



**STUDIES IN IRANIAN POLITICS**  
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# Iran in an Emerging New World Order

From Ahmadinejad to Rouhani

Ali Fathollah-Nejad



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*Dedicated to  
my most beloved parents  
Ana and Ata  
for their unconditional love and their invaluable  
moral and intellectual guidance*

## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This study covers the period until the end of 2014, when Iran was witnessing the early years of the Hassan Rouhani administration. It is based upon my PhD dissertation submitted in January 2015 to the Department of Development Studies at SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies), University of London. I have decided to refrain from any update or significant editing of the text. An exception, however, is the discussion on the impact of sanctions on Iran's foreign-policy behaviour. This book is published precisely at a time when the new Joe Biden administration in the USA is about to re-engage with Iran where President Rouhani's second term is nearing its end. I hope that the theoretical and empirical insights presented in this book can be useful for scholars and analysts alike.

I would like to extend my deepest gratitude to my principal PhD supervisor Prof. Gilbert Achcar for his guidance, wisdom and not least his *esprit humain* and patience. I have learned a great deal from his scholarship, especially the rejection of dogma and the concise language, which I still continue to admire. I also wish to thank my second supervisor Prof. Arshin Adib-Moghaddam—a fellow “German–Iranian”—for the many hours of formidably stimulating discussions. I will be eternally grateful to both of them. I have indeed been privileged to have such outstanding academics as supervisors from whose work I have immensely benefitted and whose divergent theoretical approaches, which enabled me to continually rethink my own, I have tried to infuse into this study. Last but not least, I am very grateful to my examiners, Prof. Ali M. Ansari and Dr. Gholam Khiabany, for their invaluable comments which immensely helped me improve the thesis.

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Needless to say, all shortcomings are solely mine.

Berlin, winter 2020/2021

AFN

## Praise for *Iran in an Emerging New World Order*

“Forged in the fires and intense deliberations of a PhD, undertaken at a most unique institution of higher learning in the world, Ali Fathollah-Nejad has produced one of the most informative and evocative studies of Iran’s foreign policy and international relations to date. Framed in a highly original theoretical approach, Ali’s nuanced analysis, drawing on a lorry load of primary and secondary sources, details the process and context of policy in the Islamic Republic, thus producing an unrivalled and lasting account of modern Iran’s worldview and the behaviour of this revolutionary state in a fast-changing world.”

—Anoush Ehteshami, *Professor of International Relations & Director of the Institute for Middle Eastern and Islamic Studies, School of Government and International Affairs, Durham University (UK)*

“Empirically rich and theoretically sophisticated, *Iran in an Emerging New World Order* flashes out the key drivers behind Iran’s international relations since the mid-2000s. Providing evidence for the material and geopolitical significance of Iran’s identity constructions, the book enriches the debate on the Islamic Republic’s foreign policy and bridges the divide between the discipline of IR and area studies.”

—Fawaz A. Gerges, *Professor of International Relations & inaugural Director, LSE Middle East Centre (2010–13), London School of Economics and Political Science (LSE); author of the forthcoming The 100 Years’ War for Control of the Middle East (Princeton University Press, 2021)*

“Ali Fathollah-Nejad has established himself as one of the most insightful observers of Iranian politics. Providing the analytical background to his assessments of Tehran’s foreign policy in the 21st century, this book comes out opportunistically at a time when a new U.S. administration is about to re-engage with Iran.”

—Gilbert Achcar, *Professor of Development Studies and International Relations, SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies) University of London*

“A wide-ranging interrogation of Iran’s international politics which acutely dissects and interrogates the complex dynamics informing Iranian politics and its wider international relations. An important contribution to the debate, which deserves to be widely read.”

—Ali Ansari, *Professor of Iranian History & Founding Director, Institute for Iranian Studies, University of St Andrews, Scotland*

“A decisive contribution to two avant-gardist fields of knowledge: Critical geopolitics and Iranian foreign relations. Anyone interested in cutting-edge research that brings together International Relations and Iranian Studies will revel in this important book.”

—Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, *Professor in Global Thought and Comparative Philosophies, Department of Politics and International Studies & former Chair (2012–18), Centre for Iranian Studies, SOAS University of London*

“One of the few to have a thorough, beyond-the-headlines and forward-looking grasp of Iran, Ali Fathollah-Nejad offers a brilliant analysis of what is in store for Iran. A must-read for anybody interested in geopolitics.”

—Florence Gaub, *Deputy Director & Director of Research, European Union Institute for Security Studies (EUISS), Paris*

“It is no longer possible to think of any nation-state without simultaneously seeing the reflection of an entire changing world in it. Ali Fathollah-Nejad’s prose and politics in *Iran in an Emerging New World Order* is the state-of-the-art mapping of the epistemic shift that seeks to understand the global in the local, and the domestic in the foreign. The result is a mode of supple and symbiotic thinking that reveals the way transnational politics dwells on the borderline where the fate of nations unravels into the fold of a dysfunctional disorder that has become the fact of our fragile world.”

—Hamid Dabashi, *Hagop Kevorkian Professor of Iranian Studies and Comparative Literature, Columbia University*

“Iranian politics, outside of a small group of specialists, remains poorly understood. *Iran in an Emerging New World Order* helps demystify this subject. Thoroughly researched, very accessible and packed with insights, this book, focusing on the Ahmadinejad period, is highly recommended. It makes an important contribution to the study of internal Iranian politics, Iran’s foreign policy orientation and the international relations of the Middle East.”

—Nader Hashemi, *Director, Center for Middle East Studies & Associate Professor, Josef Korbel School of International Studies, University of Denver*

“Ali Fathollah-Nejad has produced an academic work that is, from my viewpoint, so far the most comprehensive one concerning Iranian standing in regional and international politics, its new political élite and their attitude towards the West and the world order.”

—Farhad Khosrokhavar, *Professor in the Sociology of Contemporary Iran & Director of Studies at EHESS (École des hautes études en sciences sociales), the School for Advanced Studies in the Social Sciences, France*

“Iranian foreign policy is a central subject in contemporary international affairs, but is usually approached in glib and propagandistic ways, with an implicit great man theory of history. Fathollah-Nejad delineates a far more complex scene of changing domestic constituencies and rival elite factions, as well as reactions to an erratic, adventurous and arguably declining United States in the region. This book is a must read for anyone concerned with foreign policy.”

—Juan Cole, Richard P. Mitchell Collegiate,  
*Professor of History, University of Michigan*

“Since its inception in 1979, the Islamic Republic’s initial foreign policy was based on the rejection of the bipolar international order under the banner of a “neither East nor West” policy. By the end of the Cold War and the emergence of a unipolar order, the Islamic Republic tried to adjust its approach to deal with the United States as a hegemonic power. Iran shifted its foreign policy toward the East as soon as the international order moved from unipolarity in the early 2000s. Why did Iran turn its foreign policy, and what were the consequences and ramifications of this shift? *Iran in an Emerging New World Order* dives deep to answer these questions. *Iran in an Emerging New World Order* is a comprehensive and critical review of Iran’s foreign policy in post-unipolar world. As a delightful read full of important information and analyses, the book explores the domestic, regional, and international dimensions and ideational and material factors that shape and impact the Islamic Republic’s geopolitical imaginations and foreign policy controversies. Fathollah-Nejad explores Iran’s foreign-policy transformation from a unipolar to a (what he cautions as an increasingly but not fully-fledged) multipolar order, and its relations with non-Western great-powers in the 21st century. Written with clarity, *Iran in an Emerging New World Order* is a must-read primer for anyone interested in Iranian politics in particular and Middle East politics in general.”

—Saeid Golkar, *Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science, University of Tennessee, Chattanooga*; *Senior Fellow on Iran Policy, Chicago Council on Global Affairs* & author, *Captive Society: The Basij Militia and Social Control in Post-Revolutionary Iran (Columbia University Press, 2015)*

“A competent, engaged and impressive study of Iran’s foreign policy and its place in the world. Ali Fathollah-Nejad’s most important quality is that he looks with a wide lens and sees not just Iranian politics and foreign policy (in which he is clearly an expert) but the dynamics of the broader world and changes in the international system. This book is thus a must-read for those interested in Iranian foreign policy but also in shifts and changes of the international system into the second decade of the 21st century.”

—Arash Azizi, *New York University*; author of *The Shadow Commander: Soleimani, the US, and Iran’s Global Ambitions (Oneworld Publications, 2020)*

“In presenting Iran as sets of complexities – within and how it acts externally; how it represents itself and is represented by others; its myriad political and religious cultures, and how these shape the state and its international relations – and locating those within a constantly-changing global environment, Fathollah-Nejad provides us with unique and alternative assessments of how Iran’s foreign policy is shaped within the context of what he calls “Imperial Interpolarity”. The creative interplay of these various factors makes this an indispensable text for anyone wishing to understand Iran and its international relations within the current global political environment.”

—Na’eem Jeenah, *Executive Director, Afro-Middle East Centre (AMEC), Johannesburg & advisory board member, World Congress for Middle Eastern Studies (WOCMES)*

“A magnificent and conceptually powerful book; an eye opener for those who essentialize the role of Iran in contemporary International Relations. This landmark study covers the complexity of Iran’s cultural geopolitics and the diversity of its interlocutors in 21st-century world politics. The book is useful for delving into the internal dynamics of Iranian politics and its connection with the spheres of power in international relations. It is a very methodical book. Theoretically flawless. A deep, brilliant and enlightening academic text.”

—Moisés Garduño García, *Professor in the Center for International Relations, National Autonomous University of Mexico (UNAM)*

“In this book, Ali Fathollah-Nejad goes beyond the usual one-dimensional view that dominates the study of Iran’s foreign policy and presents a comprehensive framework explaining the interrelated role of socio-cultural, economic and geopolitical elements in shaping the Islamic Republic’s foreign-policy orientation. The book also focuses on a crucial period involving two critical transitions: a systemic transition from the unipolar to the post-unipolar world order and a domestic one from a hardline to a more moderate worldview. All this makes the book a valuable contribution to the field.”

—Hamidreza Azizi, *Alexander von Humboldt Fellow, Middle East and Africa Research Division, German Institute for International and Security Affairs (SWP) & former Assistant Professor of Regional Studies, Shahid Beheshti University, Tehran (2016–20)*

“*Iran in an Emerging New World Order* provides a timely and original account of foreign-policy making in the Islamic Republic of Iran, especially the turbulent first decade of the new millennium.”

—Kamran Matin, *Senior Lecturer in International Relations, Sussex University & Associate Research Fellow, Swedish Institute of International Affairs (UI)*

“Ali Fathollah-Nejad’s *Iran in an Emerging New World Order* builds on a reliable scientific approach and an informed overview of Iranian foreign policy. It identifies and examines the different factors which orientate it, such as its various schools of thought and their debates, the élites’ role, the interplay between structure and culture, and the one between internal and external realms. Furthermore, it casts light on the evolution of Tehran’s choices, including its “look to the East”. In this new book, Fathollah-Nejad has provided a challenging study which demonstrates the need to go beyond conventional framings, to include political culture, and provides a new evaluation of Iran’s international relations. This is an original and significant contribution to the literature on international relations, the workings of the Islamic Republic, and the understanding of the latter’s regional and global actions.”

—Firouzeh Nahavandi, *Professor of Sociology of Development and Political Science & Director, Institute of Sociology & Director, CECID (Center for International Cooperation and Development Studies), Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB), as well as President, Graduate School of Development Studies of French Community of Belgium*

“Through its careful analysis of a modern political culture in Iran gestated in the context of an encounter with European colonial modernity and evolved in correspondence with a catalogue of internal and external others, Ali Fathollah-Nejad’s timely book places contemporary geopolitical concerns against a much-needed backdrop of colonial and anti-colonial histories.”

—Siavash Saffari, *Associate Professor of West Asian Studies, Department of Asian Languages and Civilizations, Seoul National University*

“If you really want to dive deep into Iran and understand the reasons why its leaders are operating in the current crisis, this is the book you should read. It teaches analysts and policy-makers to understand the past to act wisely in the future.”

—Susanne Koelbl, *award-winning Foreign Correspondent, Der Spiegel*

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**Ali Fathollah-Nejad** is a German–Iranian political scientist focusing on Iran, the Middle East and the post-unipolar world order. He holds a PhD in International Relations from the Department of Development Studies at SOAS (School of Oriental and African Studies), University of London, and was the winner of the 2016/17 post-doctoral fellowship of the Harvard Kennedy School’s Iran Project. He is an affiliated researcher with the Centre d’Études de la Coopération Internationale et du Développement (CECID) at Université libre de Bruxelles (ULB), Freie Universität (FU) Berlin’s Center for Middle Eastern and North African Politics as well as the Afro–Middle East Centre (AMEC), South Africa’s think-tank specialized on the Middle East. Most recently, he was Senior Lecturer in Middle East and Comparative Politics at the University of Tübingen and adjunct Assistant Professor in the PhD programme of Qatar University’s Gulf Studies Center. Fathollah-Nejad is also the former Iran expert of the Brookings Institution in Doha (BDC, 2017–20) and the German Council on Foreign Relations (DGAP, 2015–18). In 2020, he published two monographs: *The Islamic Republic of Iran Four Decades On: The 2017/18 Protests Amid a Triple Crisis* and *The Politics of Culture in Times of Rapprochement: European Cultural and Academic Exchange with Iran (2015–16)*.

## LIST OF ACRONYMS

AEOI	Atomic Energy Organization of Iran
BRIC(S)	Brazil, Russia, India, China (and South Africa)
Centcom	US Central Command
CENTO	Central Treaty Organization
CICA	Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia, an inter-governmental and ‘multi-national forum for enhancing cooperation towards promoting peace, security and stability in Asia. It is a forum based on the recognition that there is close link between peace, security and stability in Asia and in the rest of the world.’ ( <a href="http://www.s-cica.org/page.php?lang=1">http://www.s-cica.org/page.php?lang=1</a> )
CISAD	The Comprehensive Iran Sanctions, Accountability and Divestment Act of 2010
D-8	The D-8 Organization for Economic Cooperation, also known as Developing-8, is an organization for development of cooperation among Bangladesh, Egypt, Indonesia, Iran, Malaysia, Nigeria, Pakistan and Turkey. Its objectives are to improve member-states’ position in the global economy, diversify and create new opportunities in trade relations, enhance participation in decision-making at the international level and improve standards of living. ( <a href="http://www.developing8.org/About.aspx">http://www.developing8.org/About.aspx</a> )
ECO	Economic Cooperation Organization, an inter-governmental regional organization established in 1985 by Iran, Pakistan and Turkey for the purpose of promoting economic, technical and cultural cooperation among the member-states. Successor organization of Regional Cooperation for Development (RCD) that existed from 1964 to 1979
EU	European Union

G2	Group of Two, a proposed informal special relationship between the US and China
G20/G8	Group of 20/8
GCC	The Gulf Cooperation Council, originally called the Cooperation Council for the Arab States of the Gulf (CCASG), is a political and economic union of the Arab states bordering the Persian Gulf and constituting the Arabian Peninsula, namely Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia (KSA) and United Arab Emirates (UAE). On 10 May 2011, a request by Jordan to join the GCC was formally being considered and Morocco was invited to join the GCC. ( <a href="http://www.gcc-sg.org/eng/">http://www.gcc-sg.org/eng/</a> )
GDP (PPP)	Gross domestic product in purchasing power parity (PPP). GDP refers to the market value of all officially recognized final goods and services produced within a country in a given period. PPP signals the amount of money needed to purchase the same goods and services in two countries, and uses that to calculate an implicit foreign exchange rate
GDR	German Democratic Republic (East Germany)
GWOT	The Global War on Terror, proclaimed by the Bush/Cheney administration
Hamas	<i>Harakat al-Muqāwamah al-Islāmiyyah</i> , ‘Islamic Resistance Movement’
IAEA	International Atomic Energy Agency
IAG	Iranian Association of Geopolitics ( <i>Anjoman-e Géopolitique-e Irān</i> )
IFIs	International financial institutions
ILSA	The Iran–Libya Sanctions Act (see <a href="http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/z?c104:H.R.3107.ENR:">http://thomas.loc.gov/cgi-bin/query/z?c104:H.R.3107.ENR:</a> )
IMF	International Monetary Fund
IORA	Indian-Ocean Rim Association, initially known as the Indian Ocean Rim Initiative and Indian Ocean Rim Association for Regional Cooperation (IOR-ARC), is ‘an International/Diplomatic Organization with 20 Member States namely Australia, Bangladesh, Comoros, India, Indonesia, Iran, Kenya, Madagascar, Malaysia, Mauritius, Mozambique, Oman, Seychelles, Singapore, South Africa, Sri Lanka, Tanzania, Thailand, UAE and Yemen’. ( <a href="http://www.iora.net/about-us/membership.aspx">http://www.iora.net/about-us/membership.aspx</a> )
IPI	Iran–Pakistan–India (IPI), a projected 2700-km pipeline aimed at transferring gas from Iran’s South Pars fields to Karachi and Multan (Pakistan) and then further to New Delhi
IRGC-QF	Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps—Qods (Jerusalem) Force

IRI	Islamic Republic of Iran
IRIB	Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting, Iran's state TV station broadcast outside the country
IRISL	Islamic Republic of Iran Shipping Lines, Iran's national maritime carrier
IS(IL)	Islamic State (of Iraq and the Levant); alternatively ISIS (Islamic State of Iraq and <i>al-Sham</i> )
LNG	Liquefied natural gas
MP	Member of Parliament (or <i>Majles</i> )
NOC	National oil company
NPT	Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty
OGEC	Organization of Gas Exporting Countries
OIC	Organization of the Islamic Conference
OPEC	Organization of Petroleum Exporting Countries
P5+1	The permanent members of the UNSC plus Germany who have negotiated with Iran over its nuclear programme
PLO	Palestine Liberation Organization
SCO	Shanghai Cooperation Organization
SCIRI	Supreme Council of the Islamic Revolution in Iraq (later renamed the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq)
TNCs	Transnational corporations
UNSC(R)	United Nations Security Council (Resolution)
US	United States of America
USSR	Union of Soviet Socialist Republics (Soviet Union)
WANA	West Asia and North Africa
WMD	Weapons of mass destruction
WTO	World Trade Organization

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## CHAPTER 1

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# Introduction

### (A) STUDYING IRAN'S INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS AMID CHANGING INTERNATIONAL AND DOMESTIC POWER RELATIONS

The first decade of the twenty-first century witnessed momentous changes in the distribution of power in West Asia as well as within the international system. Given those shifting power relations, a fresh evaluation of Iran's international relations during the 2000s imposes itself.

As a starting point for a “critical geopolitics” of Iran's international relations, I would like to take Arshin Adib-Moghaddam's overture to Critical Iranian Studies (CIS). The aim of CIS is to ‘capture the plurality of meanings attached to Iran's Islamic project from within the country and without’ with its methodical concern lying in the ‘ambition to put contemporary Iran in context, to provide alternative paths of explanation’.<sup>1</sup> The objective of pluralizing the ways in which we comprehend Iran is built upon the following inquiries: ‘on the one side, how Iran “enacts” itself domestically and in world politics (internal dialectic); and, on the other side, how Iran is “enacted” from without (external dialectic).’<sup>2</sup> The external dialectic consists in critically assessing those ‘discourses

<sup>1</sup> Adib-Moghaddam 2007: 28.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid.: 29.

enveloping Iran [that] tend to reduce rather than extend the meanings of the country, singularize rather than pluralize Iran's identities'.<sup>3</sup> An inherent task would be to dispense with 'one-dimensional verities about Iran in general and the Islamic Republic in particular',<sup>4</sup> by highlighting how ideas and schools of thought evolve in the context of historical developments:

The horizon of critical Iranian studies is not science *per se*. Rather, its purpose is to engender dialectical analysis that divides up the diversity of contemporary Iran, and to invalidate movement towards positivistic unification. So it defines limited spaces where we can engage Iran theoretically, ontologically and empirically. [CIS shall be] designed to ask "how" rather than "what", to present alternatives rather than imperatives, to diversify rather than unify, to explore the making of politics, culture, norms, institutions rather than getting engaged in the grand project of reifying them.<sup>5</sup>

The present study thus wishes to pluralize the way in which "Iran's Islamic project" can be comprehended, by delving into Iran's diverse political and geopolitical cultures. By so doing, the way in which Iran is "enacted" domestically and internationally shall be critically scrutinized, by questioning the respective dominant explanations so as to move towards "pluralizing Iran's identities" domestically and internationally. Yet, the study does not claim to present an exhaustive account of Iranian political or geopolitical culture(s). Rather, in the spirit of Critical Geopolitics (to be laid out in Chap. 2), its initial part (Chaps. 3 and 4) attempts to critically examine the rationale offered behind geopolitical representations.

