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Multiple Dualities: Seeking the Patterns in Iran's Foreign Policy

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Abstract

As one of the most significant actors of the region, Iran's interactions with great powers (as well as regional powers and non-state actors) have come under scrutiny. This article adopts an historical account and suggests a framework to study Iran's foreign policy. The framework is contextually built with a multi-level approach to specify the independent and intervening variables of Iran's foreign policy through the light of neoclassical realist theory. In this context, it is argued that the independent variables of Iran's foreign policy are geopolitics, threat perceptions and balance of power politics. These systemic variables are filtered through nationalism, theological and revolutionary ideology and policy making mechanisms.

Keywords: Iran, foreign policy, neoclassical realism, foreign policy analysis

1. Introduction

Regionally and globally, Iran has been one of the most remarkable international actors. Due to its geopolitical location, it attracted the attentions of the great powers during the Cold War. By the Islamic Revolution, it had opened a new chapter in its international relations. The foreign policy (FP) perspective of Iran came under scrutiny once again by the nuclear revelations. The Arab Spring wave intensified the role Iran plays in the region, which reached its climax with the Syria crisis. Iran is “a fiercely independent and defiant player”¹ that wants to be an engaged actor in regional and global politics. Due to the multiplicity of dualities in many levels, Iran is a challenging case for FP analysis.

The existing literature analyzing Iran's FP piles upon three episodes of the Islamic Republic. The recent literature is built upon Iran's regional role, its power balancing vis-à-vis regional actors like Saudi Arabia or vis-à-vis global powers. Former studies focus on Iran's nuclear aspirations, and the third study group is concerned with the revolutionary FP. As expressed by Zaccara, Iran's FP is widely seen as “irrational and unpredictable” and explained by “the radicalism of its principles and objectives, and the opaqueness of the internal decision-making mechanisms”.² To determine which structural dynamics shape Iran's FP, and to sort out how to explain Iran's behavior on the international platform, this article applies the conceptual framework presented by neoclassical realism, which takes both

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¹ Anoushrehvan Ehteshami, “The Foreign Policy of Iran,” in *The Foreign Policies of Middle East*, ed. R. Hinnebusch and A. Ehteshami (Boulder, Co.: Lynne Rienner, 2002).

² Luciano Zaccara, “Iran's Permanent Quest for Regional Power Status” in *Diplomatic Strategies of Nations in the Global South*, ed. Jacqueline Braveboy-Wagner (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 184.

systemic and domestic factors into account.³ This study assumes that the main drivers of Iran's FP are found at the systemic level, and that they are geopolitical location, security concerns and power balancing. While translating the systemic elements into FP, the internal elements intervene. In concordance with this, the uniqueness of Iran's FP lurks in its exceptional political system that is based on duality as well as idiosyncratic values.

The literature assumes that 'there are patterns in the FP and not just single acts'.⁴ The sources of the FP can be determined within a theoretical framework. This study does not aim to analyze the FP behavior of Iran on a case basis. Instead, this article seeks to find the variables that mold the general pattern of Iran's behavior, among them dualities like pragmatism vs. idealism, decision making through the institutions of the Revolution vs. parliamentary democracy and Iran's desire for recognition as a *regional power* vs. unrelenting intransigence.

The existing literature on Iranian FP focuses mainly on two facets: Iran's permanent search for regional leadership, and Iran's state identity as shaped by revolutionary ideology, theology and institutions. The first facet stretches from the era of the Shah until today, and the second dimension is a result of the Islamic Revolution. Byman, Chubin and Ehteshami discuss that the motivation for regional leadership is a result of revolutionary Islam and Persian nationalism. On the contrary, Barzegar states that regionalism is an outcome of systemic impulse and has been reinforced by global factors like 9/11 and its aftermath.⁵ For Byman, Chubin and Ehteshami, economics, geopolitics and ethnicity and communalism are the elements that hold Iran back from obtaining the leadership it desires.⁶ The most dedicated scholar of this field, Ramazani, discusses that it is an "internal power struggle" between two major governing bodies that prevents Iran from materializing its regional power status. He holds that two major FP events of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI), the hostage crisis and the settlement of the Iraq-Iran conflict, are both marked by this duality.⁷ Przeczek seeks the FP determinants in the revolutionary character of the regime, for which anti-imperialism, self-sufficiency, independence and anti-Zionism are the foremost values.⁸ Farideh Fardi agrees that revolutionary Islamic ideology is the foundation of Iran's FP priorities as shown in its regime security, territorial integrity and regional aspirations.⁹ Ramazani formulates an argument that pragmatism and ideology are two competing dynamics of Iranian FP, in which the balance of influence is shifting from ideology to pragmatism.¹⁰ Some scholars, like Lubna Arshad, have assessed that culture and religion are the foremost sources of the FP, since they directly influence the decision makers. There is a need to notice their worldviews and societal conditions.¹¹ Maleki also agrees with the agent-centered analysis by arguing that FP brings

³ Gideon Rose, "Neoclassical Realism and Theories of Foreign Policy," *World Politics* 51, no. 1 (1998): 146.

⁴ Kjell Goldman, *Change and Stability in Foreign Policy: The Problems and Possibilities of Détente* (Baltimore, Md.: Project MUSE, 2015), 7.

⁵ Kayhan Barzegar, "Regionalism in Iran's Foreign Policy," *Iran Review*, February 7, 2010, http://www.iranreview.org/content/Documents/Regionalism_in_Iran_s_Foreign_Policy.htm.

⁶ Daniel Byman, Shahram Chubin, Anoushiravan Ehteshami, and Jerrold D. Green, *Iran's Security Policy in the Post-Revolutionary Era* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2001), https://www.rand.org/pubs/monograph_reports/MR1320.html.

⁷ U.S. Department of State, *Iran's Foreign Policy*, by Rouhollah K. Ramazani (Washington D.C. Office of External Research, 1981).

⁸ Sermin Przeczek, "Iran's Foreign Policy under President Rouhani: Pledges versus Reality," *Middle Eastern Analysis/Ortodogu Analiz* 5, no. 57 (2013): 64-71.

⁹ Farideh Farhi and Saideh Lotfia, "Iran's Post-Revolution Foreign Policy Puzzle," *Worldviews of Aspiring Powers: Domestic Foreign Policy Debates in China, India, Iran, Japan and Russia* (2012): 118.

¹⁰ R.K. Ramazani, "Ideology and Pragmatism in Iran's Foreign Policy," *The Middle East Journal* 58, no. 4 (2004).

