadr file	Moderate — bounded, transactional re-engagement

Table 2 Policy Matrix: Analytical Categories across the Study Period

Category	1989–2003	2003–2011	Post-2011
Political relations	Cautious, correct	Modestly warming	Frozen, then partially restored (2023–)
Economic diplomacy	Minimal	Joint funds (2007); oil/gas talks (2010)	Shipping resumption; joint committee talks (2024–25)
Security considerations	Al-Sadr file unresolved	Al-Sadr file unresolved	Sectarian accusations; embassy bombing (2015)
Ideological signalling	Shared anti-Western rhetoric, low intensity	Diverging trajectories reduce signalling	Iran frames Libya within 'Axis of Resistance' outreach
International sanctions	Joint target (ILSA, 1996)	Libya exits ILSA (2006); Iran remains	Iran under 'maximum pressure' variants; Libya largely unsanctioned
Regional geopolitics	Post–Gulf War containment	Post-9/11 realignments	Post-Arab Spring fragmentation; post-2024 Axis contraction

Discussion

The results are consistent with a neoclassical-realist approach to Iran–Libya relations, in which systemic pressure or pressures, generally in the form of sanctions or regional upheaval, have been the most important variables explaining the sheer dynamics of the relationship; domestic legitimacy politics, meanwhile, have largely decided when and how specific overtures have occurred. The volatility of the domestic political climate in Iran in the year following 2022 did provide a domestic reason for Tehran to assert its continued global salience, making it politically palatable to resume its Libya outreach at a time when it may not otherwise have been offered a high priority, as the latter country has limited strategic value (IranWire, 2024).

The results also make an exclusive ideological interpretation of the relationship difficult. The right to make certain partnerships rhetorically available, such as 'anti-imperialism' and 'resistance' framing, has been rightly noted by constructivist scholarship on shared identity narratives in discussions about Libya (Erbas, 2022; Kovačević, 2023),

a framing that has captured the attention of Iranian officials from time to time in their discussions about Libya (Center for Strategic and International Studies, 2026). But the empirical record indicates that these stories have not accurately predicted when or to what extent actual cooperation occurs—instead it closely correlates with material opportunity (sanctions eligibility, oil and gas opportunities, and embassy security). As Foreign Policy Analysis has argued that factors at the level of decision makers, not the abstract identity category, are more important (Hudson & Day, 2020), going forward, Iranian ideology should not be presumed as a causal factor in studies of Iran's regional partnerships, but rather it should be considered a permissive one.

The case of Libya is unique among prior studies on Iran's Axis of Resistance, which report enduring material support for Hezbollah, Iraqi militias, and (until 2024) the Assad government (Middle East Institute, 2026; The Soufan Center, 2025), in that it represents a relatively slender material entanglement given decades of intermittent rhetorical involvement. This reinforces the main hypothesis of the study, namely that proximity to the core issue of security – Israel, the Gulf, Iraq – not ideology is what has guided the kind of relationship Iran has been willing to fund and arm – and the kind of other relationships it has formalized, such as Libya's, but never pledged to do so. The results suggest that the re-engagement with Tripoli in 2023-2026 would not be interpreted as a sign of an expanding coordinated 'Axis of Resistance' presence in North Africa, but rather a diversionary move of lower cost for Middle East foreign policy and regional security, in a time when Iran's 'traditional' network has been harmed by the 2024 fall of Assad's government and the projected 2025-2026 clash with Israel and the United States (Stimson Center, 2026). The question of Libya itself's political unification, which is still not resolved and still under the UN Chapter 7-broom, is key to the durability of this outreach, which focuses solely on the Tripoli GNU and not on the east, which is Haftar-allied (Security Council Report, 2025; House of Commons Library, 2026).

Conclusion

Major Findings

This study has outlined the Rashid Islam in Iran's Libya policy by three time periods since 1989 and found a typical pattern in all the periods: the policy was cooperative but not consistent, neither systematic nor ideologically motivated; the outer boundaries of the possibilities were defined by external circumstances (joint sanctions against Libya in the 1990s, diverging courses after 2003, the new regional landscape after 2011); an unresolved bilateral grievance – the disappearance of Musa al-Sadr in 1978 – emerged as one of the independent constraints in every period studied.