The study's latter part (Chaps. 6 and 7) primarily focuses on the shifting world-order configurations and their ramifications for Iran and its international relations. Here, the common view that the world order after the brief period of unipolarity has entered an era of multipolarity shall be critically scrutinized. Such an examination shall likewise serve the purpose

<sup>3</sup>Ibid.: 188. Against this backdrop, Adib-Moghaddam (2007: 188–189) argues that 'the question of the Islamic Republic can only be posed and answered in the plural, that Iran in fact cannot be captured because Iranians number over seventy million, because life and culture in Lorestan are not the same as in Sistan-Baluchestan, because I don't know of any effective methodology that could capture Iranians in their entirety, from the Iranian-Jew in Boroujerd to the Iranian-Baha'i in exile. In short, [...] any reduction of Iran along a set of easily digestible propositions has a political purpose, typically carried by a myth making apparatus.'

<sup>4</sup>Ibid.: 25.

<sup>5</sup>Ibid.: 194.

of offering “alternative ways of explanation” for Iran’s international relations beyond those conventionally diagnosed. Therefore, the present study with its own set of foci hopes to make a contribution to this overall project of pluralization and diversification.

Hence, the following elements of investigation can be formulated in the attempt to respond to our key research endeavour:

*Internal dialectic: Exploring political and geopolitical cultures, the domestic power structure, the foreign-policy schools of thought and their controversies*

How have Iran’s political cultures (or politico-ideological formations) as well as geopolitical cultures affected its worldview and grand-strategic preferences? How can we comprehend the process whereby the diversity of a country’s political and geopolitical cultures is transformed into a prevalent state-sanctioned political and geopolitical culture?

How is the power structure in the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) constituted and what are its relevant components? And how does the domestic realm affect Iran’s international relations and vice versa?

What have been the areas of convergence and divergence among the IRI’s foreign-policy schools of thought? How have they perceived the changing international geography of power, particularly the global power capabilities held by the U.S. and by non-Western great-powers? And in how far has that reading shaped its foreign-policy ambitions and conduct? How have shifts in the domestic power structure affected the way in which Iran has perceived the world order? And, what are the ramifications of those issues for the future of Iran?

The internal dialectic indispensably requires defining Iranian grand-strategic preferences, self-conception(s) and outlook(s) towards the outside world, since the country’s *Selbstverortung* (self-locating or -positioning) impacts the nature and scale of its global interactions. To do so, an examination of the geopolitical imaginations, narrations and rationales being produced can provide useful insights. The theoretical rationale for this is rooted in the suggestion that ideational patterns can have important consequences for the shape of international structures. In that vein, investigating the Arab world, Michael Barnett demonstrated that changing and contested notions of Arab national identity help define security threats and shape the dynamics of alliance formation.<sup>6</sup> Yet, distancing ourselves from a

<sup>6</sup> See Barnett 1996.

purely Constructivist approach, we shall also be asking for potential material underpinnings of ideational stances.

*External Dialectic: Exploring the International Geography  
of Power (World Order)*

The international system has been undergoing significant changes due to the (re-)emergence of non-Western great-powers, a process driven by the world's economic centre of gravity unmistakably heading eastwards. But has the redistribution of economic power already translated into that of political power as well? What are the ramifications of the shifting international geography of power and its inherent (inter-)dependencies for Iran's international relations? What consequences do those bear in terms of fulfilling Iran's "national interests", its grand-strategic preferences and its place in the evolving hierarchy of international order?

How have non-Western great-powers (most notably the BRIC countries) acted towards Iran, taking into consideration their own ambitions and interests in an emerging new world order? Given Iran's key role for peace and stability in West Asia, whose unrivalled energy resources are crucial for the development of those rising economies, have the latter embraced Iran geo-economically or geopolitically also as an indispensable part in forging a "post-Western" world order; or have they conversely not acted according to this widely held assumption of a mutual interest in the forming of an "anti-hegemonic" alliance against the U.S. superpower—and if so, why? Put differently, what have been the differences (isolation vs. integration) and convergences (e.g. the containment of Iran) between established and aspiring great-powers when it came to dealing with Iran?

The external dialectic thus necessitates the exploration of the evolving international system at the outset of the twenty-first century (that has moved from unipolarity to post-unipolarity) and its ramifications for Iran's international relations and the pursuit of its grand-strategic preferences. In that context, some relevant questions follow: How is Iran's foreign-policy goal of "independence" to be assessed in light of different circumstances at the global (considering varieties of polarity and an increasingly interdependent world) and regional levels (considering Iranian self-conception and ambitions)? What does this hold for the issue of alignment? Moreover, what interactions or interrelatedness can one decipher when dealing with Iranian and Western strategies towards each other?

The study's empirical focus will be accompanied by two theoretical queries as derived from our upcoming discussion in Chap. 2: on one side, the interplay between the outside and the inside realms in shaping the trajectories of Iran's domestic and international politics; on the other, the role of ideational and material factors in the agent's behaviour towards the outside world.

### *Brief Account of International, Domestic and Regional Arenas*

*On the international level*, the decade following the U.S. "unipolar moment" of the early 1990s has been marked by the U.S.-led "global war on terror" in the "Greater Middle East", fuelled by neoconservative aspirations to initiate a "New American Century", as well as by significant transformations in international power relations. For both phenomena, Iran has occupied a particular place. On the one hand, Iran lies at the very core of the U.S.-designated battlefield, and on the other, being at the very centre of West Asia, it is crucial in Eurasian geopolitics, which involves almost all of today's relevant great-powers.

The events between "9/11" and the occupation of Iraq one-and-a-half years later laid the ground for landmark developments in regional and global geopolitics. In 2002, the U.S. superpower set the modus for its global strategy. In January, it designated an "axis of evil" composed of the formerly coined "rogue states" of North Korea, Iraq and Iran. In the summer of 2002, the "Iran nuclear crisis" took its course, powerfully overshadowing the question of Iran in world politics. In September, the U.S. National Security Strategy (NSS) proclaimed a "global war on terror" with preventive wars being an integral part thereof and thus sought to parlay the U.S. post-Cold War "unipolar moment" into an "American twenty-first century", thereby seeking pre-eminence over potential great-power rivals. Then, by the mid-2000s, tensions between the U.S. and Iran peaked. At the height of the "nuclear crisis" and the threat of war against Iran, the 2006 NSS bluntly stated that the U.S. 'may face no greater challenge from a single country than from Iran',<sup>7</sup> after the 2003 U.S.-led invasion of Iraq had radically altered regional geopolitics in favour of Tehran.

*On the domestic level*, the 2000s also experienced two equally divergent administrations displaying very different worldviews in both Iran and the U.S. While in Washington the neoconservative-minded Bush/Cheney

<sup>7</sup>The White House 2006: 20.

administration held office for almost the entire decade (January 2001–January 2009), by the decade’s midway (in August 2005) Iran’s reformist administration headed by President Mohammad Khatami was replaced by Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s “principalist”, or neoconservative, faction. At the end of the decade, in 2009, a centrist administration under President Barack Obama took office in Washington, while in Tehran President Ahmadinejad and allies succeeded in preserving power. Finally, in August 2013, with the election of an equally centrist administration in Iran led by President Hassan Rouhani, the stars over the decades-old inimical (non-) relationship between Iran and the U.S. seemed to finally align, paving the way for a new chapter in bilateral relations (which, however, is not the focus of the present book). Arguably, in the same way that the nature of each of these administrations shaped their international politics as well as their counterparts’ perceptions of Iranian foreign policy,<sup>8</sup> the realities in regional and global politics also did shape their very nature.

On the *regional level*, the 2000s were marked by an extraordinary degree of geopolitical tumult as a result of two U.S.-led military occupations in conjunction with aggressive Israeli foreign-policy behaviour, whose stage was set before 11 September 2001 when the most hardline factions in both Washington (with President George W. Bush and Vice-President Dick Cheney) and Tel Aviv (with Prime Minister Ariel Sharon) assumed power. This was followed by two U.S. military occupations (in October 2001 in Afghanistan and in March 2003 in Iraq) and various Israeli military operations in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and Lebanon. While Iran sought to accommodate its interests with the U.S. “regime change” operations targeting two of its regional foes (the Iraq of Saddam Hussein and Afghanistan under the Taliban), it provided support to its two main non-state regional allies (i.e. Hamas throughout the decade and Hezbollah most notably in the 33-Day War in the summer of 2006), which added the dimension of an Israeli–Iranian proxy war to Israeli–Arab confrontations.

A turning point occurred by the mid-2000s when mounting resistance in Iraq and Afghanistan produced serious challenges to the U.S.

<sup>8</sup> On the latter aspect, Ansari (2006: 233) observes: ‘Students of international relations have a tendency to look at state as actors—rational or otherwise—with an occasional foray into the domestic political context of their foreign policy making. Rarely do we look at the ways in which these actors relate and communicate with each other or the ways in which they have influenced the behavior and perceptions of the other. When we do, more often than not any assessment of influence tends to be one way.’

occupations there, ultimately prompting a change in the U.S. posture with the second term of the Bush/Cheney administration (2005–2009). Given these increasing problems accompanied by rising Iranian influence in both U.S.-occupied countries, Washington decided to hold talks with Iranian officials on security in Iraq; in May 2007 the first official talks between the two countries in almost 30 years took place. Given the U.S. neoconservatives' mantra of not talking to "rogue states" such as Iran, those talks were a considerable step, signalling a shift from a neoconservative to a pragmatic foreign policy. Despite these U.S. difficulties in managing its occupations, Washington had already managed to build permanent military bases in Iraq and Afghanistan, thus establishing a firm military presence all around Iran. Tehran's sense of vulnerability had thus been immensely boosted by U.S. threats of "regime change" directed at it from 2002 onwards. In sum, the "geopolitical revolution" (to borrow Volker Perthes' notion)<sup>9</sup> brought about by the war on Iraq led to Iran turning into the indispensable geopolitical power of the region.

Discussing these features at the global and domestic levels in relation to each other, by paying special attention to the global position occupied by the U.S. and the (re-)appearance of various non-Western great-powers onto the main stage of world politics, this book thus aims to fill a crucial gap in the literature devoted to explore Iran's international relations.

### *Discussing Iran's International Relations Beyond the Iran–U.S. Stand-off*

On these regional and international levels the U.S. and Iran have appeared most prominently. For the last three decades, the Islamic Republic of Iran has assumed a permanent place in the headlines of world politics. This is perhaps primarily due to the fact that no other state in the post-Cold War international system has found itself in such jangly juxtaposition to the world's most powerful state, the U.S., in the way post-revolutionary Iran has. No other regional state has proclaimed active non-compliance to U.S. hegemony over the "Middle East", with the scope of this decision being boosted by it being arguably the geostrategically central country in that crucial part of the world. Also, no other country than Iran has in such a dramatic way undergone a change from the global superpower's most trusted regional ally, deemed the central pillar for U.S. "vital interests", to

<sup>9</sup> Perthes 2004b.

the most contested one challenging even those. Indeed, the Iranian revolution of 1979 not only revolutionized Iran's relations with the U.S. but in the same token radically transformed the geopolitics of the region and also impacted global power politics, above all by catapulting so-called political Islam onto the stage of world politics.

However, with the transition to the twenty-first century, the story of Iran's international relations cannot be reduced to its enmity vis-à-vis the U.S., or "the West" in general, as it is the case in the vast bulk of the literature. Although the impacts of that relationship remain far-reaching and thus indispensable in any discussion of Iran's international relations, it is no more sufficient to solely focus on them. In fact, the ongoing redistribution of global economic, and potentially geopolitical, power eastwards—from the North Atlantic to the Asia Pacific—increasingly influences the Iranian–U.S. relationship, but also the one between each one of them and the non-Western (re-)emerging great-powers.

The ways in which Tehran and Washington—but also Moscow or Beijing—see the world necessarily impacts their foreign-policy decisions. They all harbour different views about the world and international relations. The U.S., which emerged as the globe's "sole superpower" after the implosion of the Soviet Union, has the unrelenting ambition to keep occupying the premier seat in international politics—a global hegemonic project also aimed at keeping potential global competitors at bay (be they partners such as the EU or contenders such as Russia and China).

The Islamic Republic, on its part, has in 1979 entered the international system with a markedly anti-imperial posture, very much directed against the U.S. dubbed as "global arrogance", all the while its pan-Islamic ideological pedigree can in itself reveal a hegemonic pretence. Thus, since the start of this century, both sides have asserted the claim to shape a "new world order" while their respective strategic goals appear to be diametrically opposed to each other.

## (B) STRUCTURE OF THE BOOK

*Chapter 2* provides the theoretical framework by delineating my account of a Critical Geopolitics for the study of international relations (Critical Geopolitics of International Relations, CGIR), which combines ideational and material accounts within the agent–system arrangement. *Chapter 3* investigates on a more conceptual level the spectrum of dominant political and geopolitical cultures to be found in modern Iran. This will be done

against the backdrop of our approach that is informed by CIS and Critical Geopolitics, which necessitates that we pluralize as well as critically scrutinize our understanding of political or geopolitical cultures. There, we propose a critical account of Iranian geopolitical imaginations as derived from its various political cultures (or politico-ideological formations). Given the importance we attribute to the domestic realm when analysing foreign policy, *Chap. 4* examines the IRI's state–society complex, that is, the military–clerical–commercial complex, as well as the state's prevalent political and geopolitical culture as constructed by the political élite. After delineating the institutional arrangement for foreign-policy in the IRI, *Chap. 5* introduces the variety of foreign-policy schools of thought in contemporary Iran and then brings them into conversation with each other over important foreign-policy controversies of the 2000s. Opening the discussion on Iran's international relations during that decade, *Chap. 6* is devoted to an examination of the period between “9/11” and the initial phase of the Iraq War (–2004) with its implications for Iran's foreign policy and its state–society complex. *Chapter 7* discusses the period after the mid-2000s until when Iran had emerged as the region's indispensable power through a combination of U.S. occupation “quagmires” and Iran's successful Offensive Realist regional strategy. In a next step, it scrutinizes the rationale and outcome of Iran's “Look to the East” policy in the context of the specific world-order configuration that I propose to call “Imperial Interpolarity”. The multifaceted ramifications of the Iran sanctions regime are also accounted for. Finally, the *Conclusion* evaluates prospects for Iran's international relations to escape the strategic trap posed by Imperial Interpolarity in view of its grand-strategic goals enshrined in the so-called 20-Year Outlook document and its salient desire to safeguard independence. It therefore asks whether a “developmentalist foreign policy”, espoused by Iran's Defensive Realists who inform the grand-strategic preferences of the Hassan Rouhani administration, can present an adequate response to those challenges.

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## CHAPTER 2

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# A Critical Geopolitics of International Relations: A Theoretical Derivation

## INTRODUCTION

The purpose of this chapter is to provide the theoretical framework from which the present study emanates. First, the introduction to this chapter sets the stage by highlighting the particular geography Iran occupies and the interest it has generated from various great-powers throughout the country's modern history, making the notion of geopolitics (understood as geography-related power politics) something not to be ignored in any exploration of the international relations engulfing Iran. Second, a perusal over the field of Iranian foreign-policy studies indicates the need to examine both structural and cultural factors as well as domestic and international politics in the effort to properly comprehend Iran's foreign relations. All this raises the question which International Relations (IR) theories or approaches are adequate for the present study's objective to provide an analysis of Iran's international relations in a changing world order? Therefore, *Part A* critically engages with the latest paradigmatic shift in IR and geopolitics theory-building, namely their "Constructivist turn" (Constructivism and Critical Geopolitics). *Part B* will then delineate a theoretical derivation that may be called a Critical Geopolitics of International Relations (CGIR).

*Iran's Geostrategic Location: A Salient Spot  
of Geopolitical Rivalry*

Despite the inadequateness of assigning a deterministic role to geography, the latter can have important consequences for a country's international relations, which is the reason why it is worth looking at the geographic location of Iran. For only a few countries on the globe, if any, possess the geographic situation and the geostrategic significance that Iran has in the context of contemporary world politics. Located in Southwest Asia, Iran finds itself between major geopolitical entities of the contemporary world. To its north there lies the Caspian Sea, and as the littoral state of that inland sea condominium Iran is a direct neighbour to Kazakhstan and Russia, the latter being the most dominant force in modern Eurasian history. To its northeast, Iran is bordered by Turkmenistan. Thus, together with Russia and the three post-Soviet states of Armenia, Azerbaijan and Turkmenistan, Iran forms the Caspian Sea condominium. To its east, Iran shares borders with Afghanistan and Pakistan, farther to the Indian sub-continent lies South Asia's dominant power India, and further east the East Asian giant China. In the south, Iran is bordered by the Persian Gulf and the Gulf of Oman, and across that body of water lies the Arabian Peninsula with Saudi Arabia as its unrivalled power. To Iran's west lies the major Arab country of Iraq, and at a distance of 800 km Israel and Egypt on the eastern shores of the Mediterranean Sea. In the northwest, Iran is bordered by Turkey (a NATO member), and within 1000 km, by the EU's southeastern borders. Also to the northwest, Iran shares borders with the Caucasian states of Armenia and Azerbaijan, and slightly further lies Georgia. Overall, Iran has 15 land and maritime neighbouring states, being the world's number two when it comes to the number of neighbouring countries. As a consequence, Iran's security is foremost contingent on its relations with all these neighbours, hence the primacy of the region in its foreign and security policy.

There are two notable factors that illustrate Iran's particular geostrategic position. On one hand, Iran borders the two main fossil cores of the globe, the Persian Gulf and the Caspian Sea regions, and connects both as the only land bridge. While Iran itself holds the world's second-largest reserves of petroleum and natural gas, the Caspian Sea region is traded as a major source of hydrocarbons of the twenty-first century, while the Persian Gulf region is home to 60% of the world's oil and 40% of its gas reserves, it constitutes the main waterway for oil exports to world markets.

On the other hand, within a radius of a mere 1000 km, Iran is situated in the geographic midst of all noticeable great-powers of our time: the European Union, Russia, India, China and the U.S.—the latter due to its heavy presence at Iran’s borders since the second half of the last century.<sup>1</sup> Hence, it can be argued that no other state on the planet occupies such a geostrategic location surrounded by great-powers. For Iran, its superb strategic location poses a complex challenge for the conduct of its foreign policy as well as for any study of its international relations.

Even prior to the twentieth century at the outset of which the discovery of oil in southwest Iran fuelled imperial rivalries, Iran had already been firmly placed in the midst of geopolitical tensions. Due to its insurmountable geographic location connecting European powers to their nineteenth-century Asian colonial acquisitions, Iran—then called Persia—found itself amidst the struggle between the British and Russian empires over Central Asia in what was known as the “Great Game”. The post-Cold War “New Great Game” over the energy reserves in the Caspian Sea region and Central Asia again highlights the geostrategic importance of Iran. With the rising energy hunger of various great-power economies, the situation in Iran’s periphery is of paramount importance to the latter’s vital energy-security interests.