¹¹ Lubna Arshad, "Internal Dynamics of Iran's Foreign Policy," *Pakistan Horizon* 57, no. 1 (2004): 47-53.

religious hierarchy and parliamentary democracy together for decision making that constitutes a unique administrative impact on Iranian FP.¹² Constructivist scholars like Karimifard underline the significance of the national identity by discussing that Iran's perception of other states influences their FP and orientation.¹³ Akbarzadeh and Barry similarly argue that Iran's FP choices rest upon Iranism, Islam and Shi'ism.¹⁴ There is yet another group of work that attempts to interpret Iranian FP through its relations and conflicts with the U.S. and/or Israel by adopting a strategic perspective. The literature partially fails to reflect the complexity of Iran's FP that is a combination of the aforementioned determinants that partially contradict each other. Yet each FP determinant kicks in either at different levels or under particular conditions. This study is an attempt to draw a framework that encloses Iran's strategic concerns, regional and global influences and normative factors. The framework holds that both systemic and domestic factors shape Iranian FP; however, in diverse contexts.

2. Neoclassical Realism

Neoclassical realism (NCR) provides the most appropriate conjectural infrastructure to analyze Iranian FP since it is deliberately designed as a theory of FP, rather than as a theory of *international politics*. Theories of international politics intend to explain states' behavior at the international level.¹⁵ This article seeks to explore the general configuration of Iranian FP rather than the outcomes of Iran's interactions with other states. As stated by Waltz, theories of FP explain "why states similarly placed in a system behave in different ways. Differences in behavior arise from differences of internal composition".¹⁶ NCR provides scholars flexibility through unit level variables (domestic political constraints, decisions makers' perceptions, etc.) to determine the FP identity of one state.¹⁷

Concordantly, this study analyses domestic determinants, as well as international setting.

Being a member of the realist school, NCR is built upon classical realism and neorealism. Both assume that the global system is anarchical; therefore, states adopt the self-help doctrine for security and defense reasons. The security dilemma locks states into a search for power. At this point, neoclassical realists differ from classical realists; the latter assume that power is the ultimate aim, but in NCR, power is a tool. The ultimate aim is consolidation of security and fulfillment of interests in the international arena. NCR argues that domestic ideas and politics contribute to the degree of power. The emphasis on internal factors can be traced back to classical realism, for which *internal* structures of states are reflected on to the FP. NCR integrates the core concept of constructivism by arguing that power is also rooted in national identity.¹⁸ Liberalism's ideational variables and state and society relations are not excluded. The integration of constructivist and liberal elements do not isolate NCR from the realist school.

¹² Abbas Maleki, "Decision Making in Iran's Foreign Policy: A Heuristic Approach," *Journal of Social Affairs* 73 (2002).

¹³ Hossein Karimifard, "Constructivism, National Identity and Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran," *Asian Social Science* 8, no. 2 (2012): 239.

¹⁴ Shahram Akbarzadeh and James Barry, "State Identity in Iranian Foreign Policy," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 43, no. 4 (2016).

¹⁵ Kenneth N. Waltz, "International Politics is Not Foreign Policy," *Security Studies* 6, no. 1 (1996): 54.

¹⁶ Waltz, "International Politics".

¹⁷ Nuri Yeşilyurt, "Explaining Miscalculation and Maladaptation in Turkish Foreign Policy towards the Middle East during the Arab Uprisings: A Neoclassical Realist Perspective," *All Azimuth* 6, no. 2 (2017): 65.

¹⁸ Brian Rathbun, "A Rose by Any Other Name: Neoclassical realism as the logical and necessary extension of structural realism," *Security Studies* 17, no. 2 (2008): 296.

NCR allows FP examination with a multi-level approach by uniting the micro-level and macro-level units and applying them with a systematic method.¹⁹ The realist tradition disagrees that FP has roots in domestic politics.²⁰ In contrast with realism, *Innenpolitik* theories include domestic factors like ideology, national identity, party politics, social or economic structure into FP analysis.²¹ In a similar way, *democratic peace theory* proposes that the distribution of political power among the inland democratic institutions prevents democratic systems waging wars against each other.²²

For NCR, privileging one of the internal or external dynamics results in oversimplified explanations that are inaccurate.²³ Instead, the most important factor in determining FP behavior is *relative power*.²⁴ The systemic pressures must be filtered through the perceptions of the decision makers to formulate a FP.²⁵ The ability of a government 'to extract and direct the resources of their societies'²⁶ is another significant intervening variable for NCR. This capability is referred to as state power and interpreted as a significant portion of national power. The interests, resources, identity construction and understanding of prestige of a state are all factors that influence threat perception of a government. The assessment shall not ignore the civil-military relations, public/elite belief systems or organizational politics that influence the threat-assessment capacity of a state.²⁷

The methodological perspective is built upon determining the independent intervening and dependent variables that reside at diverse levels of analysis. Historical case analysis is the most significant methodological component to determine the aforementioned variables. Various cases, processes and periods are examined. The aim is to ascertain the independent and intervening parameters and examine whether they have influenced the dependent variable (the FP) for change or continuity.²⁸

¹⁹ While addressing the *micro-level* examination, it is necessary to clarify three core concepts specific to Iran: the state, the regime and the government. In this article, the term *state* refers to the international legal definition that is about the territorial band with the population living on it; the term *regime* refers to the political system established by the Islamic Revolution. This is a complex system based on councils led by *mullahs* (religious clerics) that compose representatives, who are not popularly elected by the people. The Supreme Leader (*rahbar*) is elected by the Assembly of Experts, as stated by the §107 of Iran's constitution. The regime is led by the *Rahbar*. The §110 of the constitution holds that the main function of the *Rahbar* is to delineate the general policies with the values of the Islamic Republic and with religion. As for the *government*, it is popularly elected and composed of the president (who is elected for a term of four years and forms a cabinet) and the legislature, which is the parliament (*majlis*) composed of the popularly elected members; and also the Guardian Council of the Constitution, whose six members are directly appointed by the *rahbar* and other six members are nominated by the head of justice and approved through voting by the *majlis*. The national interests are represented by the state; the interests of the regime are represented by the Supreme Leader. The interests that are represented by the government may differ from one to another depending upon their orientation.

²⁰ Joseph S. Nye Jr., Gideon Rachman, Walter Russell Mead, John Mearsheimer, Stephen Walt, Peter D. Feaver, Christopher Gelpi et al., *The Domestic Sources of American Foreign Policy: Insights and evidence* (Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2012), 6.

²¹ Rose, "Neoclassical Realism," 147-48.

²² John M. Owen, "How Liberalism Produces Democratic Peace," *International Security* 19, no. 2 (1994): 87-125.

²³ Rose, "Neoclassical Realism," 150.