Theoretical Contribution

This study aims to serve neoclassical-realist theory by establishing that the framework is valuable for the analysis of the intermittently activated low-salience dyad, and that domestic legitimacy politics can take the place of intervening variables even in dyads which are not in the center of a state's security calculus. It also demonstrates that constructivist and identity accounts are fruitfully understood as covering the presence as well as the occurrence of cooperation.

Practical and Policy Implications

In terms of the views of policymakers and analysts tracking Iran's regional strategy, the study points out that the move towards Libya has been analysed as a diversification strategic hedge rather than a strategic pivot, and continues to depend on the evolution or continuation of the institutional division that emerged in the country between the GNU and the Haftar-affiliated east.

Study Limitations

This study draws heavily on the open-source secondary reporting, Iranian and official statements, and think-tank analysis, rather than access to Iranian and/or Libyan language primary archival material, unaffordable within the present scope of this analysis. He has quoted from several sources that describe developments in 2025–2026 that are based upon current monitoring and reporting, and so are provisional, and should be revisited as soon as further academic literature becomes available. The study method used, a single dyad, although adequate for the process tracing approach, may also undermine the generalizability of the results to other bilateral relationships in Iran unless a comparison with other cases is conducted.

Recommendations for Future Research

- Comparative case studies comparing Iran–Libya relations with Iran–North African or Sahel post-conflict relations and the generalizability of the diversification–hedge argument.
- When it will be possible, revision of the process-tracing evidence base through primary source rather than secondary documents, using Persia- and Arabic-language press and archive material.
- To test whether Tripoli and Tehran can make progress in cooperation when Libya manages to institutionalise them in the framework of the UN-led political process, longitudinal monitoring of their relationship is planned.
- Crisis of domestic legitimacy in sanctioned or contested states (Iran and post-2011 Libya) and the timing of peripheral bilateral overthrows.

References

- Ajami, F. (1986). *The vanished imam: Musa al Sadr and the Shia of Lebanon*. Cornell University Press.
- Al Jazeera Centre for Studies. (2021, March 7). The fate of JCPOA, sanctions and Iran's "virtual deterrence" strategy. <https://studies.aljazeera.net/en/analyses/fate-icpoa-sanctions-and-iran%E2%80%99s-%E2%80%9Cvirtual-deterrence%E2%80%9D-strategy>
- Alexander Hamilton Society. (2024, December 20). The future of maximum pressure: Lessons learned and a path forward. <https://alexanderhamiltonsociety.org/security-strategy/issue-one/the-future-of-maximum-pressure-lessons-learned-and-a-path-forward/>
- Arms Control Association. (n.d.). Chronology of Libya's disarmament and relations with the United States. Retrieved July 19, 2026, from <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/chronology-libyas-disarmament-and-relations-united-states>
- Atlantic Council. (2025, April 30). From Tripoli to Tehran: Lessons from Libya in US–Iran nuclear talks. <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/menasource/from-tripoli-to-tehran-lessons-from-libya-in-us-iran-nuclear-talks/>