It is often pointed out that only large states “have a geopolitics”. Being one of the world’s oldest continuous civilizations, Iran has regarded itself as a natural regional power and has laid claim on its own brand of geopolitics. It is thus that the omnipresence of the notion of geopolitics (used in its French version *géopolitique*) in the Iranian context can be explained.

### ***Broad Consensus in Iranian Foreign-Policy Studies: Interplay Between Structure/Culture and Internal/External***

A perusal over the scholarly literature on the study of Iranian foreign policy indicates an implicit broad consensus: Both structural and cultural factors assume a key role in the effort to explain the country’s foreign-policy behaviour. Most studies are purely empirical; they either proffer no theoretical framework or their appraisal of Iran’s foreign-policy conduct

<sup>1</sup>Iran could deploy ballistic missiles hitting targets within a 1000-km range, including Israel, India or the EU’s southeastern parts, although there remains uncertainty over their actual functionality. See Fitzpatrick 2011; Center for Arms Control and Non-Proliferation 2014.

has rather (Neo-)Realist leanings, focusing on balance of power and security dilemmas amidst an anarchical environment dominated by the U.S. Seen in the context of political debates, the Realist tendency positing Iran's foreign-policy behaviour as being basically "pragmatic" and as such following the same rules as all other states, can be interpreted as a counter-argument to neo-conservative portrayals of irrational and aggressive Iranian foreign-policy conduct that gained currency in the 2000s. However, academically speaking, any such purely Realist reading neglects the ideational factors that might influence strategic thinking and foreign policy in the first place, as most stringently argued by Constructivist accounts.<sup>2</sup> But comparatively few authors engage with existing theoretical queries, by asking how Iran's foreign policy should and can be explained, how predictable its behaviour is, what goes on in the "black box" of its foreign policy, and how it defines its interests and chooses to pursue them.<sup>3</sup>

The first thorough study on the foreign policy of the Iranian state—from the early-sixteenth-century Safavi dynasty, which established Shiism as state religion, up until the abdication of Reza Shah at the outset of World War II—was conducted by the late Iranian-American scholar Ruhollah K. Ramazani and published in the mid-1960s. He suggested a "combined" or "interactive" approach to the study of Iran's foreign policy that is composed of three sets of interaction that ought to be systematically applied to empirical data: 'interaction between external situation and foreign policy, internal situation and foreign policy, and internal-external situation and foreign policy.'<sup>4</sup> Disclaiming any intention to thus build a theory, Ramazani calls his methodology 'dynamic triangular interaction'.<sup>5</sup> In 2000, he contended that over the decades his 'theoretical approach has proved to be just as useful'.<sup>6</sup> By taking the internal dimension as a key variable, Ramazani's model thus overcomes the boundaries set by Realism. For the latter insists on a strict division between internal and external politics by stressing their different "logics",<sup>7</sup> representing a conception that

<sup>2</sup> See, above all, Adib-Moghaddam 2007.

<sup>3</sup> See, for example, Rezaei (A.A.) 2008a.

<sup>4</sup> Ramazani 1966: 10.

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.

<sup>6</sup> Ramazani 2000: 5.

<sup>7</sup> As the late Kenneth Waltz (1986: 40) has put it: 'Students of international politics will do well to concentrate on separate theories of internal and external politics until some figures out a way to unite them.'

has drawn criticism that this would be hardly apt to reflect the complex, *über*-disciplinary reality of the social world.<sup>8</sup>

The present study's theoretical framework is informed by what I call a Critical Geopolitics of International Relations (CGIR). The latter builds upon insights gained from the more sophisticated and time-tested methodological approaches to understanding and explaining Iran's international relations, and derives its *raison d'être* from the desire to capture geopolitical perceptions, dynamics and interactions. The following discussion sets to clarify the agent–system dichotomy that lies at the heart of most theoretical debates in IR.<sup>9</sup> To do so, it will consult both Adib-Moghaddam's Constructivist-inspired overture to Critical Iranian Studies and Houweling and Amineh's Critical Geopolitics for the study of IR.<sup>10</sup>

To delineate the contours of our upcoming argument, we can stress that limiting oneself to a dialectic exploration of the internal and external *discursive cultures* affecting Iranian foreign policy (as proposed by Constructivism) would run the risk of *overestimating* the structural power assigned to culture and thus *underestimating* the material stakes driving as well as accounted for by both internal and external actors. In other words, is a Constructivist approach satisfying our need to weigh the importance of ideational or material factors in foreign-policy comportment? Also, as already indicated, we will suggest that geography must be taken into account due to the strategically extraordinary geographic location Iran occupies of which great-powers are cognizant, without however reifying geography as the supreme explanatory factor for foreign-policy behaviour (as proposed by Classical Geopolitics).

## (A) ENGAGING WITH THE “CONSTRUCTIVIST TURN” IN IR THEORY: ON CONSTRUCTIVISM AND CRITICAL GEOPOLITICS

In the same way the IR theory of Realism stresses the primacy of material factors (geographical, economic and military indicators) whereas Constructivism highlights the importance of cultural, ideational and discursive elements in structuring world politics, Classical Geopolitics with its focus on material facts overlaps with the rationalist outlook of the former, while issues relevant to Critical Geopolitics (in its majoritarian form) are

<sup>8</sup> Rosenberg 1994: 4–5.

<sup>9</sup> See, for example, Hobson 2003.

<sup>10</sup> See Adib-Moghaddam 2007; Amineh and Houweling 2005; Amineh 2007.

addressed by the latter.<sup>11</sup> However, a clear separation between these two strands of geopolitical thinking does barely exist, rather has the critical variant evolved as a critique of classical or orthodox thinking about geopolitics in general. Critical Geopolitics has sought to explore not only the ideational patterns underpinning Classical Geopolitical reasoning, but also the political economy behind those “material realities”. It is here that the present study situates itself: Rather than applying a Constructivist (majoritarian) Critical Geopolitics lens, it draws upon the other, admittedly minoritarian spectrum offered by the wider Critical Geopolitics scholarship that does not deify the explanatory power of ideational patterns and instead tries to identify potential material driving forces, such as considerations regarding political economy, domestic power structure and so on. By doing so, it sets itself apart from Classical Realism or Classical Geopolitics as it follows the core Critical Geopolitics contention that calls into question allegedly stable factors underpinning global politics, instead stressing the fluidity, dynamic nature and evolution of such “facts” (see also Table 2.1).

### *Blind Spots on the Realist Radar*

Classical Geopolitics has been contested along the same lines as Realism. I would like to point out two instances of change on the domestic (Iranian Revolution) and global fronts (end of bipolarity) where the limitations of both of these theoretical concepts that share the same assumptions come to the fore. On the first issue, many have noted that the fundamental change that occurred with the 1979 Iranian Revolution has revealed the instruments of analysis proffered by Realist IR theory deficient. The late Fred Halliday observed:

Realism does discuss revolutions but they are invoked not as objects of study in themselves, but in order to prove the pressures of conformity, the socialization, that the constraints of the system impose on even the most deviant or revisionist of states.<sup>12</sup>

In the Iranian case, the Pahlavi state was under no such systemic pressure, but quite on the contrary it was safely embedded in the international system of the time, allied to its most powerful state, the U.S.

<sup>11</sup> In the following, I will mainly rely on Wight 1991; Meyers 2004; Dunne and Schmidt 2005; Lamy 2005; Kuus 2010.

<sup>12</sup> Halliday 1990: 208.

**Table 2.1** Classical vs. Critical Geopolitics

<i>Classical Geopolitics</i>		<i>Critical Geopolitics</i>
National sovereignty		Globalization
Fixed territories		Symbolic boundaries
Statecraft		Networks/interdependence
Territorial enemies		Deterritorialized dangers
Geopolitical blocs		Virtual environments
Physical/earthly environments		
Cartography and maps		Geographic Information Systems (GIS)
Dodds (2005: 29); his adaptation from Ó Tuathail and Dalby (1998). Here, the term “traditional geopolitics” has been replaced by Classical Geopolitics		
<i>Classical Geopolitics</i>		<i>Critical Geopolitics</i>
Geographical unit of analysis	Territory	Space
Object of analysis	The state as object	Statecraft as multitude of practices
State identity and interest	Fixed, as deriving from “geographical facts”.	Enacted, that is, forged through foreign-policy practices Narratives of national identity largely built on geographical claims about cultural borders and homelands.

Own illustration. On the basis of Kuus (2010)

Another shortcoming of the Realist lens has been its inability to even consider the possibility of an allegedly irrational, Islamist force to assume a powerful role in a state’s foreign policy. Yet, after the “Islamic Revolution”, as pointed out by Ali Ansari, the Realist paradigm tried to integrate culture as a determinant in foreign-policy explanation, but this happened mostly in the form of a (Western) “rational culture” pitted against an (Oriental) “irrational culture”.<sup>13</sup> Thus, the revolution could not be “foreseen” by the Realist paradigm nor, for that matter, had it been within the spectre of expectations of Classical Geopolitics.

Likewise, Iran’s immediate post-revolutionary foreign policy—the decision to opt out of Cold War bodies like the Central Treaty Organization

<sup>13</sup> Ansari 2006: 241–242. See also Adib-Moghaddam 2015: 389–390.

(CENTO),<sup>14</sup> the hostage-taking of U.S. embassy staff and so on—cannot be satisfactorily be explained and understood in Realist terms.<sup>15</sup> On the contrary, the rationalist paradigm would have suggested that the post-revolutionary Iranian state would go “back to business” and stick to traditional balance-of-power politics. Hence, the rationalist-Realist paradigm fails to explain the diametrically opposite choices made by the pre- and post-revolutionary Iranian state. As a case in point, upon the common recognition of Iran’s geopolitical centrality, on the one hand the Shah opted for an alliance with the most powerful state of the international system, while on the other Khomeini’s revolutionary government chose to detach itself from that very system and its U.S. hegemon.<sup>16</sup> However, as shall be discussed in Chap. 3–A, the latter choice was preceded by important controversies that reflected internal power struggles in the immediate post-revolution period on the question of who will run the state. As such, arguably, material factors cannot be fully dismissed in those foreign-policy choices.

Realism proved to be deficient to testify for change not only on the domestic front but also on the global one. There, it lacked the ability to explain the abrupt collapse of the bipolar order and the implosion of the Soviet Union. ‘Realist theory leaves unexplained why a militarily capable contender for world power such as the former Soviet Union was “defeated” without a shot fired between Cold War adversaries’, Houweling and Amineh observe.<sup>17</sup> In that vein, as Bahman Fozouni concludes his discussion of the Realist paradigm, the almost exclusive reliance on power as the sole driver of state behaviour is problematic:

The compelling nature of political realism is directly linked to its fatal vulnerability to easy falsification and its gross empirical liabilities. Realism is compelling for the right reason—power is a crucial determinant of political behavior; but it is also false because power is not the only determinant.<sup>18</sup>

Such deficits in explaining power politics prompted two debates around IR theory. The first centred on a revision of the dominant Realist-rationalist

<sup>14</sup> Post-revolutionary Iran’s decision to leave CENTO also heralded the organization’s dissolution later in 1979.

<sup>15</sup> See Adib-Moghaddam 2007: 67.

<sup>16</sup> I am indebted to Adib-Moghaddam for bringing this argument to my attention.

<sup>17</sup> Amineh and Houweling 2005: 1.

<sup>18</sup> Fozouni 1995: 507.

paradigm (emanating in Neorealism and Neoliberalism) and the second challenged fundamental assumptions of the rationalist approach (Critical Geopolitics and Constructivism).

### *Critical Geopolitics: Critically Investigating Geopolitical Representations*

It was after the end of the Cold War that Critical Geopolitics<sup>19</sup> largely established itself as a strand of enquiry of its own, mainly within the academic discipline of geography. But due to its pluri-disciplinary character it also entered the sphere of international studies. Yet other disciplines have at times utilized Critical Geopolitical concepts, such as “geopolitical imagination”, for example in the context of revisiting the theme of development theory.<sup>20</sup> It is for that reason, that is, the use of the term Critical Geopolitics in disciplines not directly linked to IR, that we use CGIR as a way to specify its connection to international studies.

These and other critics of Classical Geopolitics deplore the latter’s claim to constitute an objective account of world politics. Gearóid Ó Tuathail (a.k.a. Gerard Toal), one of the founding fathers of Critical Geopolitics, explains the latter’s *raison d’être*:

The very act of declaring the “geopolitics of” was interrogated, and the adoption of a natural attitude on the part of the geopolitician was subject to critique. This natural attitude that the real is that that is physically given, and which in geopolitics means the so-called “material realities” of world politics. For orthodox geopoliticians these comprised geographic location, resource endowments and oceanic access, and the physicality of power as measured by “military might”, “economic strength” and “manpower”. In some instances, organizations, doctrines, religious systems, and consciousness were included in the inventories of geopoliticians but only as naturalized physical facts about states. Geopolitics presents itself as an objectivist science of world politics with the geopolitician as the detached god-like recorder of the “realities” of power politics.<sup>21</sup>

<sup>19</sup>The term was first coined by Simon Dalby in his *Creating the Second Cold War: The Discourse of Politics* (New York: Guilford & London: Pinter, 1990) where he analysed the representational strategies of the Committee on Present Danger, a conservative foreign-policy interest group in the U.S. during the 1970s and 1980s.

<sup>20</sup>See the dialogue in *Transactions of the Institute of British Geographers* between Slater (1993) and Ó Tuathail (1994).

<sup>21</sup>Ó Tuathail 2004: 75.

Against such a positivist posture, Critical Geopolitics has instead taken into account the subjective presuppositions at play and has opposed Classical Geopolitics' assumedly "objective recording" by conceiving geopolitics as '*an intersubjective cultural practice*',<sup>22</sup> thus a dynamic rather than a stable process. If Realism shares the core claims of Classical Geopolitics, then Critical Geopolitics constitutes the 'Constructivist turn' in geopolitical thinking.<sup>23</sup>

After more than four decades of bipolar confrontation, the traditional structuring of political thought that accompanied it lost its ordering prowess.<sup>24</sup> Post-Cold War global politics could no longer be analysed or "spatially organized" along a bipolar superpower rivalry. Therefore, 'the discursive construction of political space and the role of geographic knowledge in this process' became the subject of critical inquiries. After the end of the Cold War, the number of publications associated with Critical Geopolitics swelled. They called into question the many "truths" reigning throughout the Cold War, and as such the simplistic, binary geographical demarcations of "self"/"other", inside/outside and "us"/"them", as epitomized in "East" vs. "West", freedom vs. oppression, development vs. under-development, security vs. danger dichotomies. Crucially, these alleged "geographical facts" were seen as projecting a prowess that helped sustain the bipolar confrontation. 'At the core of critical geopolitics, therefore', Atkinson and Dodds assert, 'is the belief that these geopolitical representations of global politics deserve serious attention, for it is such "scripting" of the world that helps constitute and legitimate foreign policies'<sup>25</sup>—a concern that shall accompany this study.

While these discussions about the Cold War period continued after its end, the 1990s saw the rise of economic globalization and the concomitant suggestion that military might had largely become a phenomenon of the past. Also in Iran, scholarly attention experienced a relative shift away from geopolitics to "geo-economy".<sup>26</sup>

<sup>22</sup> Ibid.: 75.

<sup>23</sup> Nissel 2010: 12.

<sup>24</sup> Of course, this is not to argue that during the so-called Cold War there was merely a bipolar ideological division spanning the globe, thus ignoring the "third way" or other ideologies to be found throughout the Global South as well as in Maoist China, but to point to the dominant ordering characteristic of that era.

<sup>25</sup> Ibid., here p. 11.

<sup>26</sup> See Yazdani 2007.

However, the U.S.-led military occupations following “9/11” demonstrated to many the relevance of Critical Geopolitics two decades after its emergence, with the exploration of imperial attempts at dominating distant spaces forcefully reappearing on the world’s political agenda, as argued by Simon Dalby.<sup>27</sup> ‘Critical geopolitics’, he noted at the twentieth anniversary of Critical Geopolitics in 2008, ‘is all about understanding the production of knowledge of spaces facilitating certain kinds of violent practice, the drawing of lines, the specification of dangers and the legitimization of violent actions to deal with these “threats”’<sup>28</sup>—in other words, geopolitical knowledge production for power-projection purposes. Hence, a second wave of Critical Geopolitics literature surfaced with the proclamation of the U.S.-led “global war on terror” at the outset of the twenty-first century with its de facto designation of the entire planet as a potential battlefield, which again underscored the topicality and relevance of Critical Geopolitics’ concern over geographic representations having a geopolitical impact.<sup>29</sup> As such, to a very large extent, Critical Geopolitics was closely and critically following the foreign policy of the most powerful state of the international system, the U.S., and the many representational images it deployed in this process.<sup>30</sup> Put differently, a Critical Geopolitical enterprise amounts to speaking truth to power and the hegemonic geopolitical representations going with it:

[T]he function of a critical geopolitics is not to provide “advice to the prince” in terms of using geopolitical reasoning to advise state policy-makers, but rather to investigate how geopolitical reasoning is used as an ideological device to maintain social relations of domination within contemporary global politics.<sup>31</sup>

So far, the vast empirical space provided by a Critical Geopolitical approach has not been satisfactorily filled, as much of that literature is concerned with the West’s hegemonic powers, most notably with the U.S.-led “war

<sup>27</sup> Dalby 2008a.

<sup>28</sup> Dalby 2008b: 4.

<sup>29</sup> See, for example, the second edition of *The Geopolitics Reader* (Ó Tuathail et al. 2006); Brunn 2004; the second edition of *Geopolitics: Re-Visioning World Politics* (Agnew 2003), esp. ch. 7; Chomsky 2003a. In fact, Chomsky and also Hamid Dabashi’s political writings implicitly fit into the intellectual project of Critical Geopolitics.

<sup>30</sup> See, for example, Ó Tuathail 2009.

<sup>31</sup> Dalby (1990), *op. cit.*, pp. 14–15; cited in Dalby 2008b: 4–5.

on terror". Although the geographic realm has been recently widened (most notably to include post-Soviet Russia), Critical Geopolitical examinations are still lacking for many other parts of the world.<sup>32</sup> The present study with its critical enquiry of Iranian "geopolitical imaginations" can be seen as an introductory endeavour towards that end.

### *Constructivism: The Social Construction of National Interests*

In the classical power-politics tradition (Classical Geopolitics and Classical Realism), foreign-policy agency is limited to the state which on its part assumes a merely reactive role vis-à-vis structural constraints emanating from an international system marked by anarchy. But as Christopher Hill argues, the analysis of foreign policy has to be liberated from 'cruder versions of realism' where alleged 'self-evident national interests' drive foreign-policy behaviour.<sup>33</sup> Constructivism has provided that particular foreign-policy actor with an agency of its own. Therefore, the state's "national interests" are not merely a function derived from the international system but have a genealogy of their own. National interests, Constructivism holds, are in fact socially constructed by the agents themselves.

Challenging Realism's fundamental assumption of an insecurity-producing anarchic international environment, Constructivism replied by what Alexander Wendt famously framed in the title of his 1992 article: '[A]narchy is what states make of it.'<sup>34</sup> Later in his *Social Theory of International Politics*, Wendt developed a theory of the international system as a social construction and explained the distinctiveness of Constructivism:

Neorealists see the structure of the international system as a distribution of material capabilities because they approach their subject with a materialist lens; Neoliberals see it as capabilities plus institutions because they have added to the material base an institutional superstructure; and constructivists see it as a distribution of ideas because they have an idealist ontology.<sup>35</sup>

<sup>32</sup> Kuus 2010.