²⁴ The key independent variable, the relative power, necessitates a definition. The definition coined Dahl "A's ability to get B to do something it would not otherwise do" (Robert A. Dahl, "The Concept of Power," *Systems Research and Behavioral Science* 2, no. 3 (1957): 202-3.) is the one that is most commonly referred to, which is however also still abstract to measure and to operationalize. Dahl's definition is a reference mostly for soft power. On the other hand, the power definition of Wohlforth "the capabilities of resources, mainly military, with which states can influence each other" (William Curti Wohlforth, *The Elusive Balance: Power and perceptions during the Cold War* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 1993), 4.) is a reference to hard power that is more functional to operate by *balance of power* and *balance of threat* theories. For power balancing two elements are counted in: the physical capacities of the states, and the individual perceptions of threat. The foreign behavior of a state is a result of decisions made by real human beings. The decisions are determined by subjective insights or the values, norms, rules, and principles of that state. The relative power is a concept that is mainly related with survival, which indicates hard power capabilities. Still, it does not exclude soft power elements.

²⁵ Rose, "Neoclassical Realism," 157-61.

²⁶ Rose, "Neoclassical Realism," 162.

²⁷ Lobell, Ripsman, Taliaferro, *Neoclassical Realism*, 63.

²⁸ Lobell, Ripsman, Taliaferro, *Neoclassical Realism*, chap. 5.

3. Systemic Factors

The adherents of NCR argue that the FP of a country is directly affected by its relative power. Therefore, systemic influences are the foremost independent variables of FP. When threats appear, states look for balancing that threat, yet balancing is not an immediate reaction. Security seeking is necessary, but not a tense activity. States are willing to increase their influence to be effective in controlling the architecture of their environment.

Iran has been living in a security complex since the Operation Ajax of 1953. Iran's FP is coded to answer the power balance vis-à-vis global and regional rivals. Its geopolitical location creates both security threats and strategic opportunities. Scholars discuss that Iran's drive to become a regional power is one of the most important developments of the 21st century.²⁹ However, they argue that Iran's behavior is not compatible with systemic and regional restrictions, and so, hinders it from becoming a regional leader. In order to adjust its interactions, a state has to realize and assess the actual environment it encounters. It has to weigh its geopolitical environment to resolve which power to deploy where, and to what extent. Hinnebusch and Ehteshami reflect that Iran is a "middle regional power" which is "playing the realist game" vis-à-vis great powers that are highly penetrant to the policies of the region, and have a better deterrence capacity as compared to lesser powers.³⁰

3.1. Geopolitics

The *Shia Crescent* ideal is at the heart of Iran's geopolitics. This ideal is based upon the Shia-Sunni power sharing competition in the region. It is Iran's attempt to balance the great power existence in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA); Iran's arc of influence enables it in realizing ideological and pragmatic goals at a time. Religious and cultural ties ensure Iran's active presence in the region. Hosni Mubarak states that Shias "across the Middle East are more loyal to Iran than to their own countries".³¹ For Barzegar, this speech also signifies "how much Arab elite are concerned by the Iranian Shiite influence upon the average people in their countries".³² Iran's balancing against Saddam precluded potential tensions with the states of the Persian Gulf for a long time. Today, Iran's extensive influence in Iraq marks new geopolitical confrontations: the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) and Iran today remain face to face, and Lebanon is within easy reach of Iran through Syria. If the crescent strategy functions properly, Iran will have a power advantage at multiple levels. It will have the tools to dictate policies on regional issues be it energy politics, economy, containing Israel or the Sunni rival, Saudi Arabia. Iran fails to balance against American military power; however, it narrows the gap through its enhanced political influence in the region. Iran will ensure regional hegemony when it can consolidate its power in Syria, and bridge through Hezbollah its influence in Lebanon. As a result, Iran will be able to intervene in the Arab-Israeli conflict through geographical proximity to Hamas. This connection also constitutes the basis of Iran's confrontation with Israel, and indirectly with the U.S. The operational capability of Iran is enabled via the Lebanese Hezbollah and the Quds Force of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC). Additionally, Iran provides support for the Badr Brigades in Iraq, and

²⁹ Barry Rubin, "Iran: The Rise of A Regional Power," *Middle East Review of International Affairs* 10, no. 3 (2006): 142.

³⁰ Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond A. Hinnebusch, *Syria and Iran: Middle powers in a penetrated regional system* (New York: Routledge, 2002), 7.

³¹ "Mubarak's Shia remarks stir anger," *Aljazeera*, April 10, 2006, accessed March 11, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/archive/2006/04/200849132414562804.html>.

³² Kayhan Barzegar, "Iran and the Shiite Crescent: Myths and Realities," *Journal of World Affairs* 87 (2008): 89.

Hamas and Islamic Jihad in Palestine. As for the remote edges of the region like the Red Sea and Yemen, Iran opts for sponsoring Shia communities for operational capabilities. Iran's one other significant neighbor is Turkey. Both countries are striving for regional hegemony, although Turkey is not within the Shia crescent and Iran is not trying to extend its influence to Turkey. Ankara and Tehran encounter each other in Syria though the parties are not hostile; they keep up their diplomatic dialogue and even cooperate to solve the Syrian crisis.³³

Iran's geopolitics rest upon maintaining security and stretching power through manipulating sectarian fissures and balancing against Israel, Saudi Arabia and the U.S. A fragile economy, insufficient military capacity, regional and international mistrust as well as a complicated FP (due to a mixture of idealism and pragmatism) are the basic impediments before Iranian geopolitics.

3.2. Security and balance of power

Historical adverse experiences have left a 'permanent scar on the Iranian psyche.'³⁴ Living in an unstable neighborhood, having non-NPT nuclear states in the close geography (Pakistan and India), having hostile regimes who have faced military invasion as neighbors (Taliban and Saddam), living close to near-failed neighbors (Pakistan and Afghanistan) and having politically dependent neighbors in the Persian Gulf, all combined with a general dissatisfaction with authoritarian regimes in the region, create stress on Iran's FP calculations. Regional rivalries, aspirations for hegemony and the aforementioned security threats are the basis of Iran's balance of power policy.³⁵ As Ramazani reminds, balancing revolutionary ideology with the pragmatism of power balancing "has been one of the most persistent, intricate, and difficult issues in all Iranian history".³⁶

In regards to recent conduct, the initial security problem was created as a result of the U.S. invasions sparked by the War on Terror initiative and the preemption doctrine of the Bush government. Although Khatami has opted for cooperation, the *axis of evil* label (created by the U.S.) has raised perceptions of coercion, isolation and alienation as well as concerns over regime change. In order to balance against the U.S., Iran started to pursue an opaqueness policy in its nuclear development. While rejecting claims about its nuclear intentions, Iran kept the nature of its nuclear activities ambiguous by not ratifying the additional protocol of the NPT, and in providing partial access to the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors. This was a way of challenging the U.S. in non-military ways and indicating the possibility of prospective military action.³⁷

Kamrava stresses that ideology is the basis of Iranian politics, though the FP and national security issues are a direct product of the pragmatic balance of power considerations.³⁸ The material capabilities of Iran are limited to sustain Iran's regional power aspirations or to maintain Iran's security in the stormy region.³⁹ After the cooperation failure in the

³³ "Turkish, Russian, Iranian presidents to meet in Turkey in April," *Hürriyet Daily News*, February 20, 2018, accessed March 15, 2018, <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/turkish-russian-iranian-presidents-to-meet-in-turkey-in-april-127599>.