- Atlas Institute for International Affairs. (2026, July). Libya: One country, two governments, no winners. <https://atlasinstitute.org/libya-one-country-two-governments-no-winners/>
- Brandeis University, Crown Center for Middle East Studies. (n.d.). Iran after Trump (Middle East Brief No. 145). <https://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/middle-east-briefs/pdfs/101-200/meb145.pdf>
- Britannica. (2009). Musa al-Sadr. Encyclopaedia Britannica. <https://www.britannica.com/biography/Musa-al-Sadr>
- Bulletin of the Atomic Scientists. (2018, June 28). A message from Tripoli: How Libya gave up its WMD. <https://thebulletin.org/2014/12/a-message-from-tripoli-how-libya-gave-up-its-wmd/>
- Center for Strategic and International Studies. (2026, March 25). Axis rising: Iran's evolving regional strategy and non-state partnerships in the Middle East. <https://www.csis.org/analysis/axis-rising-irans-evolving-regional-strategy-and-non-state-partnerships-middle-east>
- Congress.gov. (1996). H.R.3107 — 104th Congress (1995–1996): Iran and Libya Sanctions Act of 1996. Library of Congress. <https://www.congress.gov/bill/104th-congress/house-bill/3107>
- Critical Threats Project. (n.d.). Libya Iran foreign relations. American Enterprise Institute. Retrieved July 19, 2026, from <https://www.criticalthreats.org/analysis/libya-iran-foreign-relations>
- Defense Priorities. (2026, February 2). "Maximum pressure" harms diplomacy and increases risks of war with Iran. <https://www.defensepriorities.org/explainers/maximum-pressure-harms-diplomacy-and-increases-risks-of-war-with-iran/>
- Erbas, I. (2022). Constructivist approach in foreign policy and in international relations. *Journal of Positive School Psychology*, 6(3), 5087–5096.
- Fund for Peace. (2021, November 2). Libya: State fragility 10 years after intervention. <https://fundforpeace.org/2021/11/02/libya-state-fragility-10-years-after-intervention/>
- GEOPOL. (2026, March 11). The Libyan civil war: From NATO intervention to permanent fracture. <https://geopol.uk/historical/libyan-civil-war/>
- GlobalSecurity.org. (n.d.). Iran foreign relations, 1989–2013. Retrieved July 19, 2026, from <https://www.globalsecurity.org/military/world/iran/forrel-dev.htm>
- GovTrack.us. (1996). H.R. 3107 (104th): Iran and Libya Sanctions Act of 1996. <https://www.govtrack.us/congress/bills/104/hr3107>
- House of Commons Library. (2026, July). Libya: Political developments since 2011. UK Parliament. <https://commonslibrary.parliament.uk/research-briefings/cbp-10103/>
- Hudson, V. M., & Day, B. S. (2020). *Foreign policy analysis: Classic and contemporary theory* (3rd ed.). Rowman & Littlefield.
- Iran Primer. (2011, April 5). Iran backs Libyan rebels, chastises West over oil, Bahrain. United States Institute of Peace. <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2011/apr/05/iran-backs-libyan-rebels-chastises-west-over-oil-bahrain>
- Impact of Iranian foreign policy on relations with Libya, 1989–1997. (n.d)
- Iran Watch. (n.d.). Iran and Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA) of 1996. Wisconsin Project on Nuclear Arms Control. Retrieved July 19, 2026, from <https://www.iranwatch.org/library/government/united-states/congress/legislation-reports/iran-and-libya-sanctions-act-ilsa-1996>
- IranWire. (2024, December 12). After Assad: Iran's path in Syria and the lessons of Libya. <https://iranwire.com/en/politics/136988-after-assad-irans-path-in-syria-and-the-lessons-of-libya/>
-