<sup>33</sup> Hill 2003: 2.

<sup>34</sup> Wendt 1992.

<sup>35</sup> Wendt 1999: 5.

For Constructivists, the starting point is that ideas shape structures, although in a next step they acknowledge that a *dialectic* relationship between ideas and material forces develops. Nonetheless, Constructivists assume the primacy of actors over the social context or structure, and hence reject the idea that truth and reality exist outside the minds and will of agents.<sup>36</sup> Therefore, they argue that *national interests derive from national identity*, thus rejecting the notion that the “national interest” is a pre-determined, fixed factor as the Realist-rationalist paradigm would claim, or for that matter, primarily a function of the country’s geography as Classical Geopolitics would suggest.

Highlighting the influence of normative structures upon world politics, Constructivists have relied on critical and sociological theories. Sociological concepts have been consulted, such as norms, identities and culture, as they ‘result from social processes, purposeful political action, and differences in power capabilities’.<sup>37</sup> Constructivists stress that social construction does not deify reality but rather questions the very fundamentals of “facts of life”, while also opening the path for imagining and producing alternative worlds. Power is thus seen as an ability to produce identities and interests, which are both in turn subject to change and thereby in the process of being made all the time and therefore not deterministic in outcome. Crucially and in stark contrast to Classical Realism and Classical Geopolitics, the recognition that the world is socially constructed in an open-ended process is seen to allow Constructivists to explore global

<sup>36</sup> Aminéh and Houweling 2005: 1–2.

<sup>37</sup> Katzenstein (1996: ch. 1) defines these concepts as follows: *Norms* ‘describe collective expectations for the proper behavior of actors with a given identity. In some situations norms operate like rules that define the identity of an actor, thus having “constitutive effects” that specify what actions will cause relevant others to recognize a particular identity. In other situations norms operate as standards that specify the proper enactment of an already defined identity. In such instances norms have “regulative” effects that specify standards of proper behavior. Norms thus either define (or constitute) identities or prescribe (or regulate) behavior, or they do both.’ *Identity* is understood as ‘varying constructions of nation- and statehood [whose] process [...] typically is explicitly political and pits conflicting actors against each other [while] depict[ing] varying national ideologies of collective distinctiveness and purpose [and referring] to variations across countries in the statehood that is enacted domestically and projected internationally’. *Culture* ‘denotes collective models of nation-state authority or identity, carried by custom or law. Culture refers to both a set of evaluative standards (such as norms and values) and a set of cognitive standards (such as rules and models) that define what social actors exist in a system, how they operate, and how they relate to one another.’

change and transformation through the effort to “understand” states’ actions predicated upon their intentionality.<sup>38</sup>

Meeting the demand voiced by Peter Katzenstein and colleagues that national identities—which for Constructivists are constitutive to “national interests”—“must be investigated empirically in concrete historical settings”,<sup>39</sup> Arshin Adib-Moghaddam in his *Iran in World Politics* builds upon the Constructivist critique of the rationalist paradigm by offering a theory of foreign-policy behaviour. In order to understand *foreign-policy cultures*, he develops a four-dimensional dialectical model:

(1) [I]t is through externalization [of socially produced knowledge] that culture is a human product; (2) it is through objectification that culture becomes a reality *sui generis* [thus exercising a certain degree of hegemony over the culture bearer, which at times is overwhelming, at times reformed through consistent resistance, and at times overthrown *in toto* by revolutionary force]; (3) it is through internalization that we [i.e. agents] are products of culture [being a moment of the cultural process that transforms us from culture *maker* to culture *taker*]; and (4) it is through introjection that culture constitutes our [i.e. agents’] identities, interests and preferences.<sup>40</sup>

In other words, once culture as a human product becomes hegemonic, it impacts human culture and concomitantly our identities, interests as well as preferences. Drawing upon Iranian politico-philosophical narratives, especially in the decade preceding the 1979 revolution, Adib-Moghaddam fills that model by stating that ‘utopian-romantic ideals formulated during the revolutionary years, and institutionalized as central norms of the Islamic Republic, inform the contemporary grand strategic preferences of the Iranian state’. He thus questions the interpretation of Iranian foreign policies as merely status quo oriented, pragmatist or Realist. He furthermore argues that the Islamic Republic’s foreign-policy culture is ‘not only a set of ideas but also a mentality, a *Geist*, a systemic phenomenon that is strong enough to penetrate the strategic thinking of Iran’s foreign policy elites to its core’.<sup>41</sup> Just as in Constructivist theory, he thus assigns structure-shaping capabilities to ideas or ideology. Such a dialectic

<sup>38</sup> See Barnett 2005.

<sup>39</sup> Katzenstein 1996: ch. 1.

<sup>40</sup> Adib-Moghaddam 2007: 42. See also *ibid.*: 38–43.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*: 35, 34.

agent–system arrangement, he writes, ‘may offer mnemonic (yet ephemeral) value for the relationship between agents (individuals, nation-states) and cultural systems (society, international system)’.<sup>42</sup> While arguing that ideas or culture have assumed structural force in leading the state’s way, he nevertheless does not pretend that a state’s grand strategy is merely a function of ideology or domestic culture. He rather points out that ideas *can* become so strong as to be institutionalized within the state and henceforth assume structuring power on the system level. Therefore, he suggests the need for the exploration of the ‘genealogy of Iran’s national interests’, whose lack in most studies of Iran’s international relations he deplores as a result of the field’s ‘ideological commitment to positivism—the idea that Iran is “simply there”, that there is no genealogy of Iran’s national interests, that Iranian society is undifferentiated, that the processes of change are decisively halted by the forces of an authoritarian state’.<sup>43</sup> All this necessitates what he calls “critical Iranian studies”. Central to the latter, as noted at the outset, is the pluralization of the ways in which we see Iran and the dissection of the international politics surrounding the country.

### *The Construction of Interests: Primacy of Ideational or Material Underpinnings?*

That the social construction of interests is a reflection of ideational patterns (culture, norms and identity) is still a matter of controversy, especially from the vanguard of Marxist approaches. In general terms, Marxism and historical materialism make the distinction between economic base and ideologico-political superstructure.<sup>44</sup> In this vein, Cyrus Bina rejects the idea that “culture” (however it is defined) would become the prime mover (or cause) of politics and thus international relations anywhere under the universe of capitalism, including Iran under the Islamic Republic’. He rather contends that “culture” (old and new) cannot stand on its own, and thus generally emerges from existing institutions and the structure of the economy and polity in modern societies’. As such, “culture” cannot be seen independent from the universally dominant modern capitalist system. The latter, in fact, shapes “culture” in accordance to ‘the

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.: 42–43.

<sup>43</sup> Adib-Moghaddam 2007: 17.

<sup>44</sup> Callinicos 2005b: 40–41.

mode of production, exchange and reproduction' and as such culture does not emerge independent from the latter.<sup>45</sup> In other words, the agent's culture is seen as a product of capitalist material structures.

The result, Bina holds, is 'the malleability—if not entirely flimsiness—and deformation of what we call "culture" and thus the difficulty in grounding the international relations of today on such infirm grounds'.<sup>46</sup> 'The question then is what is reliable as solid ground and what is the derivative of the present historical transformation that can be related to it', he continues:

This is the question of the specification of model or the identification of the cause as opposed to the effect(s), while we know that there is a dialectical relationship between them as well. If we accept this premise, then, one needs to search for concrete tendencies of all kinds that would lead to the simultaneity of religious ideology, nationalist ideology, class-based ideology, etc. that would shape the contours of policies, including foreign policies.<sup>47</sup>

A conclusion from Bina's explanations that are reflective of Marxist thinking on this issue is that one of the ways in which culture and structure can be meaningfully combined is through identifying the material bases upon which ideational preferences (ideologies, worldviews etc.) are expressed. Obviously, this is a complicated issue that requires an exploration of the often concealed politico-economic stakes at hand. Although the present study cannot pretend to systematically unravel the possible material bases of ideas, it will make an effort to do so when its derivation seems reasonable.

Another, perhaps related critique that can be directed at Constructivism is its disregard for any purely geostrategic, Neo-Realist considerations, which can barely be ignored when it comes to explaining continuity in a country's foreign policy despite changes in ideology. Here, elements of

<sup>45</sup> Author's interview with Bina. He further explains: 'The usage of "modern" here refers to the capitalist system of class formation in which (more or less) the creation of wealth departs from "tradition" (however defined) and emerges based on the formation of distinct and qualitatively different classes and sub-classes of people. Yet, the characteristic of the modern capitalist system (the system that is today universally dominant across the world) is so versatile that it tends to take all these (pre-capitalist traditions, including the so-called culture) "cultures" and reshape them into a mold that is somewhat agreeable with this mode of production, exchange and reproduction.' See also Bina 2009b.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.

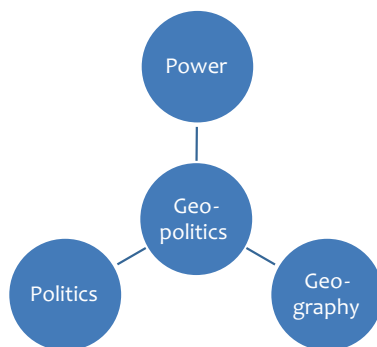
<sup>47</sup> Ibid.

foreign-policy continuity in Iran between a secular monarchy and an Islamic Republic as well as in Russia between the Soviet Union and the post-Soviet state can serve as cases in point.

### *IR Scholarship in the IRI: Geopolitics and Constructivism*

In the Islamic Republic of Iran, scholars have likewise engaged with various approaches to the study of IR. On one hand, the geopolitics strand is largely embedded within a Classical Geopolitics framework. However, there have been careful attempts to integrate the role of ideational patterns into a definition of geopolitics. Thus, the definition by Mohammad-Reza Hafeznia—a co-founder of the Iranian Association of Geopolitics—adds the concept of power to a purely Classical Geopolitics framing, stating that geopolitics consists of the study of reciprocal relations between geography, politics and power as well as the interactions arising from the combination of them (see Fig. 2.1).<sup>48</sup> The academic centre of geopolitical scholarship is arguably the Tarbiat Modares University (TMU) in Tehran, a post-graduate public university, where also the most prominent Iranian geopolitics scholars are based at, namely Hafeznia and Pirouz Mojtahed-Zadeh, both full professors of Political Geography there.<sup>49</sup> Yet there is a schism among Iran's academic community dealing

**Fig. 2.1** Hafeznia's model of geopolitics



<sup>48</sup> Hafeznia 2001/02, 2006: 37f., 2007.

<sup>49</sup> The Classical Geopolitics approach is reflected in the list of courses required for a PhD in Political Geography at TMU: 'World History (20th Century); Contemporary History of Iran; Space-Place Analysis by Using GIS System; Research Methodology; Government-Nation Thought in Iran; Geostrategy; Political Geography of Seas with Emphasis on the Persian Gulf and of [the] Hormoz Strait; Urban Political Geography; Political Geography of

with geopolitics as epitomized in the disagreement between Hafeznia, who considers geopolitics to constitute a science of its own,<sup>50</sup> and Mojtabeh-Zadeh who rejects that notion in favouring the term “political geography” (though the latter is also used interchangeably with geopolitics), thus highlighting “the political” rather than rigid geography.<sup>51</sup>

On the other, next to the field of geopolitics, we have IR scholarship. To gauge its state of affairs in Iran a few surveys were conducted among the academic community, including qualitative and quantitative inquiries, from which a rather clear picture can be drawn.<sup>52</sup> There has not emerged an Iranian IR theory and the academia has not much succeeded in domesticating IR theory because of a number of reasons. The deficiencies in teaching, research and production of IR knowledge are ascribed to: (a) There is a lack of the students’ proficiency in English. (b) Most textbooks are in Persian—often produced in the 1980s and early 1990s, and ever since only reprinted but not updated—and present various Western IR paradigms without actually providing a critical reading thereof.<sup>53</sup> (c) Regarding the “grand theories” taught, Realism, Liberalism and increasingly Constructivism are covered, while over four-fifths of staff do not teach Marxism.<sup>54</sup> To remedy these deficits, it has been suggested to include a critical reading of the genealogy of Western IR theory and to teach the entire spectrum of IR theories, including ‘mainstream’ and ‘dissident’ theories.<sup>55</sup>

According to Mahmood Sariolghalam, a U.S.-educated prominent Iranian IR professor at Shahid Beheshti University, whereas Iranian academia focuses on Realist and Liberal theories of IR, the attitude of Islamic Republic officials is determined by normative approaches and revolutionary idealism. His concluding claim is that the discipline of IR in Iran and its destiny are not tied to the nature of the regime.<sup>56</sup> However, when

the Persian Gulf; Local Governments; Water Geopolitics; Geopolitical Areas around Iran’ (<http://www.modares.ac.ir/en/Schools/hum/grp/ggs#phdpg> [17/08/2013]).

<sup>50</sup> See Hafeznia 2006.

<sup>51</sup> Mojtabeh-Zadeh 2013: 9–13; author’s interview with Mojtabeh-Zadeh 2009. See also Mojtabeh-Zadeh 1999: 1–12.

<sup>52</sup> For an internal assessment of Tehran University’s IR department, see Simbar and Ilkhani-Pour 2013.

<sup>53</sup> Haji-Yousefi 2009, 2010a.

<sup>54</sup> Haji-Yousefi 2010a: 11–12.

<sup>55</sup> Ibid.: 39.

<sup>56</sup> Sariolghalam, Mahmood (2009) ‘Iran: Accomplishments and Limitations in IR’, in: Tickner, Arlene & Wæver, Ole (eds.) *International Relations Scholarship around the World*,

reviewing the literature on the IRI's foreign policy published in Iran during the 2000s, this contention needs to be questioned. For it is eye-catching that Constructivism has not only quite forcefully entered Iranian IR scholarship but that it has arguably turned into the most prominent paradigm through which the IRI's foreign policy is being explained.<sup>57</sup> As a case in point, in his *Language, Discourse and Foreign Policy* (in Persian) Majid Adibzadeh's approach towards analysing modern Iranian foreign policy (pre- and post-revolutionary) is predicated upon the belief that attention should be shifted away from the "hardware" (i.e. power, military capabilities, geopolitics and the economy) and towards the "software" (i.e. the examination of the structure of meaning of language, culture and discourse).<sup>58</sup>

This trend can have various reasons. First, the reality that to project power, the IRI's foreign policy was often heavily relying on discursive speeches. Second, Constructivism's prominence, however, cannot be seen detached from its focus on ideational aspects and its concomitant undervalorization of material factors in explaining foreign-policy behaviour. This arguably is very much in line with the "politically correct view" in the IRI that, after all, noble ideological motivations assume primacy, which eclipses the role of material interests in the underpinning of foreign-policy comportment. Related to this is the above-made observation of the heavy neglect of Marxism-inspired IR theory in university curricula. In contrast, works with an explicit use of Critical Geopolitics (*Géopolitique-e Enteqâdi*) are still rare and those existing have so far examined theatres of conflict independent from Iran.<sup>59</sup>

Despite all these shortcomings, Sariolghalam in 2009 observed a growing interest among various groups for the field of IR:

[A]lthough IR theories and methodologies have had virtually no impact upon the way in which the Islamic Republic defines the global system and conducts its foreign relations, its influence today among students, the intellectual community, and the interested public is unprecedented.<sup>60</sup>

Abingdon, OXF (UK) & New York: Routledge, pp. 158–171, here pp. 169–170; cited in Haji-Yousefi 2010a: 6.

<sup>57</sup> See, for example, Valipour-Zaroumi 2004; Adibzadeh 2008/1387; Naqibzadeh and Khoshkjan 2012; Sabouri and Salehiyan 2013; Bagheri-Dolatabadi and Shafi'i 2014; and also the 2009 Persian translation of Adib-Moghaddam 2006.

<sup>58</sup> Adibzadeh 2008/1387.

<sup>59</sup> See, for example, Eskandari 2012.

<sup>60</sup> *Op. cit.*, p. 158; cited in Haji-Yousefi 2010a: 6.

## (B) OUTLINING A CRITICAL GEOPOLITICS OF INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS: DEFINING THE AGENT– SYSTEM ARRANGEMENT

The following shall set out the theoretical and methodological framework in which the study is embedded. It will offer a rather brief introduction, while the employed concepts will be explained in more detail when applied throughout the study.

### *Summary*

As I shall argue, understanding Iran's international relations requires the exploration of both cultural and structural geopolitics in a critical sense. A Critical Geopolitics of International Relations (CGIR) bases its agent–system arrangement on the following assumptions: On the agent level, it claims that foreign-policy behaviour rests on both constructed identity from the inside (geopolitical culture)—including material interests underpinning ideational preferences, which shall be identified where possible—and systemic exigencies from the outside (geopolitical structure). On the system level, a CGIR assumes an international system (or geography of power) under constant flux, shaped by both mechanisms of geopolitics and economic globalization, which ultimately produce geopolitical structures.

#### *The Agent: The State and Its Foreign-Policy Élite*

*Who is the agent?* The agent consists of the state–society complex from which, however, it is primarily the state and its foreign-policy elite that act on the international scene. Exploring the state–society complex as the study of institutionalized power relations in a specific country allows us to illuminate what is often referred to as the “black box” of the state. The choice of the state, and its foreign-policy elite, as the main player in today's international relations is derived from the recognition of its predominant role in contemporary world politics.<sup>61</sup>

*What is driving the agent's behaviour in foreign affairs?* The agent's conduct is shaped by both *cultural* and *structural* factors. On cultural

<sup>61</sup> See Panitch and Gindin 2003, 2005; Weiss 1997; Krätke 2006; Bonefeld 2010; Mayo 2011; Vanaik 2013.

accounts, it is assumed that a state's foreign-policy culture is predicated upon ideas forceful enough to assume structural power. These are ideas of a geopolitical dimension, such as worldviews and geopolitical imaginations, powerful enough to become norms forming foreign-policy culture. These norms can either at best become institutionalized within the state or at least inform the state's grand-strategic preferences, including its "national interest". Yet, in contrast to Constructivism, it is assumed that these "cultural" aspects can be materially driven. Conversely, the geopolitical structure, that is, the international system, also shapes agent behaviour.

*The System Level: An Increasingly Multipolar International System—  
From Unipolarity to Imperial Interpolarity*

The following assumptions rest upon the premise that '[t]he international system is a dynamic arena, where change is constant':<sup>62</sup> The international system's (or the geopolitical structure's) main characteristics are recognized as being geopolitics and economic globalization. It is inherently marked by an unequal distribution of international power and influence. *Geopolitics* is understood as inter-state rivalry for power and influence. Here, balance-of-power and Neo-Realist assumptions about state behaviour on the international scene are accounted for. More precisely, Structural Realist considerations (including its Defensive and Offensive Realist variants) as well as geopolitical cultures are seen as driving a state's foreign policy. *Globalization* is understood as an essentially neoliberal process of economic integration. It also involves deepening interdependence, which can carry a strategically important dimension.

As to the international system's polarity, a periodization within the 2000s is proposed here. While the first half saw the continuation of U.S. post-Cold War unipolarity, the second half witnessed the rise of a systemic arrangement of what I call Imperial Interpolarity. Extending Giovanni Grevi's concept of "interpolarity"—defined as multipolarity in an age of interdependence—for describing the contemporary world order composed of a concert of various established and (re-)emerging great-powers, I suggest adding "the imperial" as a way to account for not only the position the U.S. still holds as a *primus inter pares* but for its role as an

<sup>62</sup>Nayar 2005: 215.

empire.<sup>63</sup> Thus, my proposition attempts to bridge the controversies surrounding the shape of world order (raging at least since the latter half of the 2000s), with multipolarity being ever more prominently evoked, while conversely others (authors as diverse as the late Kenneth Waltz and Noam Chomsky)<sup>64</sup> still claimed the existence of U.S. unipolarity.