³⁴ Ehteshami, "The Foreign Policy of Iran," 285.

³⁵ Ehteshami, "The Foreign Policy of Iran," 304.

³⁶ Ramazani, "Ideology and Pragmatism," 549.

³⁷ Hong-Cheol Kim, "The Paradox of Power Asymmetry: When and Why Do Weaker States Challenge US Hegemony?," *All Azimuth* 5, no. 2 (2016): 7.

³⁸ Mehran Kamrava, "Iran and Its Persian Gulf Neighbors," in *Iranian Foreign Policy since 2001: Alone in the World*, ed. Thomas Juneau and Sam Razavi (London: Routledge, 2013), 104.

³⁹ Randall Schweller, "Unanswered Threats: A Neoclassical Realist Theory of Underbalancing," *International Security* 29, no. 2 (2004): 166.

Afghanistan case, Iran had to go back to maintaining a balance of power. Due to regional isolation, lack of sufficient allies and confrontations with great powers, Iran felt compelled to start an *alliance policy* by turning attentions to common regional conflicts like the Arab-Israeli conflict and Israel's nuclear ambiguity.⁴⁰ With respect to alliances, sectarianism has provided the most functional basis. Through the Shi'a connection, Iran has managed to establish close ties with Iraq's Haidar al-Abadi government. By this alliance, Iran managed to oust U.S. control and became the champion of influence in Iraq. As for Syria, the existence of the al-Assad government is a strong element of Iran's balance of power framework. The alliance with Syria provides Iran with a strong fortress against the Saudi-led block, which supports the opposition forces in Syria. A similar balancing is also observable in Yemen, where the Saudi/Emirati military campaign is set against the Huthis supported by Tehran. The sectarian balance of power is easy to trace, particularly in Lebanese politics, where Iran remains influential through Hezbollah. Saudi Arabia has opened a front in Lebanon to eliminate Iranian influence by supporting and sponsoring the March 14 Alliance, which is known as an anti-Syrian coalition of political parties in Lebanon.⁴¹

As for balancing the great powers, Iran has diplomatic relations with China and Russia; Iran shares similar strategic visions with both countries. However, the degree of engagement with China is not sufficient to create an anti-U.S. block. In Syria, Iran and Russia effectively cooperate to support the al-Assad regime. Still, it is unlikely that the cooperation extends to other conflicts, such as Yemen or Afghanistan. In Yemen, Russian-Iranian ties are strained over Iran's support for Houthis. In Afghanistan, the parties have divergent approaches to the inclusion of Taliban in the newly emerging political settlement.

Iran's FP options are narrowed by the regime's reliance on the strict principles of the Revolution. The innovative foreign policy approaches, like Khatami's Dialogue of Civilizations approach, had to bounce back to the rigidity of Mullahs as soon as they hit the counter reactions of especially great powers.

4. Intervening Variables: Translators of Stimuli into Foreign Policy

The confrontational FP of Iran is a product of various intervening variables. As would be expected, the clerical elite, the duality of the political system, the religious and revolutionary ideologies, the isolationist nationalism, the national resources and the economic conditions are factors that translate the international power distribution into foreign policy. In this context, the most prominent internal dynamics for Iran can be assessed under the titles of nationalism and ideology and as well as its complex decision making mechanism.

4.1 Nationalism

The link between nationalism and FP is a complex one, since it is not mono-directional. This study assumes that nationalism can shape FP in numerous causal ways, by affecting a state's perception of its environment, by interpreting the history or historical incidents, by motivating the state for certain aims or by creating subjective interpretations of power.

The Iranian leadership has reflected nationalism as an integral part of Iranian independence. Therefore, from Khomeini to Rafsanjani, Khatami, Ahmadinejad and Rouhani, all political

⁴⁰ Kayhan Barzegar, "Iran's foreign policy strategy after Saddam," *The Washington Quarterly* 33, no. 1 (2010): 173.

⁴¹ "Lebanon: At the Crossroads," *Aljazeera*, 2015, accessed March 14, 2018, <https://interactive.aljazeera.com/aje/2015/lebanoncrossroads/>.

figures have opted for incorporating nationalism into their FP.⁴² The concept *Iranism* is the most all-encompassing approach and includes all elements from language to religion, ethnicity to history, culture and even geography.⁴³ This kind of a comprehensive concept helps when referring to different styles of Iranian leaders, who emphasize diverse aspects of Iranian corporate identity while addressing FP issues.

The history of informal imperialist domination and foreign interventionism that led to the 1953 Operation TP-Ajax has taught Iranian leadership a lesson: the governance has to preserve the regime from any kind of foreign involvement, especially Western influence. Nationalism functions in Iranian politics as a strict bearer of Iranian independence, a tool for non-submission. Pragmatism and nationalism are two elements of Iranian FP that are used alternately. Threats trigger nationalism; pragmatism is employed under stability and peace. Nationalism, in general, creates a confrontational approach against certain states. Concordantly, Iranian leaders keep labeling the U.S. as ‘the great Satan’ and Israel, ‘the little Satan’. The existence of American troops in the Middle East, in Afghanistan and in Iraq has been causing distress. Additionally, during the nuclear talks with P5+1 group, the U.S. officials threatened Iran by often repeating that “all options are on the table” to solve the nuclear crisis. The more Iran feels their independence jeopardized, the bolder the nationalist discourse. In other words, Iranian nationalism is based on prudence; it is seen as the assurance of sovereignty and territorial integrity that are basic pillars of statehood. Iranian nationalism recognizes Iran’s multiethnic character. Hence, Iranism is the widely employed nationalistic approach to ensure the loyalty of other ethnic groups. For instance, the rising Turkish nationalist tendency in Azerbaijan, under the governance of Elbulfez Elchibey, was perceived as a threat against Iran’s territorial integrity. Iranism helped to shield the Turkish (*Azari*) population in Iran from Azerbaijani influence.

During the nuclear crisis, ambiguity over the true nature of Iran’s nuclear program was harshly criticized all over the world. Ahmadinejad’s take on these criticisms was that the West prevents Iran from bearing advanced technologies by overlooking it. He said, “the nuclear technology is ... the sort of technology that has been monopolized by a few countries and they want to maintain such a monopoly, and they want to use it as an instrument of domination over the whole world”.⁴⁴ In other words, Ahmadinejad protected Iranian independence from Western domination of technology and economy.