- Kovačević, M. (2023). Identity–role relationship in international relations and foreign policy: Ontology, epistemology and methodology. *Političke Perspektive*, 13(2), 57–86.
<https://doi.org/10.20901/pp.13.2.03>
- Legamart. (2025, June 15). ILSA 1996 (Iran and Libya Sanctions), ISA 2006 and D'Amato Act.
<https://legamart.com/ilsa-iran-and-libya-sanctions-damato-act/>
- Libya Economic Review. (2025, July 29). Libya's power struggle: Who controls what in 2025?
<https://libyaeconomicreview.com/libyas-power-struggle-who-controls-what-in-2025/>
- Libya Herald. (2024, May 10). Iranian-Libyan Supreme Committee to be held in Tehran.
<https://libyaherald.com/2024/05/iranian-libyan-supreme-committee-to-be-held-in-tehran-exhibition-and-economic-forum-for-iranian-industries-to-be-held-in-libya/>
- Libyan News Agency. (2023, August 27). The Iranian president expresses his country's desire to develop its relations with Libya. <https://lana.gov.ly/post.php?lang=en&id=286736>
- LibyaReview. (2023a, December 20). Libya & Iran discuss bilateral ties. <https://libyareview.com/40213/libya-iran-discuss-bilateral-ties/>
- LibyaReview. (2023b, June 14). Iran to resume formal relations with Libya. <https://libyareview.com/35300/iran-to-resume-formal-relations-with-libya/>
- LibyaReview. (2025, August 5). Iran offers Libya scientific & technological expertise.
<https://libyareview.com/57931/iran-offers-libya-scientific-technological-expertise/>
- Med-Or Foundation. (2023, November 8). Lives in the history of the Mediterranean: Musa Sadr.
<https://www.med-or.org/en/news/le-vite-nella-storia-del-mediterraneo-musa-sadr>
- Middle East Institute. (2026, February 25). The axis of resistance. <https://mei.edu/backgrounder/axis-of-resistance/>
- Middle East Monitor. (2021, August 31). Profile: Musa al-Sadr — "The vanished imam."
<https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20210831-profile-musa-al-sadr-the-vanished-imam/>
- NamuWiki. (2025, April 18). Libya–Iran relations.
<https://en.namu.wiki/w/%EB%A6%AC%EB%B9%84%EC%95%84-%EC%9D%B4%EB%9E%80%20EA%B4%80%EA%B3%84>
- Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty. (2012, February 2). Libyan conflict shines spotlight on mystery of missing Shi'ite cleric Musa al-Sadr. https://www.rferl.org/a/libya_musa_al-sadr_cleric_missing_lebanon/2345480.html
- Rose, G. (1998). Neoclassical realism and theories of foreign policy. *World Politics*, 51(1), 144–172.
<https://doi.org/10.1017/S0043887100007814>
- Security Council Report. (2024, December 1). Libya, December 2024 monthly forecast.
<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2024-12/libya-55.php>
- Security Council Report. (2025, September 30). Libya, October 2025 monthly forecast.
<https://www.securitycouncilreport.org/monthly-forecast/2025-10/libya-62.php>
- SpecialEurasia. (2026, July 6). Reflections on foreign policy legacy of Ayatollah Khamenei.
<https://www.specialeurasia.com/2026/07/06/khamenei-foreign-plicy/>
- Stanford University, Program on Iranian Studies. (n.d.). Iran's exports under sanctions: The myth of maximum pressure. *Iranian Studies*. Retrieved July 19, 2026, from <https://iranian-studies.stanford.edu/publications/irans-exports-under-sanctions-myth-maximum-pressure>
- Stimson Center. (2023, December 20). Lessons from Libya's nuclear disarmament 20 years on.
<https://www.stimson.org/2023/lessons-from-libyas-nuclear-disarmament-20-years-on/>
- Stimson Center. (2026, April 25). After Khamenei: Regional reckoning and the future of Iran's proxy networks.
<https://www.stimson.org/2026/after-khamenei-regional-reckoning-and-the-future-of-irans-proxy-networks/>
- Tehran Times. (2024, June 29). New Iranian ambassador presents credentials to Libyan presidential council head. <https://www.tehrantimes.com/news/500461/New-Iranian-ambassador-presents-credentials-to-Libyan-presidential>
- The Conversation. (2018, April 21). What North Korea learned from Libya's decision to give up nuclear weapons.
<https://theconversation.com/what-north-korea-learned-from-libyas-decision-to-give-up-nuclear-weapons-95674>
- The Libya Observer. (2023, June 13). Iran expresses its desire to restore diplomatic relations with Libya.
<https://libyaobserver.ly/inbrief/iran-expresses-its-desire-restore-diplomatic-relations-libya>
- The Nonproliferation Review. (2009). The rollback of Libya's chemical weapons program. *The Nonproliferation Review*, 16(3). <https://doi.org/10.1080/10736700903255060>
- The Soufan Center. (2025, September 18). The diminished strategic value of Iran's "Axis of Resistance" [IntelBrief]. <https://thesoufancenter.org/intelbrief-2025-september-18/>

- TMJ News. (2025, September 2). 47 years after his disappearance, Imam Musa Sadr's legacy of unity, dignity, and resistance lives on. <https://www.tmj.news/47-years-after-his-disappearance-imam-musa-sadrs-legacy-of-unity-dignity-and-resistance-lives-on/>
- U.S. Department of State. (1998, May 18). Iran and Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA): Decision in the South Pars case [Press statement, M. Albright]. <https://1997-2001.state.gov/statements/1998/980518.html>
- Washington Institute for Near East Policy. (n.d.). Easier said than done: Renewing maximum pressure on Iran. Retrieved July 19, 2026, from <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/easier-said-done-renewing-maximum-pressure-iran>
- Wikipedia. (n.d.-a). 2011 military intervention in Libya. Retrieved July 19, 2026, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/2011_military_intervention_in_Libya
- Wikipedia. (n.d.-b). Iran–Libya relations. Retrieved July 19, 2026, from https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Iran%E2%80%93Libya_relations
-