### *Theory*

#### *The Dialectic Construction of Foreign-Policy Culture*

Following our critical engagement with Constructivism, we can build upon Houweling and Amineh who have offered a Critical Geopolitics as a theoretical framework for the study of international relations, considering their approach as filling the gaps of other dominant IR theories when it comes to exploring power-projection policies. By following the critique put forward by Constructivism, they state that ‘Critical geopolitics takes off from the failure of structural realism by considering self-constructed identity as a social force impacting on behavior’.<sup>65</sup> Thus, ‘Critical geopolitics as an approach to the study of IR’, they state, ‘considers the missing variable of identity to be the fatal weakness of both *universal* domestic society schools [of Liberalism and Marxism]’.<sup>66</sup>

Similarities with Adib-Moghaddam’s model can be detected when it comes to the dialectic dynamic—which Houweling and Amineh refer to as “feedback effects”—between the agent (or actor) and the outside world (or social reality or the international system). Yet, in addition, they regard self-constructed identity (or culture) to be politically and economically grounded:

In critical geopolitics, self-constructed identity is a partially endogenous intermediating variable between social reality and actor behavior. Such constructions are dependent on political and economic causes, but have feedback effects on social reality. These constructions help to explain actor behavior, which has feedback effects on self-constructed identities. Critical geopolitics conceives its domain of study, therefore, as “complex.” In com-

<sup>63</sup> In fact, the existence of an American Empire is evoked by its proponents and critics alike. See the revealing collection of quotes in Rilling 2008: 13–15.

<sup>64</sup> Chomsky 2009; Waltz and Fearon 2012.

<sup>65</sup> Amineh and Houweling 2005: 7.

<sup>66</sup> Ibid.: 8.

plex reality, outcomes do not necessarily follow from intentions, and intentions change under the impact of outcome of behaviour.<sup>67</sup>

Their stance implies three factors: (1) the actor is subjective when dealing with the outside world, that is, her actions are not necessarily reflecting the socio-economic structures domestically and internationally; (2) however, there is a social reality external to the actor's will, which will impact on her at each and every encounter with the outside world; (3) the 'subjective act of power projection' will be 'absorbed' by social reality, that is, the international system.<sup>68</sup> Hence, 'human actors may, and do, *redefine* their conception of social order by the experience of moving out into the world'.<sup>69</sup>

When transferring these theoretical premises onto our study, we can formulate the following empirical fields of enquiry: (1) analysing geopolitical imaginations and their potential material underpinnings, (2) analysing outside-inside dynamics shaping and re-shaping foreign-policy behaviour and (3) examining the consequences of foreign policy in terms of others' perceptions and policies (the latter allowing for Neo-Realist assumptions).

#### *Agent: The State and Its Élite*

This section will define the choice of actor. It introduces concepts for a complex understanding of the agent who is acting on the international scene (which, for its part, will be discussed in the following section):

- the state–society complex as institutionalized power relations within the state;
- the *élite* (in particular, the “power *élite*” and the political *élite*) understood as a group of people or individuals who occupy commanding posts in key institutions and whose (non-)decisions are of strategic consequence for internal or external affairs;
- in our CGIR, the actor or agent consists of the state–society complex from which, however, it is primarily the state that acts on the international scene. Among the questions to be answered are: Who is dominant within a state? Who holds power, and how?

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.: 10.

<sup>68</sup> Ibid.: 15–16.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.: 16

### The State–Society Complex

The concept of the state–society complex has roots in neo-Gramscian theory as a way to highlight the social forces within the state:

Neo-Gramscian theory has been centrally concerned to crack open Realism’s “billiard ball” conception of the “national territorial totality” and demonstrate how the state, and by extension the states system, is a site of contestation for a range of conflicting social forces of production. The singular, homogeneous state is replaced by the idea of a “state–society complex” and thereby the internal structure and development of states through various class alliances and modernization programmes can be traced [...]. However, it is recognized that the singular state–society complex exists within a plurality of states: ‘complexes of production relations, classes, and historic blocs do not exist in isolated national compartments. They are linked to a world order that bears directly on them, as well as influencing them through their national states’ [Robert W. Cox (1987) *Production, Power, and World Order: Social Forces in the Making of History*, New York: Columbia University Press, pp. 6–7]. The novelty of the neo-Gramscian approach is the extension of the Gramscian concepts to the international sphere, especially the concept of hegemony, by which, in the original Gramscian context, a dominant class co-opts subaltern classes to its project of national development and maintains their support more by consent than coercion, and, in its new international sense, the dominant class of the leading state, through alliances with like-minded classes or class fractions in other states, constructs a particular world order.<sup>70</sup>

In other words, the state–society complex concerns the domestic power structure by taking into account both material and ideational factors, thus linking relations of production and thus class analysis to issues of hegemony understood as consent-*cum*-coercion. Translated onto the international level, attention is paid to transnational alliances of the respective national power élites, which contribute to the making of world order sustained by a hegemonic arrangement between various states and their respective élites. Thus, in the domestic and international realms alike, the Gramscian concept of hegemony is being underpinned by both material and ideational forces.

<sup>70</sup> Davenport 2013: 34.

## The Élite

### The Power Élite: Some Conceptual Clarifications

*The Blackwell Encyclopedia of Sociology* of 2007 states that the “power élite” “can be defined as a small group of people who control a disproportionate amount of power, wealth, and privilege and access to decision-makers in a political system”.<sup>71</sup> A more specific definition identifying the power élite’s sources of power is offered by the sociologist C. Wright Mills in his 1956 book *The Power Elite*,<sup>72</sup> a classic study on the structures of power and class in the post-World War II U.S. Mills’ work initiated a research strand mainly in the U.S., which became known as Power Structure Research.<sup>73</sup> Mills defines the élite of power as the one occupying the ‘command posts of the major institutional hierarchies’ of modern society where their decision, or non-decision, has at least national ramifications.<sup>74</sup> The sources of or “means of power” lie in the ‘major institutional hierarchies’ of modern society, the latter being identified by Mills as the “big three”: the state (by which the politico-bureaucratic élite is meant), corporations and the army.<sup>75</sup> Hence, the power élite is formed by élite individuals and groups rooted in political, economic and military hierarchies or a combination of them (i.e. overlapping and interlocking relationships between any of them).

In the political realm, in a strictly hierarchical-authoritarian manner impulses are sent out across the entire political system via networks of influence. The downside is that such concentration of executive power in a “political directorate” set apart from the system of party democracy jeopardizes the political sovereignty of society, as Mills stressed.<sup>76</sup>

In scholarly traditions associated with Marxism, the focus has been on the “ruling class” and/or “the power élite”. The notion of “ruling class” combines the age-old phenomenon of rule (*Herrschaft*) with that of class. As a result of this coupling, rule was specified as “class rule”, and occasionally constricted as such. At the same time, the notion of a ruling class captured much more or something different than the notion of a capitalist class; hence, the employability of the term “ruling class” for different

<sup>71</sup> Powell 2007.

<sup>72</sup> Reflective of its contemporary relevance, it was newly edited in 2000.

<sup>73</sup> See, for example, Domhoff 1967, 1970; Burris 1992, 2012; Petras 2007; Krysmanski 2006.

<sup>74</sup> Mills 2000: 4.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.: 4–5.

<sup>76</sup> See Krysmanski 2003.

stages of capitalism. Particularly in the Anglo-Saxon world, “power élite” has been synonymously used with ruling class.<sup>77</sup> Mills himself, however, rejected the use of the notion “ruling class”, explaining:

[W]e must always be historically specific and open to complexities. The simple Marxian view makes the big economic man the *real* holder of power; the simple liberal view makes the political man the chief of the power system; and there are some who would view the warlords as virtual dictators. Each of these is an oversimplified view. It is to avoid them that we use the term “power elite” rather than, for example, “ruling class”.

In the adjacent footnote, he specifies the reason for dismissing the term “ruling class” in favour of “power élite”, thereby echoing some of our arguments made about the complexity of agent behaviour:

“Ruling class” is a badly loaded phrase. “Class” is an economic term; “rule” a political one. The phrase, “ruling class,” thus contains the theory that an economic class rules politically. That short-cut theory may or may not at times be true [...]. Specifically, the phrase “ruling class,” in its common political connotations, does not allow enough autonomy to the political order and its agents, and it says nothing about the military as such. [...] We hold that such a simple view of “economic determinism” must be elaborated by “political determinism” and “military determinism”; that the higher agents of each of these three domains now often have a noticeable degree of autonomy; and that only in the often intricate ways of coalition do they make up and carry through most important decisions. Those are the major reasons we prefer “power elite” to “ruling class” as a characterizing phrase for the higher circles when we consider them in terms of power.<sup>78</sup>

### Élite Consciousness

Mills concludes by stressing the power élite’s combined sources of power as well as its common consciousness and worldview:

The power elite today involves the often uneasy coincidence of economic, military, and political power. [...] The conception of the power elite and of its unity rests upon the corresponding developments and the coincidence of interests among economic, political, and military organizations. It also rests

<sup>77</sup> Krysmanski 2004.

<sup>78</sup> Mills 2000: 277.

upon the similarity of origin and outlook, and the social and personal intermingling of the top circles from each of these dominant hierarchies.<sup>79</sup>

In other words, although Mills has prioritized the use of “power élite” over “ruling class”, he has not stripped off the former from a key defining characteristic inherent to the latter; namely that a group situated at top of the state–society complex shares a common and distinctive bondage (*Zusammengehörigkeit*) or consciousness of a commonality of interest (e.g. to retain power in the face of opposition) as well as of worldview. Hence, we might state that there is a class consciousness of the power élite. This “élite consciousness” is borne out of the realization of the élite’s ability to be in command over the structural means of power and influence (political, economic and military) for the purpose of rule, and concomitantly the will to sustain it. Beyond those material capabilities, élite members are conscious of their ideational bonds (e.g. ideology, values, norms and culture), which sets them apart from other groups.

An apt illustration of this phenomenon is the IRI’s power élite sharing a common consciousness (materially and ideologically)—the so-called insiders (*khodi*)—which despite intra-élite differences serves as guarantor for the safeguarding of the entire system of the Islamic Republic, in other words “regime survival”.

### *Methodology: Towards Investigating Geopolitics as Structure and as Culture*

Responding to the methodological and conceptual deficits identified within a mostly eclectic body of writings under the rubric of Critical Geopolitics, Ó Tuathail has suggested the differentiation between geopolitics as structure and as culture.<sup>80</sup> He states that in any enterprise of Critical Geopolitics, constituent concepts of both geopolitics as culture and as structure need to be explored. He therefore suggests to ‘privileg[e] a particular set of concepts within critical geopolitics organized around the key anchoring notions of geopolitics as structure and geopolitics as culture’.<sup>81</sup> In other words, the concepts he offers are elaborated propositions on which areas to particularly look at, rather than *sine qua non*

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.: 278, 292.

<sup>80</sup> Ó Tuathail 2004.

<sup>81</sup> Ibid.: 76.

categories. Moreover, it shall be noted that Ó Tuathail uses the notions of geopolitics as culture and as structure interchangeably with geopolitical cultures and structures respectively (the latter being in the plural).

### *Geopolitics as Culture*

Whereas Classical Geopolitics purports that all states are succumbed to a single, universal logic of behaviour, Critical Geopolitics recognizes the diversity of geopolitical cultures as it ‘shows that there is no single tradition of geopolitical thought. There are, rather, different geopolitical cultures owing to specific geographical contexts and intellectual traditions.’<sup>82</sup>

Ó Tuathail defines geopolitics as culture—most adequate for the study of ‘particular foreign policy traditions and crises’<sup>83</sup>—as concerned with ‘the study of geopolitics as a series of dynamic cultures developed within and shared across an interstate society’.<sup>84</sup> He offers six concepts of *geopolitics as culture* understood as an ‘interpretative cultural practice’. He goes on to explain that

[r]ather than considering interstate society as a whole, these concepts concern geopolitical culture or the cultural ways in which dominant institutions (states mostly but also alliances and international institutions [...]) *make sense of their position in the world and theorize their role within interstate society*.<sup>85</sup>

### **Defining Geopolitical Imaginations and Geopolitical Culture**

A perusal over the concepts listed in Table 2.2 illustrates their interconnectedness and highlights the difficulty of neatly distinguishing them from each other. As the present study will pay special attention to the concepts of geopolitical imaginations and geopolitical culture, these shall be defined here.

Despite Ó Tuathail’s preference for the notion of “geographical imaginations”, we will be using the term “geopolitical imaginations”, thus following, for example, David Newman.<sup>86</sup> In any case, both notions refer to

<sup>82</sup> Ibid.: 689.

<sup>83</sup> Ibid.: 82.

<sup>84</sup> Ibid.: 76.

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.: 82–83; emphasis added.

<sup>86</sup> Ó Tuathail holds that although an ‘important foundation for higher order geopolitical reasoning’, “geographical imagination” is not the same as “geopolitical imagination”—the latter being used by Newman (2000) in his discussion of Israel’s multiple self-imaginings.

**Table 2.2** Concepts for the study of geopolitics as culture

<i>Concept</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Related notions</i>
Geostrategic discourses	Particular discursive speech acts about “national security”, and the “strategic interests” of the state	Strategic culture, securitization—security speech acts; <i>geo-strategization</i> ; formal geopolitics
Geopolitical discourse and the discursive process	The crafting and design of a particular spatial account of international affairs by institutions, and by practitioners of foreign policy	Intellectuals of statecraft, geopolitical civil society; story-lines—foreign-policy arguments and scripts—ways of performing and doing foreign policy
Geopolitical vision and subject	A normative picture of the world political map, and the basic agent shaping global political relations	Naturalization; certain social and geopolitical orders assumed beyond question and part of “nature”
Geopolitical traditions	Historical schools of foreign-policy theory and practice	Interpretative foreign-policy communities
Geopolitical culture	The culture of knowledge, and interpretation of the state as foreign-policy actor in world affairs; institutional setting and communicational culture of foreign-policy making	Geopolitical power complexes and their shaping of the foreign-policy process; degrees of geopolitical ignorance and knowledge in a state; popular and practical geopolitics
Geopolitical imaginations <sup>a</sup>	Location of a national identity in the world; maps of friends and enemies in the world; assertion of territorial borders, national mission, and transnational collective forces in world affairs; inclusions and exclusions	Imaginary geography; <i>self/other, us/them</i> boundary creating practices; national exceptionalism; geographies of the unconscious, popular geopolitics

Toal (2004: 98, Table 6.6)

<sup>a</sup>Toal’s concept of “geographical *imagi-nations*” has been replaced by “geopolitical imaginations”

“Geographical imagination” ‘concerns a contestation between images of where the state is perceived to be located in the world. [...] We can readily concede that geographical imaginations, or “imaginary geography,” to use [Edward] Said’s term, are always already geo-political in the philosophical sense of being simultaneously political and geographical. But this form of reasoning leads to the banal position that all distinctions, to the extent that they specify a “here” and “there,” a “self” and “other,” are geo-political, and does not allow further analytical distinctions to aid critical geopolitics theory building’ (Ó Tuathail 2004: 83, 84).

a concept used to demarcate geographical space according to a culturally defined us-vs.-them and a resulting claim to power over “our” space. This involves ‘debates over national identity and the specification of the boundaries—conceptual and cartographic—of “the nation.” Some hyphenate the concept as “imagi-nation” to foreground this debate over the imagining of the nation.’<sup>87</sup> While the concept of geopolitical (or geographical) imaginations exists in both Classical and Critical Geopolitics, the latter aspires to unveil its underlying ideational and/or material power-projection rationale.

Geopolitical imaginations can be regarded as being predicated upon politico-ideological formations, or political cultures,<sup>88</sup> as both of these concepts exhibit particular views or imaginations of the nation and the world as well as of the place of the nation in the world. In this vein, Yves Lacoste (who with his French geographical journal *Hérodote* is the best-known figure associated with Critical Geopolitics outside the Anglo-American world) emphasizes the necessity to explore the competing *Weltanschauungen* of politico-ideological formations, or in his words political forces:

Every political force has its own imaginations of the past, i.e. its own way of seeing and comprehending the problems of the current situation. A rivalling political force has a very different and often opposed viewpoint. Therefore it is necessary to take into consideration these conflicting imaginations on the history, if one strives for attaining an objective view on the problems. It is only by this way that it is possible to reach the notion that geopolitics is an undertaking of a scholarly character. [...] The geopolitical analysis is a new approach that examines the rivalries between political forces not only subject to ideologies and economic competition, but also in relation to territories: not only to command resources which are situated there, but also to control the people living there. These territories can be both strategic and symbolic objects of contention, but can also be spheres of confrontation between rivalling forces.<sup>89</sup>

Geopolitical culture (in the singular), on its part, is defined by Ó Tuathail as referring to

<sup>87</sup> Ó Tuathail 2004: 83, 84.

<sup>88</sup> In the present study, the terms “political culture” and “politico-ideological formation” are used interchangeably as they both are understood as referring to the same phenomenon.

<sup>89</sup> Lacoste 1994: 21–22.

the cultural and organizational processes by which foreign policy is made in states. It is a product of prevalent geographical imaginations, the particular institutional organization and political culture (including strategic culture) of a state, and longstanding geopolitical traditions.<sup>90</sup>

Extracting the quintessence of this definition and the one he offers as seen in Table 2.2 ('The culture of knowledge, and interpretation of the state as foreign-policy actor in world affairs; institutional setting and communicational culture of foreign-policy making'), we can define geopolitical culture as the prevalent geopolitical imagination (which can also embrace elements of other geopolitical imaginations but has a dominant leaning) plus institutions—or put differently, as *the institutionalized geopolitical imagination* (which will be discussed in the case of the IRI in Chap. 4–B). As to the relationship between geopolitical culture and political culture, we can concur with Ó Tuathail who views the former as being determined by the latter<sup>91</sup>—the basis for our discussion in Chap. 3.

As referred to above, Critical Geopolitics has dealt with the issue of agency in geopolitics and has posited the requirement to critically assess the production of geopolitical knowledge by “intellectuals of statecraft”, that is, leading geopolitical commentators who are mostly state élites. The latter’s “rhetorical strategies” when explaining and representing international politics (i.e. when “mapping” the world) vis-à-vis domestic and foreign audiences becomes a subject for critical enquiry. Such analysis enables the exploration of the interconnectedness between geopolitical practices and the agents carrying them out.<sup>92</sup> But in contrast to Classical Geopolitics, Critical Geopolitics particularly looks at different worldviews, their discursive construction and their impact. It also aims at uncovering the functions of these worldviews and discourses related to wider material interests. In other words, Critical Geopolitics asks in how far representations of world politics and economy serve the purpose of satisfying specific interests, for example, when looking at foreign-policy actors’ depiction of global political space.<sup>93</sup>

<sup>90</sup> Ó Tuathail 2004: 85.

<sup>91</sup> Ibid.

<sup>92</sup> Kuus 2010.

<sup>93</sup> Dodds 2005: 28ff.

*Geopolitics as Structure*

Geopolitics as structure, Ó Tuathail states, ‘concerns the structures that have generated and characterized the modern world as a historically globalizing political economy and interstate community’ (see Table 2.3).<sup>94</sup> This, in fact, echoes the above-mentioned Marxist critique as formulated by Bina, thus necessitating to account for geopolitical structure that in our CGIR account is composed of processes of geopolitics and of globalization.