Nationalism is treated as a flexible tool of Iran’s FP; it is used in various cases like protecting Iran from manipulation by foreign forces, preserving Iran’s territorial integrity or ensuring independence. Thus, nationalism is not referred in a singular manner like ethno-nationalism or lingo-nationalism, secular nationalism or religious nationalism. Instead, it is employed pragmatically to address necessity. When it is utilized to facilitate relations with Central Asian states such as Afghanistan and Tajikistan, language is emphasized; when shielding the country against the Arab states, the Shiite feature is held up. Iranism enables the flexibility of foreign behavior to adjust against any possible case in order to defend the Islamic Republic.

⁴² Though, they disunite regarding the true nature of Iranian nationalism as a constituent of their foreign policy. The descriptions revolve mainly around references to the ancient past of Iran or Shiite Islam, and anti-imperialism/anti-U.S. sentiment/anti-Zionism. Some studies also embrace alternative concepts like race, language or geography.

⁴³ Shahram Akbarzadeh and James Barry, “State Identity in Iranian Foreign Policy,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 43, no. 4 (2016): 617.

⁴⁴ “Ahmadinejad: Nations jealous of nuclear progress,” CNN, accessed February 2, 2018, <http://edition.cnn.com/2008/WORLD/meast/02/23/iran.jealous/>.

4.2. Theological and ideological influences

A revolution is, roughly described, a forcible overthrow of a government to establish a new one. Commonly, revolutions happen through a class struggle like a labor/peasant upheaval against an unjust governance of elites. However, the Islamic Revolution has a distinct character. It symbolizes a victory over imperialism. Ideological anti-Americanism lay at the heart of the revolution.⁴⁵ The Revolution treats America ‘as an idea rather than a state.’⁴⁶ Ayatollah Khamenei defined the nature of the Revolution by saying “the Revolution uprooted the enemies’ political position in the country ... Well, the U.S. is now (...) angry with the Revolution of Iran because it was defeated by this massive, retaliatory movement”.⁴⁷ *Iran* suffered from *British Imperialism for a long time*. Anti-Americanism is perceived as a general term to define *the West* as a monolithic *Other*. For a thorough break from dependent and west-inflicted exploitative politics, the Revolution popularized new terms such as ‘westoxication’ (*gharbzadegi*), which is being infected by the West, its culture, economy and politics. The western influence is assessed as a disease, which spoils the cultural authenticity and sovereignty of Iran. The cure is ‘westeradication’ (*gharbzeda’i*).⁴⁸ It is resistance to forceful western stimulus by nativism. It is the key to independence from the tyranny of oppressive neocolonialism.

Disassociation from the West did not bring a rapprochement with the East, be it Soviet influence or any alliance with the Middle East, Central Asia or Caucasus. Iran is ethnically, linguistically and theologically distinct from the rest of the Middle East. Furthermore, the inhabitants of the Persian Gulf have close ties with the U.S. Thus, Iran has distant relations with its neighbors to keep up the revolutionary principles. The interference traumas of the Pahlavi era have resulted in the formulation of the ‘negative balance’ doctrine.⁴⁹ It requires equal independence from eastern and western powers.⁵⁰ These ideals are obviously possible through self-reliance or self-sufficiency. According to Abrahamian, this policy creates an alternative development path, “a non-communist and non-capitalist road to development”.⁵¹ Economic independence is the key for political independence and regional influence. These values of the revolution are openly reflected in the constitution.⁵²

In the early years of the Revolution, Musavi and Rafsanjani implemented the aforementioned nativist values.⁵³ Particularly during the first years of the Revolution, Tehran employed the principle of non-alignment and non-participation in great power conflicts. Choosing a side would mean being in the influence zone of a foreign power. This would

⁴⁵ Gi-Wook Shin, “South Korean Anti-Americanism: A Comparative Perspective,” *Asian Survey* 36, no. 8 (1996): 792.

⁴⁶ Clifton Sherrill, “Iranian Foreign Policy: A Neoclassical Realist View” (paper presented at the annual meeting of the Southern Political Science Association, The Hyatt Regency New Orleans, New Orleans, Louisiana, January 9, 2014), 19.

⁴⁷ “Recent damage inflicted on Iran by U.S. will gain a response” Khamenei.ir, January 9, 2018, accessed February 2, 2018, <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/5394/Recent-damage-inflicted-on-Iran-by-U-S-will-gain-a-response>.

⁴⁸ The term ‘Westoxification’ or ‘*Gharbzadegi*’ is popularized by the novelist Jalal al-e Ahmad in his book with the same name published in 1962.

⁴⁹ Ehteshami, “The Foreign Policy of Iran,” 285.

⁵⁰ Most famous slogans during the Revolution were “*Esteghlal, Azadi, Jomhoori Eslami*” meaning “Independence, Freedom, Islamic Republic,” and “*Nah Sharghi, Nah Gharbi, faghat Jomhoori Eslami*” meaning “Neither East nor West, only Islamic Republic.”

⁵¹ Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2008), 38.

⁵² The §2(6/c) declares that the Islamic Republic is based on “negation of all forms of oppression, both the infliction of and the submission to it, and of dominance, both its imposition and its acceptance.” According to the §3(13) of the Constitution, it is the responsibility of the Iranian state to afford “self-sufficiency in scientific, technological, industrial, agricultural, and military domains, and other similar spheres.” See “Iran (Islamic Republic of)’s Constitution of 1979 with Amendments through 1989,” The Constitute Project, accessed February 10, 2018, https://www.constituteproject.org/constitution/iran_1989.pdf?lang=en.

⁵³ Rouhollah K. Ramazani, “Iran’s Foreign Policy: Contending Orientations,” *Middle East Journal* 43, no. 2 (1989): 212.

contrast sharply with the spirit of the Revolution. In order to build a ‘global Islamic front’⁵⁴ against Western imperialism, idealism to export the regime has also gained weight.

Anti-Zionism is another significant knot in revolutionary Iran’s ideological texture. Although Israel and Iran do not share any borders, their animosity stems primarily from Israel’s close ties with the U.S. According to Tehran, Israel has the capability to influence Washington’s policy on Iran.⁵⁵ Moreover, the Palestinian case represents the cause of the Revolution: to support the oppressed against the neocolonialists. Palestine is of both Arab and Sunni nature, yet Iran does not hesitate to provide support for it. Supporting Palestine is an opportunity to avert allegations on Iran’s sectarianism, to create a common denominator with the Arab World and, as a power-projection-opportunity, to reprove the ‘Judeo-Western political and cultural onslaught on the Muslim world.’⁵⁶ Post-revolutionary Iran, with its messianic Shi’ism, caused noticeable tensions with the Arab neighborhood. However, speaking on behalf of the Muslim world, supporting the common cause of Palestine and claiming to be the representative of Islam in the international platform created more tensions with the Arab Middle East, where ‘Iran’s identification with the Shia has also been a handicap, and has hampered its ability to reach and influence Sunni groups with any significant degree of effectiveness.’⁵⁷ The Israeli invasion of Lebanon in 1982 underwired Iran’s stance vis-à-vis Israel. Iran found the chance to intervene in a country and establish contact with a Shia community. This created the opportunity to export its own regime and expand its range of influence, in addition to finding a chance to sharpen its enmity against Israel, and condemn Israel’s actions and existence. Tehran considers Israel unlawful according to international law, and illegitimate due to its establishment pattern and settlements.⁵⁸ Moreover, it is an open enemy of the *ummah*, the Islamic society. Iranian leadership convicts Zionism for being a racist, exclusionary ideology. Then Zionism shall be opposed by all who values human rights.⁵⁹