**Table 2.3** Concepts for the study of geopolitics as structure

<i>Concept</i>	<i>Definition</i>	<i>Related notions</i>
Geopolitical condition	The medium within which geopolitical events unfold and communication occurs; the time–space regime of geopolitical action	
Techno-territorial complex	The dynamic relationship between technological systems of transportation, defence and communication and the territoriality of states	Information technology (IT); cyber-warfare; “full-spectrum dominance”
Hegemony and primacy	The rules, regulations, institutions and processes of international order that acquire the broadest consensus; their relationship to the dominant state in world affairs	U.S. global hegemony, counter-hegemonic forces and alliances; (Post-)“Washington Consensus”, IMF and World Bank
Geopolitical economy	The prevailing structure of the global economy, including the global division of labour, trading regime, financial order and resource/energy flows	Neoliberal globalization, financialization of capitalism; “energy security”
Geopolitical order	The prevailing system of power, hierarchy, and antagonism in the interstate system	Polarity; imperialism; redistribution of global power; North–South divide; competition, domination, cooperation

Based on Toal (2004: 81, Table 6.1). The last column was added by the author

<sup>94</sup> Ó Tuathail 2004: 76.

The discussions in the following chapters will take into consideration geopolitics as culture and as structure. In particular, Chaps. 3 and 4 will be devoted to examining Iranian geopolitical cultures, while Chaps. 5 and 6 will primarily evaluate the impact of the prevailing geopolitical structure of the respective periods (unipolarity and Imperial Interpolarity) on Iran's international relations.

## SUMMARY AND CONCLUSION

This first chapter set out the task of identifying theoretical approaches to IR, which can assist in the endeavour to study Iran's international relations in a changing world order. Based on the observations made at the outset when reviewing Iranian foreign-policy studies, the need to account for the interplay between material and ideational factors as well as between internal and external politics has been highlighted. In *Part A*, we invoked the "Constructivist turn" in theories of IR and geopolitics with the emergence of Constructivism and Critical Geopolitics, which has been a response to the Realist power-politics tradition of Classical Realism and Classical Geopolitics with their almost exclusive emphasis on material conditions elevated to the status of fixed realities. For Constructivism ideas shape structures, even to the extent of comprehending the "national interest" as a social construction, which for the classical strands rather constitutes a fixed notion closely knit to geography. After consulting Marxism-inspired critiques as well as Houweling and Amineh's model of a Critical Geopolitics of international relations, despite the merits of the Constructivism-inspired strand of enquiry, we argued that Constructivist approaches are (a) barely forearmed not to fall into the trap of underestimating material realities strong enough to impose themselves upon or successfully resist challenges produced by ideas, and (b) that material interests might indeed underpin in a defining manner ideational positions taken. As a result, opting for the integration of both material and ideational factors, *Part B* has been devoted to outline a Critical Geopolitics of International Relations (CGIR) that defines its agent-system arrangement as follows: On the agent level, it claims that foreign-policy behaviour rests on both constructed identity from the inside, accounting for ideational and material motivations (geopolitical culture), and systemic exigencies from the outside (geopolitical structure). On the system level, a CGIR assumes an international system under constant flux, shaped by both mechanisms of geopolitics and economic globalization, which ultimately produce geopolitical structures.

Admittedly, the proposition of a CGIR constitutes a complex model that poses methodological challenges whose resolution is not an easy undertaking. However, this choice was made to approximate as far as possible the complex reality of the agent–system arrangement instead of a more simplistic and therefore potentially handier representation. It can also be pointed out that the model’s complexity could have been scrutinized in its various facets if the given limitations of space and thematic scope did not exist. Yet the usefulness and merit of a CGIR lie in the analytical foci it proffers, namely the examination both of geopolitical structures alongside geopolitical cultures and of internal–external dynamics.

Finally, combining all the insights derived from the discussions in this chapter, we have discerned our study’s various empirical foci, while the two theoretical queries, namely about the impact of inside–outside dynamics on foreign policy as well as about foreign-policy behaviour being driven by ideational and/or material considerations, will accompany our upcoming investigations.

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## CHAPTER 3

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# Iranian Geopolitical Imaginations: A Critical Account

## INTRODUCTION

After Chap. 1 outlined the theoretical framework specifying the need to explore geopolitical structures as well as cultures in the attempt to understand foreign policy, this chapter will explore Iran's geopolitical imaginations, or geopolitical cultures, as predicated upon the country's various political cultures, or politico-ideological formations, and their respective worldviews. Therefore, *Part A* will sketch out the historical roots of modern Iranian political culture, which was mainly shaped through the internal and external (mainly the encounter with colonialism) situation, in order to identify the most important politico-ideological formations (namely nationalism, Islamism and socialism). Then, the fate of these political cultures shall be briefly monitored throughout the initial years after the 1979 Iranian Revolution, where a process of Islamization took hold. *Part B* will provide an outline of the geopolitical imaginations (*engâreh-e géopolitiques*) that each of the afore-mentioned politico-ideological formations exhibit: namely nationalism, Islamism and Third-Worldism (*Tiers-Mondisme*). In doing so, the section highlights the geopolitical significance of an identity marker.

PRELUDE: ON THE NEED TO REACH BEYOND  
CONVENTIONAL FRAMINGS OF IRAN'S  
FOREIGN-POLICY BEHAVIOUR

Conventional Western discussions on the roots of Iranian foreign policy are usually situated in a discursive field featuring two pairs of anchors: ideology/pragmatism and Islamism/nationalism. Therefrom, following representations are usually deduced: Ideologues (or idealists) aim at spreading revolutionary Islam(ism), which reflects their confrontational disposition towards the world order; whereas pragmatists aim at furthering the *national* interest by displaying an accommodational disposition towards the international system. In other words, ideology is usually seen as suggesting a visionary or idealist posture, imagining how the world should be rather than how it actually is, to the extent of aiming to overthrow it. Pragmatism, on its part, commonly embodies a Machiavellian attitude towards politics that settles on the idea of making the best out of the world as it is, while being rooted in the realization that it can barely be changed. As such, these juxtapositions suggest the mutual exclusivity of those concepts.

While the bulk of Western public and media debates in the 2000s have conceived these pairs of terms as mutually exclusive and reflective of a bad-vs.-good opposition ("either-or"), many scholars have tended to concur that all of those concepts have their rightful place in the endeavour of comprehending Iranian foreign policy ("both-and"). Yet, despite the latter's certainly valid claim, academic confusion still looms large over the question of how these purported dichotomies have to be understood in their mutual relationship and more generally in relation to foreign policy. Instead, there has been the tendency to ascribe *ex post facto* certain Iranian foreign-policy decisions and actions to be rooted in one side of the above idealism-vs.-pragmatism axis that would have thus prevailed over the other. While such an interpretative effort has in many cases been deemed as a sound representation of reality, for the broader goal of comprehending what drives Iranian foreign policy it must be considered unsatisfactory. In fact, once one rejects the idea that the above duality ought to be conceived as mutually exclusive, it can be asked: Can there be no such thing

as ideologically driven pragmatism or vice versa pragmatically driven ideology?<sup>1</sup>

But isn't there more to it than such alleged dichotomy? Does the effort to understand the above duality, also in its complexities, suffice to comprehend Iran's behaviour towards the world? In fact, such a duality-centred approach is largely devoid of any historicity that takes note of the particular (geo-)political culture(s) of modern Iran, which is indicative of how Iran views the world and its place therein. Reflective of the academic field's Western-centrism (or rather the absence of critically addressing the latter) is the lack of realization that in fact Iran shares a history with much of the Global South. This has a number of ramifications that remain untouched if the examination proceeds on the above dual axis alone. In other words, what seems to be the missing link is what may be called the "colonial paradigm"—the experiences, lessons and ambitions related to the history of colonialism, which have contributed to shaping the ways in which countries of the Global South view and interact with the world.

#### (A) THE ROOTS OF MODERN IRANIAN POLITICAL CULTURE: FROM "ANTI-COLONIAL MODERNITY" TO THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC

This section is predicated upon the CGIR (Critical Geopolitics of International Relations) proposition laid out in Chap. 1 that a country's political culture(s), or politico-ideological formations, shape its geopolitical imaginations. However, as shall be seen, this is far from being a linear process devoid of tensions, as the question which geopolitical culture emerges as the dominant one is dependent upon historical contingencies with its particular dynamics among social forces that can ultimately lead to the formation of hegemony understood in the Gramscian sense as consent-*cum*-coercion.<sup>2</sup>

In foreign-policy studies in Iran, scholars have attempted to embed their investigations within a national framework (sometimes referred to as "national culture", *farhang-e melli*), that is, the body of accumulated political and cultural experiences prior to the Islamic Republic. Towards

<sup>1</sup>The latter approximates the philosophical definition of pragmatism as the 'doctrine that ideas have value only in terms of their practical consequences' (*The New International Webster's Student Dictionary: International Encyclopedic Edition*, 1992).

<sup>2</sup>See Haug 2004.

that end, the time span examined has conventionally been the advent of the “modern” period, usually going back to the Qajar dynasty (1794–1925) but sometimes further back to the early modern Safavid dynasty (1501–1722).<sup>3</sup> Iran’s domestic political culture has to a great extent been defined by the continuity of absolutist or dictatorial rule,<sup>4</sup> and during the reign of the Qajars and the two Pahlavi regimes (1925–1979) more precisely by the lack of individual freedoms and neo-patriarchal authoritarianism.<sup>5</sup> Especially from the Treaty of Turkmenchay of 1828 to the early twentieth century, the Iranian state has continually given concessions to more powerful outside powers—first to Russia, then to a number of European powers—which undermined national freedom and independence as well as engendered popular resistance (above all the late-nineteenth-century Tobacco Revolt, *Qiām-e Tanbākou*).<sup>6</sup>

The degree of foreign meddling throughout the nineteenth century was rendered possible by a combination of factors, above all the extreme techno-scientific and military divergence between Qajar Iran and the two mighty Russian and British empires, the poor level of socio-economic development in both rural and urban Persia, a weak central government and the lack of efficient institutions.<sup>7</sup> Hence, it is often argued that Iran’s extreme vulnerabilities during the Qajar era has provided the lesson of how a country’s sovereignty and interests can easily be trampled upon by great-powers, and as a result how negotiating from a position of weakness has resulted in important political and economic concessions. In some sense, all of that has strongly informed the Islamic Republic’s worldview.

This experience of semi-colonization was, however, accompanied by an intellectual renaissance.<sup>8</sup> The nature of Iran’s encounter with the modern world has been conceptualized by Hamid Dabashi as “anti-colonial modernity”,<sup>9</sup> which shall provide the basis for our endeavour to identify the roots of Iranian political culture(s).

<sup>3</sup> Abedin 2011: 614.

<sup>4</sup> Ghazi-Moradi 2014.

<sup>5</sup> Sariolghalam 2014a, b. Here, political culture is not understood as politico-ideological formation as is the case in our study. Rather, its meaning is similar to that of “national culture” as defined above (see Sariolghalam 2014a: ch. 2).

<sup>6</sup> Chelongar 2006. See also Ansari 2006a: ch. 1; Afary 1998: 245; Ramazani 2008: 5.

<sup>7</sup> See Issawi 1971.

<sup>8</sup> Afary 1998; Dabashi 2007: ch. 2.

<sup>9</sup> Dabashi 2007.

*“Anti-colonial Modernity” as Iranians’ Collective Historical Experience and the Shaping of the Three Politico-ideological Formations of Nationalism, Socialism and Islamism*

Iranians’ nineteenth-century experience of semi-colonization along with a simultaneous process of an intellectual renaissance has bred a collective political conscience of anti-colonial attitudes. Following Dabashi, ‘[t]hree major ideological formations and their corresponding politics emerged out of the anticolonial struggles of Iranians throughout the nineteenth century’, namely nationalism, socialism and Islamism.<sup>10</sup> These three central politico-ideological formations are hence constitutive to modern Iranian political culture. While all of them evolved throughout the nineteenth century, their emergence as a distinctive political mode can be traced back to the 1906–1911 Constitutional Revolution (*Enqelâb-e Mashrouteh*). Ali Ansari, in the context of his study of Iranian nationalism, has identified four ideological tendencies which all provided a grand narrative of emancipation largely defined against the West: secular nationalists, religious nationalists, the left and dynastic nationalists.<sup>11</sup> For the Arab world, which had a similar yet starker experience with colonialism, Gilbert Achcar has identified four major ideological formations for the 1933–1947 period: liberal Westernizers, Marxists, nationalists, reactionary/fundamentalist Pan-Islamists.<sup>12</sup> For the sake of clarity and comprehensibility, we will use Dabashi’s three formations as grid in our analysis.

Each of these politico-ideological formations has had a cataclysmic effect on each other, to be witnessed in the fact that elements of each of them can be found in the other. For the purpose of a preliminary illustration, we can, for example, refer to the nationalist–religious–socialist amalgam that was reflected in the ideas promoted by Habibollah Peyman, Mohammad Nakhshab and Hossein Razi during the Mossadeq era who advocated a kind of “spiritual socialism” coupled with nationalism.<sup>13</sup>

Despite their obvious differences, these politico-ideological formations shared a common denominator: anti-colonialism. In the Iranian case, this anti-colonial mentality dates back to the formative period of the country’s political culture in the nineteenth century when Iranians (like many other peoples of the Global South) experienced a paradoxical encounter with

<sup>10</sup> Dabashi 2007: 72.

<sup>11</sup> Ansari 2012: 2.

<sup>12</sup> Achcar 2010.

<sup>13</sup> Cottam 1979: 266; Sahimi 2012a.

modernity, often referred to as “colonial modernity”<sup>14</sup>. Hence, a “paradox of colonial modernity”, semi-colonization coupled with intellectual renaissance, emerged in which ‘Iranians (like the rest of the world) received the universal promises of Enlightenment modernity through the gun barrel of European colonialism’, as Dabashi pointedly puts.<sup>15</sup> The grievances led to the Constitutional Revolution whereby the absolutist monarchy was transformed into a constitutional one. That Constitutional Revolution can be considered

the birth channel of Iran into its contemporary history. In its origins and aspirations, goals and projects, achievements and failures, it was a revolution very much similar to other “Third World,” anticolonial movements that defined much of the twentieth century. [...] Following a century of anticolonial struggles—from the Qajars’ feeble attempt to safeguard the territorial integrity of their realm against the bloated Russian imperialism, to the French and British colonial overtures to offset, check, and balance each other—the Constitutional Revolution finally targeted the local venue of European colonialism and severely limited the damages initiated and sustained at the Qajar court.<sup>16</sup>

The period of the Constitutional Revolution was multicultural and pluralistic in character, and marked the dawn of important social movements such as the feminist one. For Dabashi, this period is the founding moment of a “cosmopolitan” (in his own words *jahān-shāhri*, literally “globo-polis”) disposition of Iranian political culture, which was undermined by an Islamization following the 1979 revolution (to be discussed below).

After the Constitutional Revolution, the three politico-ideological formations persisted, and experienced ups-and-downs in their political relevance—with the heyday of a socialist movement in the 1940s when the Tudeh Party was becoming the most important political force in Iran by the time World War II ended,<sup>17</sup> replaced by a burgeoning nationalist movement<sup>18</sup> that was crushed by the 1953 coup d’état against Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadeq.

<sup>14</sup> See Aching 2011.

<sup>15</sup> Dabashi 2007: 47.

<sup>16</sup> Ibid.: 71.

<sup>17</sup> See Abrahamian 2008a: 107–112. For leftist ideas and politics in Iran, see Afary 1994 and Taghian 2014 (for the period of the Constitutional Revolution); Behrooz 2000; Malm and Esmailian 2007: 18–19 (for a graphical overview).

<sup>18</sup> See Abrahamian 2008a: 113–118.

When regarding political culture as a foundational element for geopolitical culture, it is important to review and recognize the entire spectrum of politico-ideological formations within it, also and especially paying attention to whether this diversity has been politically manipulated or repressed. ‘It is important to mark the commencement of these three ideologies during the Constitutional Revolution’, notes Dabashi in this regard,

because since the successful Islamization of the Iranian Revolution of 1979, the Islamist component of Iranian political culture has taken over and systematically denied—politically suppressed and narratively repressed—the non-Islamist (nationalist and socialist) dimensions of the same political culture. Academic intellectuals [...] have been instrumental in this systematic Islamization of Iranian political culture. [There is] a larger trend that has now successfully bought into the dominant Islamist language and institutions of the Islamic Republic [...] and thus adds an academic legitimacy to a politically manufactured repression of the cosmopolitan disposition of Iranian political culture.<sup>19</sup>

In a similar vein, Mehrzad Boroujerdi cautions:

No serious discussion of the theoretical metamorphosis of post-revolutionary secular intellectuals can ignore their political plight. Both leftists and nationalist intellectuals had to confront a regime that has sought to silence their voice under the pretexts of fighting atheism, heresy, irreverence or contempt for Islam. They experienced censorship, expulsions, imprisonment, indoctrinations, purges, slanders, and various other violations of their civil liberties.<sup>20</sup>

Therefore, a critical account of all the important political cultures—including their mutual reinforcements, tensions as well as contradictions—is a scholarly task without which a proper understanding of Iran’s foreign policy can hardly be attained.

### *The Islamization of Post-revolutionary Political and Foreign-Policy Culture*

In this section, it is shown that in the immediate wake of the 1979 revolution not only a process of Islamization of state and society was initiated by

<sup>19</sup> Dabashi 2007: 276n4. See also Dabashi 2012: 13. Dabashi’s use of term “cosmopolitan” can be regarded as a combination of “pluralistic” and “worldly”, meaning that Iran’s political cultures emerged with a consciousness of being globally embedded.

<sup>20</sup> Boroujerdi 2000: 16.

the new rulers, but also—and intimately connected to the latter phenomenon—Iranian foreign policy got Islamized, too.

### **How the Iranian Revolution Was Transformed into an Islamic Republic: Towards Islamizing State and Society**

What the notion “Islamic Revolution” obfuscates until the present time is the originally pluralistic character of the mass uprising that toppled the regime of Shah Mohammad-Reza Pahlavi. A highly diverse group exhibiting leftist, religious and nationalist persuasions, including bazaaris, intellectuals, students, factory workers, tens of thousands of unpropertied peasants, poor urban youth, women, large parts of the middle class, and closer to the revolution itself even elements within the élites (even those inside the government apparatus) and parts of the military contributed to the revolution’s victory.<sup>21</sup> This is amplified by the fact that the revolution witnessed a much higher rate of participation than revolutions with a comparable significance: five times higher than the French and ten times higher than the Russian revolutions.<sup>22</sup>

Ali Shariati, a Sorbonne-educated sociologist who combined Islamic liberation theology with Marxism, was arguably pre-revolutionary Iran’s most important public intellectual, with his speeches at the *Hosseiniyeh* (religious auditorium) *Ershâd* being very popular. Abrahamian referred to him as ‘the main ideologue of the Iranian Revolution’<sup>23</sup> and Ali Rahnema entitled his political biography of Shariati *An Islamic Utopian*.<sup>24</sup> Only his death in June 1977 left the vacuum in which Khomeini emerged as a popular figure.<sup>25</sup>

The pluralistic—or in Dabashi’s terms, cosmopolitan—character of the Iranian Revolution, with its multitude of political orientations, could be readily witnessed in the first months after the revolution’s victory, during what some have called the “Tehran spring”:

January to May 1979 saw the freest and culturally and politically most dynamic period of recent Iranian history. More than 250 publications flourished, including those by a wide spectrum of leftist and other secular political

<sup>21</sup> Abrahamian 1982b: ch. 11; Nejati 2011: 1042–1044. For a discussion on the relationship between the bazaar and the state, see Keshavarzian 2007.

<sup>22</sup> Kurzman 2004.

<sup>23</sup> Abrahamian 1982b: 24.

<sup>24</sup> Rahnema 2000.