The revolutionary ideology is incomplete without mentioning the theological component. Iran’s Islamic identity is markedly sectarian, based on Shi’ism. The Shi’a identity is structured upon neither East nor West vision. Khomeini uttered that “the revolution was undertaken in the name of those dispossessed and oppressed by a corrupt and un-Islamic government”.⁶⁰ Ali Shari’ati is the ideologue of the Revolution. He has produced his works by fusing modern socialism with traditional Shi’ism.⁶¹ Shari’ati holds that resistance against imperialism is a teaching of Islam that we learn through the historical incident of Qarbala. Shari’ati listed the ills of contemporary Iran as “world imperialism, including multinational corporations and cultural imperialism, racism, class exploitation, class oppression, class inequality and *gharbzadegi* (intoxication with the West)”.⁶² Only by complete independence from all extraneous powers can Iran heal from these illnesses.

⁵⁴ Rouhollah K. Ramazani, “Iran’s Export of the Revolution: Politics, Ends and Means,” in *The Iranian Revolution: Its Global Impact*, ed. John Esposito (Miami: Florida International University Press, 1990), 44-45.

⁵⁵ Farhad Rezaei and Ronen A. Cohen, “Iran’s Nuclear Program and the Israeli-Iranian Rivalry in the Position Revolutionary Era,” *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 41 (2014): 442.

⁵⁶ Meir Litvak, “The Islamic Republic of Iran and the Holocaust: Anti-Semitism and Anti-Zionism,” *The Journal of Israeli History* 25, no. 1 (2006): 268.

⁵⁷ Shireen T. Hunter, “Iran and the Spread of Revolutionary Islam,” *Third World Quarterly* 10, no. 2 (1988): 739.

⁵⁸ IV. Geneva Convention Relative to the Protection of Civilian Persons in time of War of 12 August 1949. The Section III (Occupied Territories) §49 prohibits occupying state to “deport or transfer parts of its own population into the territories it occupies” that is applicable on the occupation of West Bank, the East Jerusalem, the Gaza Strip and the Golan Heights.

⁵⁹ Ray Takeyh, *Hidden Iran: Paradox and Power in the Islamic Republic* (New York: Times Books, 2006), 199.

⁶⁰ Zaccara, “Iran’s Permanent Quest,” 198.

⁶¹ Ervand Abrahamian, “Ali Shariati: Ideologue of the Iranian revolution,” *Merip Reports* 102 (1982): 24-8.

⁶² Abrahamian, “Ali Shariati”.

Both Sunni and Shia Islam accept the Mahdi concept; Shi'ism still politicizes it. Shi'a view supports that the world lacks justice. The return of the *Mahdi* will bring equity and order. Likewise, Iran wants to export its revolution to teach the rest of the Muslim world how to free themselves from imperialism in order to set a just system for their inhabitants. The export of the Revolution promises Iran a more conversant setting. Among the Sunni Arabs in the Persian Gulf region and secular Turkey, Iran could not extend its power or establish trustworthy ties to form alliances against the West.

Besides, Shi'ism facilitates Iran's transnational ties with Shi'a communities in Lebanon, similar to those in Iraq or Yemen. Those ties are veins of Iranian influence into Arab states for spreading the Revolution. Shireen Hunter asserts that Shi'a ideology makes a simple division: the oppressor and arrogant powers, and the oppressed and downtrodden nations".⁶³ Not only the U.S. and England are oppressors according to Iran, but also most Middle Eastern countries. The export of the Revolution would replace unjust and illegitimate governances with independent and equitable Islamic governances.⁶⁴ Resistance is the key for the salvation of oppressed communities. Yet Iran does not accept pursuing sectarian politics. For Tehran, their support for the cause of Sunni Palestine and Hamas is the proof of their nonsectarian FP.

Revolutionary ideology marked Iran's FP in the first years of the Revolution, and it made a come-back in the aftermath of the 9/11 attacks, when U.S. President Bush included Iran in the axis of evil. Bush announced that Iran is an ally of the terrorists, that it "aggressively pursues these weapons and exports terror" and sponsors terrorists, while "an unselected few repress the Iranian people's hope for freedom".⁶⁵ In order to balance against the U.S., Iranian leadership has gone back to the revolutionary ideals that remind the nation of anti-Westernism, anti-Zionism, third-worldism and anti-imperialism. Khamenei slammed the remarks of Bush, saying Iran "is proud to be the target of the hate and anger of the world's greatest evil, we never seek to be praised by American officials". In consistence with revolutionary principles, he accused America of opposing the will of people, opposing popular movements, supporting undemocratic regimes, selling lethal weapons and creating an unjust economic system.⁶⁶

Conservatives are the major defenders and implementers of the classical ideological values of the Revolution. Pragmatists also stick to these values but they assume that revolutionary ideology is evolutionarily in line with Iran's interests and the international context. According to pragmatists, Iran is better off opting for an approach that reduces frictions with the U.S. for security, economic and political interests.⁶⁷ The intensity of the values depend on the cases Iran face. Ahmadinejad has escalated the ideological leverage in his rhetoric during the nuclear dispute through emphasis on "resistance, justice, and independence".⁶⁸ The Arab Spring uprisings have stimulated the ideology-oriented foreign policy from 2011 onwards. The Iranian leadership has interpreted the uprisings as 'Arab Islamic Awakening.'⁶⁹ Then again, during the nuclear negotiations and cooperation with the International Atomic Energy

⁶³ Hunter, "Iran and the Spread of Revolutionary Islam," 734.

⁶⁴ Hunter, "Iran and the Spread of Revolutionary Islam," 734.

⁶⁵ "President Delivers State of the Union Address," The White House, January 29, 2002, accessed February 4, 2018, <https://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2002/01/20020129-11.html>.

⁶⁶ "A Nation Challenged: The Rogue List; Bush's 'Evil' Label Rejected by Angry Iranian Leaders," *The New York Times*, February 1, 2002, accessed February 6, 2018, <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/02/01/world/nation-challenged-rogue-list-bush-s-evil-label-rejected-angry-iranian-leaders.html>.

⁶⁷ Sanam Vakil, "Iran: Balancing East against West," *Washington Quarterly* 29, no. 4 (2006): 53.

⁶⁸ Homeira Moshirzadeh, "Discursive Foundations of Iran's Nuclear Policy," *Security Dialogue* 38, no. 4 (2007): 523.

⁶⁹ Przemysław Osiewicz, "The Iranian Foreign Policy in the Persian Gulf Region under the Rule of President Hassan Rouhani: Continuity of Change," *Przełąd Strategiczny* 7 (2014): 258.

Agency (IAEA), Ahmadinejad adopted pragmatist elements to his policy.⁷⁰ The presidency of Rouhani from 2014 on seems to be more pragmatic than his predecessors; however, his ‘prospects of policy change are constrained by internal barriers.’⁷¹ His pragmatic FP is significantly limited by Khamenei, since he has the final say in critical decisions. Ramazani points out that “the spiritual pragmatic paradigm (...) has deep roots in Iran’s diplomatic culture (...) these attributes have survived change and have influenced generations of Iran’s foreign policymakers and diplomats and their negotiating style”.⁷²

In a nutshell, the revolutionary ideology is a composition of Shia theology and anti-imperialism that affects the FP in various intensities depending upon the international power distribution and Iran’s perceptions of international phenomena. Mullahs, who have the last word in decisions, guarantee the ideology. Therefore, ideology cannot be downplayed and as soon as a threat emerges then the ideological FP gears up.

4.3. Complex decision making mechanism

The complex *political system* of Iran combines elements of democracy with the institutions of the Islamic Revolution. There is a major duality between the democratically elected president and the *Velayat-e faqih*. Iran’s regime situates the parliamentary democracy under the ultimate authority of the *faqih*. The multiplicity of the state organs and the involvement of (elected or appointed) revolutionary bodies in various degrees of the decision making create the complexity. The actual head of state and commander-in-chief of the country’s armed forces is the *faqih*. He is the ultimate authority and has the last word from national security in foreign policy issues. A natural constituent of democratic systems, transparency, is limited in Iran. Opaqueness was also the case under the single-person authority of the Shah. Milani states that after revolutions (like the French Revolution), a vacuum occurs in which power oscillates from one group to another. However, this vacuum did not occur in Iran, where ‘Khomeini was the revolution and the revolution was he.’⁷³ Khomeini set the principles of the revolution and he left his mark on all FP actions until his death, from his support for the students that seized the U.S. Embassy to the war with Iraq. With respect to the Middle East region, especially the Persian Gulf, Khomeini called on them to free themselves from foreign (the Soviet) influences and “find safety under the security umbrella of Iran”.⁷⁴ Khomeini did not hesitate to extend his aspiration “to create an Islamic-led international order”.⁷⁵

The power sharing between the elected president and the *faqih* with respect to FP making is, as might be expected, controversial. The presidents bring their own foreign policy vision and agenda. They try to run their program without clashing with the ideals of the *faqih*. The framework drawn by the Revolution is a rigid one, which undermines the effectiveness of the individual FP agendas by the static ideology. The most visible clash was during the presidency of Ahmadinejad, who attempted to strike up a nuclear deal with the West; Ayatollah Khamenei sided with the opposition in the parliament.⁷⁶ As a result, challenging the permanent leader on

⁷⁰ Rouhollah K. Ramazani, “Reflections on Iran’s Foreign Policy,” *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs* 1, no. 1 (2010): 11-43.

⁷¹ Akbarzadeh, “Iran’s Syrian Foreign Policy Objectives,” 128.

⁷² Ramazani, “Reflections on Iran’s Foreign Policy,” 75.

⁷³ Mohsen M. Milani, *The Making of Iran’s Islamic Revolution: From monarchy to Islamic Republic* (New York & Oxon: Routledge, 2018), 197.

⁷⁴ Ramazani, “Ideology and Pragmatism,” 7.

⁷⁵ Ramazani, “Ideology and Pragmatism,” 7.

⁷⁶ “Is this really the end for Ahmadinejad?,” *Foreign Policy*, November 25, 2009, accessed March 11, 2018, <http://foreignpolicy.com/2010/11/25/is-this-really-the-end-for-ahmadinejad-2/>.

a sensitive issue put Ahmadinejad into a bind. Ahmadinejad's collision with the revolutionary institutions has proven that, although elected governments implement their own FP agenda, they are still strictly bound by the predetermined ideology.

After the death of Khomeini, the constitution was revised in 1989 to clarify the offices and their duties and obligations. The revised constitution established two bodies: the Council for the Expediency of the System and the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC.) The expediency council is appointed by the *faqih*. Its duty is to mediate and resolve conflicts between the parliament and the Guardian Council of the Constitution (GC.) The duty of the GC is to evaluate the consonance of *majlis* decisions with Shia theology and revolutionary values. The SNSC appears as an organ central to FP decision making. According to the §176 of Iran's Constitution, the SNSC is established to 'safeguard the national interests and preserve the Islamic Revolution, the territorial integrity and national sovereignty.' The president, who also heads the council, appoints the Secretary of the SNSC. However, the approval of the *faqih* is necessary for SNSC decisions to go into effect. When Iran enters into international treaties, *majlis* holds the ratification power. However, the GC can veto all decisions of the *majlis*. The aforementioned expediency council arbitrates between the *majlis* and the GC; therefore, it has a behind-the-scenes role in foreign policy making.

During the presidency of Ahmadinejad, Ali Larijani headed the SNSC; he was accountable to the *faqih* and he was Iran's chief nuclear *negotiator*. As Larijani repeatedly underlined the peaceful character of the uranium enrichment program, Ahmadinejad's aggressive rhetoric against the West distressed the nuclear negotiations and discredited the reliability of Larijani's warrants over Iran's intentions.⁷⁷ As in this example, the dual voice of the Iranian state confuses their interlocutors, and divergent ideas are announced on sensitive issues.

The presidents are free to set their own FP agenda and style. They adjust the intensity of revolutionary principles on their own. The concentration of anti-Westernism in the rhetoric of, for example, Ahmadinejad and Khatami, are obviously different. Although both of them have called for a change in the U.S. relations, Khatami, as a reformist, called for repairing the mistrust with the U.S. by introducing the policy of Dialogue of Civilizations.⁷⁸ In his public talks, Khatami continued to emphasize the Islamic and revolutionary values and actually promoted "interfaith dialogue" and "faith based movements".⁷⁹ Conversely, the conservative president Ahmadinejad said that change is possible through an "effective policy shift by the U.S".⁸⁰ He has questioned the Holocaust, voiced suspicions regarding the operation against al-Qaida leader Osama-bin-Laden and called the 9/11 attacks fabricated facts.⁸¹

Iran's FP is primarily based on power and threat balancing. In this sense, threat perceptions play a significant role. The foremost concern of Iran is the preservation of the regime and territorial integrity. The key force in guaranteeing security is the Islamic Revolutionary

⁷⁷ "Iran's chief nuclear negotiator resigns," *The Washington Post*, October 20, 2007, accessed February 12, 2018, http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/10/20/AR2007102000302_pf.html.