<sup>25</sup> Fathollah-Nejad and Yazdani 2011: 301–302.

factions, women's groups, regional tribal and ethnic groups, Jewish intellectuals, and many other groupings. Magazines and journals banned under the Shah reappeared, and new ones were started. Book publishing enjoyed a heyday, with reissues of previously banned writers, great quantities of translation including large numbers of Marxist and leftist texts, religious pamphlets, and so forth. Cassette tapes of all kinds of music, but especially of revolutionary international songs and classical Persian music, were mass-produced.<sup>26</sup>

However, during the Cultural Revolution (*Enqelâb-e Farhangi*, 1981–1984) when universities were closed down, liberal and socialist tendencies were marginalized while the Islamist discourse became the only publicly allowed mode of political expression. This also involved a partial Islamization of the academic disciplines of political science and IR.<sup>27</sup>

The two key characteristics of that immediate post-revolutionary period were, on one hand, the legitimacy enjoyed by the revolution's charismatic leader Ayatollah Rouhollah Khomeini, at a time when there still was neither a parliament nor a constitution. On the other, there was a plurality of political ideas and forces on the public and political scenes. On the state level, power was in the hands not only of Khomeini's Islamic Republican Party (IRP) but also of Islamic liberals of the National Front. The former group, whose goal was to establish a state dominated by the clergy (theocracy), adhered to the revolutionary slogan "neither Eastern nor Western, [only] the Islamic Republic" [*na Sharq, na Qarb, Jomhouri-ye Eslâmi*], thereby rejecting any leanings towards any of the two superpowers of the time while adopting a confrontational attitude in order to pursue a "permanent revolution". The latter group shared the non-aligned attitude enshrined in that same slogan, which they saw in tune with the stances adopted by non-aligned countries of that time such as Yugoslavia and India. However, Islamic liberals proposed to rather "lean towards the West" because they regarded the Soviet Union's geographical proximity as a more imminent liability for Iran.

The revolutionary government's rivals as well as collaborators were composed of religious as well as secular-leftist political forces. The rivals included the Muslim People's Republic Party, formed in Tabriz by Grand Ayatollah Mohammad-Kazem Shariatmadari as a more moderate

<sup>26</sup> Sreberny-Mohammadi and Mohammadi 1994: 165, 167.

<sup>27</sup> See Haji-Yousefi 2009: 5–6.

counterpart to the IRP; and the *Mojāhedīn-e Khalq* Organization (MKO), established in 1965 as a guerrilla movement who followed the ideas of Ali Shariati who had opposed the role of the clergy as conceived by Khomeini, combining Islamism with Marxism-inspired anti-feudalism, anti-capitalism and anti-imperialism.<sup>28</sup> The collaborators consisted of the bulk of the National Front, which was however a weak organization; the liberal-left National Democratic Front which advocated the protection of political democracy; the Organization of the Iranian People's Fedaian (Majority); the Moscow-oriented Tudeh, established in 1941 as a communist party; the social-democratic Kurdish Democratic Party that advocated autonomy; and the Komala Party of Iranian Kurdistan, a Maoist, anti-Soviet group.<sup>29</sup>

This complex political environment posed a challenge to the consolidation of the state and the establishment of a *Velāyat-e Faqīh* system—the guardianship of the supreme religious jurist—as conceived by Khomeini. However, a number of events ultimately helped pave the way for the realization of a Khomeinist theocracy. In March 1979, in the midst of revolutionary euphoria, a referendum was held offering a barely democratic choice between favouring monarchy or an “Islamic Republic”, with an overwhelming majority opting for the latter option. The initial decisive turning-point leading to the establishment of Islamist hegemony—understood as consent-*cum*-coercion—took place eight months into the revolution. On 4 November 1979, Islamist students occupied the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and took 66 diplomats hostage, purportedly driven by the concern that another imperial *coup d'état*—like the one in 1953—could be launched from there against the embryonic revolution, while the U.S. admitted the ailing Shah for medical treatment.<sup>30</sup> Despite the fact that the seizure was ‘justified and rationalized on the basis of a collective historical memory’<sup>31</sup>, there was a chief domestic dimension to it. The Khomeinists sought to acquire domestic hegemony over rivals at a time when the political scene was dominated by leftist ideas, pushing political actors to ‘demonstrate who was truly anti-American’ with the embassy seizure an ‘unmistakable proof’ that it was the Islamists.<sup>32</sup> In fact, to them,

<sup>28</sup> See Nejati 2011: 404–405.

<sup>29</sup> Behrooz 2009.

<sup>30</sup> See Nejati 2011: 1000–1004. Another purported concern in Tehran was over potential anti-Iranian military actions by the U.S. in the Persian Gulf (Ramazani 1989: 206–209).

<sup>31</sup> Ansari 2006b: 248.

<sup>32</sup> Ayatollahi Tabaar 2014.

the issue of domestic hegemony prevailed as ‘the ideological challenge posed by the anti-imperialist leftists was perceived as far more dangerous than the potential U.S. threat’.<sup>33</sup> Khomeini *a posteriori* approved of what later was known to be the Iran Hostage Crisis (which was to last 444 days), an act that can be interpreted as a preventive anti-colonial reflex but whose political significance lied in Khomeini’s appropriating and outbidding his political opponents’ anti-imperialist discourse. Thereby, Khomeini succeeded in securing the political hegemony of his Islamist faction, thus

<sup>33</sup> According to Mohammad Ayatollahi Tabaar (2014), before, during and after the revolution, Khomeini’s clerical disciples as well as his liberal associates were secretly in close communication with U.S. representatives to assure them that once the Shah is removed and the army neutralized, the new regime would remain anti-communist and Western-friendly. He further elaborates: ‘[I]n the Cold War era, the West dreaded that the Islamists would be overwhelmed by highly organized and popular communist activists. The latter had long penetrated the region, including Iranian society and intelligentsia. The fear, indeed, turned out to be real. After the shah fled, a wide range of Marxist actors quickly overwhelmed the political scene. [...] Leftist students, professors, teachers and workers dominated the universities, high schools, factories and labor unions. In their daily statements, papers and meetings, they relentlessly accused the new Islamic Republic and the interim nationalist government of being in bed with American imperialism. In this highly anti-U.S. climate, Islamist and nationalist actors were losing the war of narratives. Unlike the nationalists, however, Khomeini and his followers turned to the left, and disarmingly adopted an anti-imperialist language, which eventually surpassed that of their rivals. Less than a year after the Islamic Revolution, hundreds of Islamist students decided to demonstrate who was truly anti-American. They chose an act [the U.S. Embassy seizure] that would constitute unmistakable proof. [...] They stole the anti-American torch from the patently anti-imperialist, and now stunned, left. With one blow, both the nationalists and the Marxist left were paralyzed before being totally eliminated. The interim government fell due to the growing interference of the clergy and the [IRGC]. Although Khomeini had rejected Prime Minister Mehdi Bazargan’s previous resignation attempts, this time he accepted it without any hesitation. In this major political coup, the left went mute and the Islamists gained an upper hand. Within days after the seizure of the embassy, Khomeini turned the tables and called the leftist groups American stooges: “My ears did not hear that they supported [the seizure of the U.S. Embassy]. If they are not pro-American, why didn’t they support [this act]?” It is not clear if Khomeini was aware of the plan to take over the embassy. Nine months earlier, a number of armed Marxist men had occupied the embassy for a few hours only to be criticized by Khomeini and kicked out by the armed Islamic Revolutionary Committees [...]. [...] Despite international condemnation of the takeover and its impact in isolating the state, Khomeini’s faction benefited from it enormously. His disciples could shape the elected and appointed bodies and thus effectively institutionalize Velayat-e Faqih [...] in those critical days of debating the shape of the political system in the Assembly of Experts for Constitution.’ For details on Khomeini’s meetings with U.S. representatives before and after the revolution, see Nejati 2011: 893–901 and 918–929 respectively.

outmanoeuvring leftists, Islamic liberals and nationalists. In December, in the midst of the hostage crisis, a second referendum was organized, asking whether a 73-member Khomeinist council was desired, which effectively posited the *Faqih* on top of the political system.<sup>34</sup> Hence, by the end of 1979, the Khomeinists had succeeded in monopolizing power through institutionalizing the *Velâyat-e Faqih* system.<sup>35</sup>

From September 1980 onwards, when Iraq under Saddam Hussein launched an attack on Iran initiating a war that was to last eight years, the process of Islamization of state and society was decisively boosted and the state under Islamist domination was eventually consolidated.<sup>36</sup> In the fight against the foreign aggressor, the Islamic Republic initiated a mass mobilization (including teenagers), proclaiming a “Holy Defence” (*Defâ-e Moqaddas*) and making use of the Shia cult of martyrdom. Meanwhile, dissidents were routinely branded as undermining much-needed national unity in the face of the nation’s quasi-existential battle against the external aggressor. As a result, ‘[a]s various parties were preparing for the first presidential and parliamentary [...] elections’, these two landmark events, the hostage crisis and later the Iraqi invasion, ‘were effectively employed toward silencing and intimidating [the Khomeinists’] opponents’.<sup>37</sup>

In the ensuing period, the state branded Islamism as the only acceptable ideology while discrediting and suppressing alternative ones. As Majid Mohammadi explains,

Islamic propaganda is used to disapprove “others,” including other religions (even Sunni Islam) and other ideologies, especially secular ideologies and isms. Among the isms, liberalism is demonized more than any other ideology, whereas communism and socialism were equally demonized in the 1980’s. The positive propaganda is used to support enforcement of *shari’a* law and to propagate the ideologized morality of Shi’ite Islam.<sup>38</sup>

Nationalism, though, was integrated into the IRI’s identity politics, as a way to elevate the new regime’s domestic legitimacy and to help mobilize for the war against Iraq. For that purpose, religious (i.e. Shia) and not secular nationalism was utilized, establishing in the 1980s an

<sup>34</sup> Behrooz 2009. See also Behrooz 2000: ch. 2; Jafari 2010: 89–95.

<sup>35</sup> See Abrahamian 2008a: 168–169.

<sup>36</sup> Rostami-Povey 2010: ch. 1.

<sup>37</sup> Ayatollahi Tabaar 2014.

<sup>38</sup> Mohammadi (Majid) 2008: 402.

“Islamic–Iranian identity” that was to become élite consensus (to be discussed in Chap. 3–B).<sup>39</sup>

On the societal level, the process of Islamization occurred at the interplay between social forces and the new, not yet fully Islamist state. While the latter’s rule was cemented by its alliance with the bazaar, an important conflict emerged with the labour movement. The workers, whose self-organized strike committees had brought the economy to a standstill (especially the oil industry which was absolutely central to state revenue) and thus gave the monarchy a decisive blow, became a thorn in the flesh of the new rulers as they were claiming their rights after the revolution’s victory. Henceforth, independent workers’ organizations were discriminated against, with the new state establishing “Islamic Councils” (*Shorâ-ye Eslâmi*) in the work places, whose influence—aided by state repression—was secured and increased. The “Islamic” state increasingly viewed the interests of the working class as deviating from those of the Islamic community (*Umma*) and finally in March 1980 issued a law prohibiting strikes.<sup>40</sup> Concomitantly, the position of workers, students and women loyal to an “Islamic” order was promoted, while their dissident fellows were facing harsh repression.<sup>41</sup>

The dismissal of workers’ interests by the Islamists could not be achieved without the support from non-Islamist political forces. In fact, also Khomeini’s first Prime Minister, Mehdi Bazargan, had condemned strikes in the immediate post-revolutionary period, seconding the Khomeinists’ claim that they would put a brake on the country’s economic recovery. In addition, some leftist groups played an infamous role when it came to the smashing of independent workers’ councils, as they infiltrated these councils, infesting them with their political fragmentation, while the Tudeh Party—very much in tune with the new rulers—had demanded the integration of those councils into structures of the new-born Islamist state.<sup>42</sup> Moreover, a unified secular opposition movement did not exist, again boosting Khomeini’s position. In other words, [w]ithout the decisive support of non-Islamic organizations, secular intellectuals, and political forces on the ground, the creation of a theocratic regime in Iran and its

<sup>39</sup> See Bashiriyeh 1984: ch. 3; Ansari 2012: ch. 4.

<sup>40</sup> Malm and Esmailian 2007: ch. 2.

<sup>41</sup> See Rostami-Povey 2004, 2005.

<sup>42</sup> Malm and Esmailian 2007: ch. 2.

consolidation could not be realized'.<sup>43</sup> By the end of this 1979–1983 period, which some authors refer to as the counter-revolution,<sup>44</sup> the Khomeinist state got consolidated.

Hence, the 'temporary marriage'<sup>45</sup> between political and social forces for the purpose of ousting the Shah was soon dismissed at the expense of the workers and various political organizations. It was replaced by a new, solid partnership between the bazaaris and the Islamists, who together formed the backbone of the new state. If one adds the anti-women changes in marital and family laws, which were proclaimed by Khomeini's office less than two weeks into the revolution,<sup>46</sup> women alongside workers ought to be regarded as the first victims of the IRI.

Our brief discussion has been indicative of the flexibility of Islamism in terms of class alliances, a crucial prerequisite for consolidating power. As Farhang Morady explains:

Islam in general—and the Islamic Republic of Iran in particular—has survived because of its ability to adapt to differing class interests. It has had the financial support of tradesmen, the *bazaaris*, landowners, industrialists and the bureaucrats of modern capitalism to consolidate its role through building seminaries and recruiting students. Equally, it has gained the support of the mass of the people by offering comfort to the poor and oppressed, and promising the exploited class a degree of protection. It is this flexibility that provides various interpretations and an appeal to different classes, especially in times of social revolt, even if these ideas are contradictory.<sup>47</sup>

Even after the Iraq–Iran War ended, the process of Islamization did not come to a halt. On the state level, alongside the institutions directly elected (such as the Parliament, the President and the Assembly of Experts), after Khomeini's demise in June 1989 the Guardian Council, which in the first draft of the Constitution was modelled as a controlling body elected by Parliament, through constitutional changes was turned into an all-dominating instrument of power at the hands of the Supreme Leader.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>43</sup> Mohajer and Vahabi 2011: 110.

<sup>44</sup> See, for example, Nikbeen 1983; Marshall 1988; Jafari *op. cit.*

<sup>45</sup> This notion is borrowed from Malm and Esmailian 2007: pt. 1, ch. 3.

<sup>46</sup> Mir-Hosseini 2006: 634–635.

<sup>47</sup> Morady 2011a: 42.

<sup>48</sup> Massarrat 2010a: 38.

The hegemony of the Islamists had rested on both coercion and consent. On one hand, the coercive element was constituted of political repression. Prior to the revolution almost a hundred political prisoners were executed between 1971 and 1979, whereas in the early period of the Islamic Republic (1981–1985) more than 7900 dissidents faced the same fate. Under the premiership of Mir-Hossein Mousavi (1981–1989) 2500 to 12,000 political prisoners were executed during the “Great Massacre” of 1988.<sup>49</sup> On the other, the element of consent can be traced back to the discursive field where the dominant paradigm was anti-imperialism—and not democracy. As Maziar Behrooz argued, the opposition could have at least delayed the establishment of theocracy if it had not focused that much on anti-imperialism but instead on democratic rights.<sup>50</sup> Mohajer and Vahabi, on their part, see the absence of secularism as the reason for the defeat of progressive forces, who, including radical thinkers, had ‘argued for the compatibility of the principles of Modernity [...] with Sharia’. In their struggle against the monarchy, ‘the nonclerical forces have retreated from secular demands in the name of “unity” with “progressive” and /or “anti-imperialist militant Islam” in fear of losing the support of people’. Hence, in their view, despite the existence of secular circles, ‘*there has never been a truly secular movement in recent Iranian history*’.<sup>51</sup>

### Islamizing Foreign Policy

In the immediate wake of the revolution, the Iranian government was not yet exclusively Islamist but rather pluralistic in its composition, unmistakably so in the foreign-policy realm, although the Islamist Ayatollah Khomeini remained the final authority. The government included Mehdi Bazargan from the Freedom Movement of Iran (FMI, *Nehzat-e Āzādi-e Irān*) as provisional prime minister (appointed on 5 February 1979, resigned in November)—also shortly acting as foreign minister (1–12 April 1979)—and Karim Sanjabi from the National Front (*Jebheh-ye Mellī*) as first foreign minister (11 February–1 April 1979); later, Abol-Hassan Bani-Sadr, first as acting foreign minister (12–29 November 1979) and then as the first president of revolutionary Iran (4 February 1980–21 June 1981), and Sadeq Qotbzadeh as foreign minister (29 November 1979–3 August 1980). They were all mostly associated with the National Front

<sup>49</sup> Abrahamian 1999: 169, 215.

<sup>50</sup> Behrooz 2009.

<sup>51</sup> Mohajer and Vahabi 2011: 113, 114, 115 (emphasis in the original).

and/or the FMI, which were largely secular (yet including religious persons), nationalist and democratic-minded in nature, with their social base composed of the middle class and modern intellectuals. Bazargan, himself a religious person, claimed that his FMI would constitute the bridge between National Front nationalists and Khomeini's Islamists. However, their collaboration with Khomeini was rendered possible by their acceptance of Islamism as a legitimate popular ideology and the—at least, initial—realization of its convergence with nationalism, reflecting “religious-nationalist” (*melli-maz'habi*) beliefs.

#### Independence via Non-alignment as Grand-Strategic Preference

To pave the way for an independent and non-aligned foreign policy—a central aspiration of the revolution—a series of measures were taken by foreign-policy officials in the immediate wake of the revolution. In a first period, Iranian foreign policy under Bazargan was marked by a nationalist non-alignment policy aimed at establishing independence through equidistance to great-powers. This was based on the principle of “equilibrium” (*tavâzon*), which was established and practised by Amir Kabir (Mirza Taghi Khan)—one of the most committed reformist statesmen of nineteenth-century Iran, who had served under Nasr al-Din Shah (r. 1831–1896)—in order to offset imperial pressures by adopting a policy of “impartiality” (*bi-tarafi*) or non-alignment. For Bazargan, Iran's policy towards the great-powers should have followed Mohammad Mossadeq (Prime Minister in 1951–1953) whose policy of “negative equilibrium” (*movâzeneh-ye manfi*) aimed to maintain Iranian independence by terminating British domination. Hence, to put an end to monarchical Iran's alliance with the U.S., Foreign Minister Sanjabi on 12 March 1979 withdrew Iran's CENTO membership and Foreign Minister Ebrahim Yazdi on 3 November cancelled the U.S.–Iranian defence agreement of 5 March 1959. At the same time, Tehran also abrogated articles of a 1921 Iranian–Soviet treaty which Moscow saw as entitling it to militarily intervene in Iran whenever it judged that its security would be threatened from inside Iranian territory.<sup>52</sup> Sanjabi explained the latter step by invoking that Iran had ‘bad memories’ of its ties with its powerful northern neighbour, adding that

<sup>52</sup> Ramazani 1989: 205.

our country genuinely wants friendly relations with the USSR, and it will refuse to be [the base] for attack or propaganda against it. [...] On the other hand, we will not allow recurrence of disturbing precedents such as requests for oil concessions, territorial demands or proclamation of the Kurdish Republic at Mahabad. We will defend Iran's independence, integrity and unity whatever the cost.<sup>53</sup>

In accordance with the revolutionary slogan “neither East, nor West”, nourished by Iran's historical experience, these measures by Iran created equidistance towards both Cold War superpowers. Consequently, within months after the revolution, the Iranian government sought membership of the Non-Aligned Movement (NAM), an organization of countries of the Global South that played a prominent role during that period. The recourse to independence and non-alignment as foreign-policy guidelines did not come as a surprise, especially to non-Western observers cognizant of Iran's shared experience with the Global South. In 1981, the Indian scholar of Iran, A.H.H. Abidi, approved of revolutionary Iran's new foreign-policy orientation:

Since the revolution itself was partly a response to foreign interventions and a conscious manifestation of the urge for non-involvement, the twin battle-cries of the revolutionary leaders were a denunciation of imperialist control over Iran and a rejection of Iran's imperious posture in the region. In this framework, Iran's attraction towards the concept of non-alignment was both prudent and logical.<sup>54</sup>

In fact, revolutionary Iran's upholding of the independence principle was squarely placed in the anti-imperial *Zeitgeist*, reflected in both its multi-ideological popular revolution and the like-minded nations of the Global South.<sup>55</sup>

#### Bipolar Political Power-Structure and Foreign-Policy Orientations:

##### The Roots of National-Security Discourses in the IRI

In the immediate post-revolutionary period, a duality in the political power-structure emerged: One group can be referred to as revolutionaries (*Engelâbiyoun*) or ideologues (*Maktâbiyoun*), the other as liberals or

<sup>53</sup> Cited in *ibid.*: 206.