⁷⁸ "Khatami suggests warmer relations with U.S.," CNN, January 7, 1998, accessed February 12, 2018, <http://edition.cnn.com/WORLD/9801/07/iran/>.

⁷⁹ Turan Kayaoğlu, "Constructing the Dialogue of Civilizations in World Politics: A case of global Islamic activism," *Islam and Christian-Muslim Relations* 23, no. 2 (2012): 129-47.

⁸⁰ "Mahmoud Ahmadinejad calls for change in US relations but says nuclear issue is 'closed'," *The Telegraph*, February 17, 2009, accessed March 12, 2018, <https://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/worldnews/middleeast/iran/4683971/Mahmoud-Ahmadinejad-calls-for-change-in-US-relations-but-says-nuclear-issue-is-closed.html>.

⁸¹ "Iran president makes 9/11 claims after UN walkout," CNN, September 23, 2011, accessed March 12, 2018, <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-us-canada-15028776>.

Guard Corps (IRGC; *sepah-e pasdaran*.) The Guard Corps emerged as a crowded military force during the Iran-Iraq War. In the aftermath of the war, it was downsized with expanded duties and economic opportunities.⁸² The difference between the IRGC and the regular army is that the duty of the Guard is not limited to external threats; they are also responsible for ensuring the persistence of the revolutionary structure. The regular army is solely responsible for external threats; the army is known to be loyal to the Shah.⁸³ Therefore, the IRGC is established as a *coup d'état* prevention. Due to its double role in politics, the IRGC grew as one of the most powerful political players in Iran. They are strictly committed to revolutionary values. They fight against counter-revolutionary movements and gather intelligence about possible threats. The IRGC does not have a direct role in FP making, but it is an effective role. Formally, the Guardian Council evaluates bills and international agreements (among other items) for concordance with revolutionary values.⁸⁴

The IRGC is the main executor of revolutionary FP ideals. Recently, they have suppressed anti-Assad rallies in Syria. Other nations find their activities in the region suspicious. The IRGC is accused of having ties with terrorist organizations. Bush included Iran in the axis of evil due to claims that the Guards deliver help to al-Qaeda members and logistics to the Palestinian Authority.⁸⁵ The Guards' responses to threats and opportunities are reactive in nature. For instance, in return to the axis of evil speech, the Guards warned the U.S. of destroying "oil fields in the Persian Gulf, which produce much of the oil used by the United States" if it kept threatening Iran.⁸⁶ The IRGC runs the ballistic missile program and has conducted tests since the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) that the global community sees as provocative actions. Two test missiles were marked in Hebrew reading 'Israel must be wiped off the Earth.' The Guard states that Iran's right to defense cannot be limited and the tests have proven Iran's "full readiness to confront all kinds of threats against the Revolution, establishment and territorial integrity".⁸⁷ In other words, Iran is trying to sustain military balance with the U.S.

Moreover, the IRGC has an internationalist mission that aims to export Iran's revolutionary ideals via the Shia populations of the Shia crescent region to stretch Iran's influence through Iraq, Syria and Lebanon. The Quds Brigade of the IRGC is particularly active in projecting Iranian influence and supporting al-Assad's regime in Syria. The commander of the Quds Force has affirmed Iran's support for the Palestinian resistance movements.⁸⁸ The Quds Force is also known as Iran's primary apparatus to sponsor Hezbollah in Lebanon. Via the Quds Force, the IRGC has been conducting Iran's struggle with the West and extending the influence of Iran to Mediterranean shores via the Shia communities among MENA states. Therefore, the IRGC appears as a significant bearer of Iran's foreign policy in the region.

⁸² The Revolutionary Guards have an extensive control over the Iranian economy. They operate through holding companies, which are known as *bonyads*; and they dominate roughly 2/3 of Iran's GDP.

⁸³ Behbod Negahban, "Who Makes Iran's Foreign Policy: The Revolutionary Guard and Factional Politics in the Formulation of Iranian Foreign Policy," *Yale Journal of International Affairs* 12 (2017): 33.

⁸⁴ Ehteshami, "The Foreign Policy of Iran," 295.

⁸⁵ Said Amir Arjomand, *After Khomeini: Iran under his successors* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009), 194-96.

⁸⁶ "Iran's Khatami backs anti-U.S. protest points to 'unfounded assertions' by U.S. leaders," CNN, February 9, 2002, accessed March 10, 2018, <http://edition.cnn.com/2002/WORLD/meast/02/09/iran.warning/index.html>.

⁸⁷ "Iran fires ballistic missiles a day after test; U.S. officials hint at violation," CNN, March 9, 2016, accessed March 11, 2018, <https://edition.cnn.com/2016/03/09/middleeast/iran-missile-test/index.html>.

⁸⁸ "IRGC commander Soleimani reaffirms full support for Palestinian resistance groups," PressTV, December 11, 2017, accessed March 13, 2018, <http://www.presstv.com/Detail/2017/12/11/545286/Qassem-Soleimani-IRGC-Quds-Force-EzzeddinalQassam-Brigades-Islamic-Jihad>.

Concisely, Iran's FP is a product of a unique administrative apparatus that blends religious authority with democratic legislature officially, and military forces unofficially. The system of checks and balances functions in favor of authoritarian hierarchy instead of democratic transparency. The democratically elected representatives run their own FP until clerics perceive external threats; then they take over control. The military forces are the most influential body in threat assessment and response.

5. Conclusion

Iran is living in an instable geography and has the sophisticated goal of becoming a regional power. It is trying to produce a FP to materialize its regional aspirations while trying to produce defense policies against treacherous regional conditions. Those policies occasionally contradict one another. The government is trying to adjust the doses of religious ideology in response to national interests. The FP agenda is full of important items; international negotiations, economic expectancies, regional conflicts and the relations with the Western world are all part of the agenda. Today the president Rouhani is limited by the Supreme Leader, besides an unfavorable balance of power and regional impediments. The U.S. administration is critical of the nuclear deal; the IRGC keeps testing ballistic missiles despite international warnings. Moreover, Iran's rivalry with Saudi Arabia is heating through proxies. Comprehending Iranian foreign behavior in this chaotic picture requires a multilevel framework provided by neoclassical realism. This article maintains that Iran is merely a mission-oriented state with tremendous domestic and international security concerns. The regime has constructed a political system with little elbow room for the democratically elected representatives. This sensitive threat perception mechanism is run by fierce 'victimism' and independence motivations. The reactions are shaped via theological paths and nationalistic rhetoric. The elected representatives decide on their own FP agenda and style until a perceived hegemonic threat occurs that demands a response from the clerics, owners of revolutionary Iran.

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