<sup>54</sup> Abidi 1981: 337.

<sup>55</sup> See Prashad 2008: 31–50, 75–94; Amin 2013.

moderates (*Miānehro-hā*) who shared nationalistic-religious beliefs. Unlike the revolutionaries who sought to export Islam and the revolution, the liberals wanted to follow up on their historical mission which they traced back to the Constitutional Revolution. On the foreign-policy front, the liberals stressed the need for peace, acceptance of other countries the way they were and the establishment of relations with them. They were followers of Mossadeq and believed that the political order of other countries was inflexible, concluding that challenging it would ultimately hurt Iran's national interests and security. Hence, Khomeini's Prime Minister Bazargan was totally opposed to the occupation of the U.S. Embassy. Rather, he was in favour of having relations with the U.S. in order to balance against Soviet power—thereby displaying a balance-of-power thinking. The revolutionaries, on their part, promoted with the idea of intervening in other countries in order to spread Islam and “export” the revolution.

Bazargan believed that after the revolution Iran was moving towards radicalization instead of entering a slow process of reform that, in his view, would have been to the nation's benefit.<sup>56</sup> In fact, moderates used to call the revolutionaries “radicals”, whereas revolutionaries labelled the moderates as “compromisers” (*sāzesbkār-hā*). As a result, as Valipour-Zaroumi from the Research Institute of Strategic Studies (RISS) in Tehran argues, this duality of managing state affairs resulted in the weakening of national security. After Bazargan, Bani-Sadr, who on 25 January 1980 was inaugurated as the IRI's first President, turned out to be in opposition to the *Velāyat-e Faqīh*. Although he was the commander-in-chief of the armed forces during the early days of the war, he was consequently relegated to deal with mostly internal issues.<sup>57</sup>

As already stated, two key conflicts emerged in the early post-revolutionary years pitting differing worldviews against one another, more precisely pertaining to Iran's relations with the Western and Eastern blocs as well as the idea of exporting the “Islamic Revolution” (*Sodour-e Enqelāb*). The first conflict, the hostage crisis, pitted revolutionary nationalists against revolutionary idealists, the second—Iraq's assault on Iran—revolutionary idealists vs. revolutionary realists.<sup>58</sup>

<sup>56</sup> Āsef-Nakh'i 2014: 8–9.

<sup>57</sup> Valipour-Zaroumi 2004: 126–133.

<sup>58</sup> These denominations are taken from Ramazani 1989.

The first conflict, the above-mentioned seizure of the U.S. Embassy, also brought a clash on foreign-policy orientations to the fore, between the revolutionary nationalists who followed the “path of Mossadeq” (*Râh-e Mossadeq*) and the revolutionary Islamists who followed the “line of Imam Khomeini” (*Khat-e Imam Khomeini*). While the first sought the realization of Iranian independence within the international system, the latter defied that very system, including its norms of diplomatic behaviour and international law. In Bazargan’s words, ‘I believe in the service of Iran by means of Islam’ while Khomeini ‘believes in the service of Islam by means of Iran’.<sup>59</sup> As stated before, Khomeini’s subsequent endorsement of the hostage-taking by radical Islamist students committed to his “line” had domestic and international motivations. Foreign Minister Bazargan, who sought not to provoke the U.S., remaining faithful to the principle of “negative equilibrium”, became alienated by this move and consequently resigned in November 1979.

Yet, as Rouhollah Ramazani explains, Bazargan’s resignation did not put an end to the school of thought that embraced a nationalist non-alignment policy cognizant of international power realities:

Both Abol Hasan Bani-Sadr, first as acting foreign minister and then as the first president of revolutionary Iran, and Sadeq Qotbzadeh, Iran’s foreign minister, hewed to a foreign policy line that was close to the nationalist nonalignment policy of Mossadeq and Bazargan. Although Bani-Sadr rationalized his “equidistance” policy in Islamic terms, he would rely on Western Europe or France as a counterbalance to the superpowers. Qotbzadeh, no less than his archrival Bani-Sadr, believed in a nonalignment policy, using the Mossadeqist term “negative equilibrium” with what he called “honesty in word and in deed.” They, therefore, like their predecessors—Mossadeq, Bazargan, Sanjabi, and Yazdi, who preferred the term positive neutralism—were all Iran firsters. And as such, they were all opposed by the revolutionary idealists who claimed to follow “the Imam Khomeini line” [...] rather than “the Mossadeq path”.<sup>60</sup>

In contrast, the idealists interpreted the slogan “neither East nor West” in a way that Iran should not have relations with the Soviet Union and the

<sup>59</sup> Cited in Ramazani 1989: 205.

<sup>60</sup> Ibid.: 207.

U.S., including governments closely associated with any of the two Cold War superpowers.<sup>61</sup>

In the second conflict pertaining to the Iran–Iraq War, the revolutionary idealists dominated most debates against the revolutionary realists. Widely ignored in mainstream accounts of the war, despite heavy involvement by outside powers—the Cold War superpowers, the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) countries as well as Western European countries—who failed to use their weight to help end the war while benefiting economically and geopolitically from the region’s two major powers pitted against each other, the war lasted and was prolonged primarily because of the decisions made by the belligerents’ respective leaders. Both Iraq’s Saddam Hussein and Iran’s Khomeini rebuffed chances of settlement when they had the upper hand in the war: in the first almost two years of the war it was Iraq’s President and after June 1982 when Iraqi troops had been driven out from Iranian territory it was Khomeini.<sup>62</sup>

During the first eighteen months of the conflict, when Iraq occupied part of Iran, Khomeini asked for an unconditional return to the status quo, while Saddam Hussein sought a military victory. In June 1982, when Iran recaptured virtually all its territory, the clerical rulers in Teheran debated the question of whether Iranian forces should pursue the Iraqi troops into their own country. After some hesitation Khomeini sided with the proponents of expansion and thus sealed the course of the war.<sup>63</sup>

Khomeini finally sided with the extremist camp, such as then-President Ali Khamenei, who saw the export of the revolution furthered by a victory over Iraq, against the moderate one, such as then-Speaker of Parliament Ali-Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani.<sup>64</sup>

As revolutionary Iran’s first ambassador to the UN (1979–1980), Mansour Farhang, recounts, Khomeini’s decision to continue the war, despite over \$20bn of war reparations offered by Saudi Arabia if it was willing to accept the UN Security Council ceasefire resolution, provided the context for boosting the status of ‘religious extremists’, or revolutionary idealists according to Ramazani, as the regime’s support base and the concomitant militarization of the state:

<sup>61</sup> Ibid.: 208.

<sup>62</sup> Farhang 1985.

<sup>63</sup> Farhang 1986.

<sup>64</sup> Farhang 1985: 675.

The Iraqi occupation of Iran had compelled the revolutionary regime to channel its energies into expelling the invaders. The psychological atmosphere of this widely popular mobilization tremendously benefited the religious extremists, who regarded the export of the Islamic revolution as their primary foreign policy objective. Since then the militarization of the state has steadily increased the extremists' base of support within the regime. When Iraq invaded Iran in September 1980, there were only 7,000 Revolutionary Guards and no irregular militias. Today there are 200,000 Guards and about 350,000 militiamen, who are generally more zealous than the clerics who lead them.<sup>65</sup>

By refusing this offer, Khomeini 'proclaimed that the goal of the war was to conquer Iraq and then move on to liberate Jerusalem. From then on, "the road to Jerusalem goes through Karbala" became the slogan of the war for the next six years.'<sup>66</sup> Hence, '[i]n the six-year interval between July 1982 and July 1988 when Iran accepted the UN-brokered cease-fire, the idealists' foreign-policy orientation often prevailed over that of the realists',<sup>67</sup> Ramazani stresses.

Those years were primarily marked by the domination of revolutionary idealists who favoured a confrontational foreign policy aimed at exporting the revolution. Despite the pan-Islamic nature of Ayatollah Khomeini's "export of the revolution" discourse, it has had a sectarian appeal.<sup>68</sup> Not only that it reserved Iran—a predominately Shia country within a predominantly Sunni Islamic-majority world—the central place within a newly to be established pan-Islamic Middle East, its concomitant political message was clearly directed at Iran's neighbouring Arab Sunni rulers, including Iraq, dubbed illegitimate and acting as pawns of malign external forces (imperialism and Zionism). As such, it was perceived by the Arab ruling élites as implicit calls for "regime change". This undoubtedly led regional (except for Iran's sole supporters Syria and Libya) and non-regional states to become alienated from post-revolutionary Iran. This was

<sup>65</sup> Farhang 1986. Farhang resigned his position in protest when Khomeini reneged on his promise to accept the recommendation of the UN Commission of Inquiry to release the U.S. hostages in Tehran. In the early period of the Iran–Iraq War he also served as then President Banisadr's envoy in negotiations with the international peace missions that attempted to settle the conflict.

<sup>66</sup> E-mail post by Mansour Farhang on Gulf2000 list, 25 May 2018; quoted here with the author's permission.

<sup>67</sup> Ramazani 1989: 209–210.

<sup>68</sup> Nasr 2006: 143–144; Abdo 2017: 147.

among the chief reasons why in 1981 the six Arab sheikhdoms of the Persian Gulf took the step to establish the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC).<sup>69</sup> Iran's idealistic policy of confrontation also affected its relations with the Soviet Union. Moscow was concerned that Soviet Muslims be contaminated by Iran's revolutionary fervour, one of the reasons why it invaded Afghanistan in December 1979 and resumed arms supplies to Iraq in 1982.<sup>70</sup>

In the months following the Shah's departure from Iran (16 January 1979), when it came to foreign-policy decisions, Khomeini's 'overriding concern [was] with establishing a faqih-ruled Islamic republic', as Ramazani stresses.<sup>71</sup> In other words, in the fragile post-revolutionary period Khomeini's standpoints on foreign-policy issues were primarily subordinated to his overarching aim of consolidating power by placing himself at the unrivalled top of the emerging political system.

### *Theoretical Insights*

Following the spirit of our Critical Geopolitics approach, we have critically reviewed the notion of an "Islamic Revolution". As stated, the pluralistic nature of the Iranian Revolution can be traced back to the Constitutional Revolution where the roots of the still existing politico-ideological formations of nationalism, socialism and Islamism can be found. Drawing upon this historical background, the revolutionary movement of the 1970s pursued, as Adib-Moghaddam described, 'utopian-romantic ideals' in the form of 'counter-hegemonic utopias', which were consequently 'institutionalized as central norms of the Islamic Republic [and] inform the contemporary grand strategic preferences of the Iranian state'.<sup>72</sup> In fact, this process of institutionalization did occur in the context of competing ideological and political forces at the end of which the hegemony of the Islamists prevailed. Modifying the above Constructivist argument on the genealogy of the IRI's foreign policy as a quasi-linear process, we have highlighted that not all pre-revolutionary "counter-hegemonic utopias" nurtured by the triad of Iranian political culture (nationalism, socialism and Islamism) were equally or consensually institutionalized as key norms of the new state as well as its grand-strategic preferences, although they

<sup>69</sup> Ramazani 1989: 210.

<sup>70</sup> Ibid.: 210.

<sup>71</sup> Ibid.: 208.

<sup>72</sup> Adib-Moghaddam 2007: 35.

informed the Constitution.<sup>73</sup> Rather a dominant Islamist narrative acquired hegemonic status, based on coercion and consent, which indeed embraced elements of the rivalling two political cultures but had effectively denied their equal status on the societal and state levels (to be discussed later), significantly driven by the Khomeinists' desire to monopolize and consolidate power.

Revolutionary idealists, or religious extremists, have seen Iran's international isolation as blessing for its alleged utility to constitute an indispensable step towards acquiring independence. Accordingly, during the hostage crisis, Khomeini's dictum read: 'We must isolate ourselves in order to become independent.'<sup>74</sup> It is worth noting that such a view—still reverberating among today's radical Islamists in the IRI—however, is rejected by geopolitics scholars. In this respect, Hafeznia argues that since 1979 Iran has been suffering from "geopolitical seclusion" (*enzerâ-e géopolitique*). In his view, revolutionary Iran's decision to isolate itself from the international system has been the most serious strategic error. This is due to the fact, he stresses, that a geopolitical system ought to be open as it depends upon exchange and interaction with other countries.<sup>75</sup> However, given the U.S. policy of containment and embargo towards post-revolutionary Iran, one could make the case of a dialectal root for Iran's isolation—one internally driven (due to ideological as well as domestic-power considerations), the other externally imposed.

Seen from a different angle, Iran's—and for that matter Iraq's—prolongation of the war for the sake of their respective leaders' pursuit of power undermined their claim to independence, as Farhang aptly explains:

As opposition groups, the Iraqi Baathists and the Iranian Moslem militants used to condemn their rulers for keeping their countries dependent on the Western powers. They used to regard the dominant role of the international oil companies in the pricing and production of oil in the region as a violation of their national sovereignty. And in their struggle to bring about social change they had set economic equity and popular political participation as

<sup>73</sup> See Art. 152: 'The foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran shall be based on the negation of exercising or accepting any form of domination whatsoever, safeguarding all-embracing independence and territorial integrity, defence of the rights of all Muslims, non-alignment with domineering powers, and peaceful and reciprocal relations with non-belligerent States.'

<sup>74</sup> Cited in *ibid.*: 211.

<sup>75</sup> Author's interview with Hafeznia.

their prime objectives. Once in charge, however, they quickly forgot their promises; the expansion of the state's power came to constitute their top national priority. [...] Khomeini used to criticize the Shah for his massive arms purchases. Now the Ayatollah has become a principal cause of the region's unprecedented militarization, and his own agents seem the most insatiable customers in the international black market for arms. [...] Consequently, the governments of Iran and Iraq have become so desperate to sell oil in order to buy weapons and food that they have lost their capacity to bargain with their trade partners or initiate any long-term plans for economic development. [...] These revived conditions of impairment and dependency have forced Saddam Hussein and Ayatollah Khomeini to justify their feud in terms of elusive ideological or security concerns. But these claims have not succeeded in subduing popular resentment against the war. Thus the two regimes have had to greatly expand their internal security apparatuses to prevent active antiwar opposition.<sup>76</sup>

The discussions made in this part have shed light on a number of theoretical queries posited in Chap. 1. (1) Regarding the theoretical model proffered in the Introduction, we could assess the adequacy of our definition of the agent as one driven by ideational motifs. Yet, the examples presented in this part, namely the agents' reactions to the U.S. Embassy seizure and their stances with regard to the war with Iraq, have not only been indicative of the intimate link that exists between positions adopted in foreign-policy matters and domestic-power considerations. More than that, they call into question Constructivism's claim of the almost exclusive primacy of ideational motivations in explaining the agents' foreign-policy behaviour, since a strong case can be made that when assessing the role of the particular ideology or worldview they espoused the material interests underpinning them can be hardly ignored. Rather it could be argued that the foreign-policy stances advocated by the Khomeinists on the U.S. Embassy occupation and the so-called idealists during the war were embedded in their domestic endeavour of elevating, if not monopolizing, their domestic power position relative to rivals, reflected in their project of Islamizing state and society in post-revolutionary Iran and consolidating a specifically favoured power structure within the Islamic Republic. (2) Those insights also challenge a linear understanding of a Constructivist explanation of foreign-policy conduct according to which ideas assume structural prowess. Instead, we have seen that such a process of

<sup>76</sup> Farhang 1985: 677–678.

institutionalization (i.e. ideas becoming norms institutionalized within the state) is squarely embedded in the context of power struggles that defines the terms of the process during which certain ideas acquire a hegemonic status and others not, to the extent of the latter being devalued or repressed in the process.

### (B) IRANIAN POLITICAL CULTURES AND GEOPOLITICAL IMAGINATIONS: ON THE GEOPOLITICAL SIGNIFICANCE OF AN IDENTITY MARKER

One major theoretical concern of the present study is the attempt to unravel the multifaceted ways in which the relation between the ideational and material spheres can be comprehended. In the previous part, we have shown that material interests (in our case, domestic power considerations) cannot be seen detached from ideational positioning on the domestic and international fronts. In this part, we elevate the discussion onto the geopolitical arena by asking what domestic identity constructions may produce in terms of geopolitical visions or imaginations, which in turn may assume structuring power for determining foreign-policy, even grand-strategic, preferences (see Table 3.1). Put differently, the ‘political mobilisation of a particular identity’<sup>77</sup> may have a material dimension.

Identity *per se* is a concept that is neither fixed nor monolithic, but fluid and multifaceted.<sup>78</sup> As with individuals, in geopolitical reasoning, too, every state is equipped with *multiple identities*. That is, the ways in which a country views itself then forms the basis of a state’s *geopolitical vision(s)* (*engâreh*) or *imagination(s)* from which, in a final step, its *geopolitical interest(s)* or grand-strategic preferences can be derived.<sup>79</sup> The social-constructivist notion of “geopolitical imagination” coined by scholars associated with Critical Geopolitics can be seen as heaving Benedict Anderson’s “imagined communities”<sup>80</sup> and Edward Said’s “imagined geographies”<sup>81</sup>—that is, basically the idea of constructing space into an us-vs.-them scheme—onto a geopolitical level of examination.

<sup>77</sup> This notion is borrowed from Ansari 2012: 3.

<sup>78</sup> See, for example, Kermani 2005b.

<sup>79</sup> Author’s interview with Hafeznia.

<sup>80</sup> Anderson 1991 (1983).

<sup>81</sup> Said 2003 (1977).

**Table 3.1** From political culture (or politico-ideological formation) to geopolitical imagination

<i>Political culture/ politico- ideological formation/ self-ascribed prime identity</i>	<i>Geopolitical imagination (geographical imagi- nation/collective identity- maker/"imagined community")</i>	<i>Main characteristics</i>	<i>Related notions</i>
Nationalism	Iranian (nationalism)	Primacy of ethno- linguistic and cultural aspects	Iranian civilization ( <i>Tamadon-e Irāni</i> ); Iranian culture ( <i>Farhang-e Irāni</i> ); (ethno-)Persianism; Aryanism
Islamism	Islamic	Primacy of the religious	Shiism; Islamic universalism
Socialism	Third-Worldism ( <i>Tiers-Mondisme</i> )	Liberation struggle of the Third World against the First ("the West") and the Second ("the East") Worlds	anti-imperialism; non-alignment

The key underlying assumption regarding geopolitical reasoning is that bonds based on a (perceived) common identity, ethnicity, religion, language, culture etc. can provide the basis for the projection of geopolitical influence and power.<sup>82</sup> Arguably, in its fundamentals this is a problematic claim as it is reflective of a tendency of essentializing identity. Given the complexities and inherent contradictions associated with identities *per se*, it is rather more likely that all these will be necessarily transferred onto the geopolitical level, with potential areas of conflict regarding the state's grand-strategic preferences coming to the fore.

By drawing their geopolitical realms and radiuses, states delimit their spheres of influence which they often regard as natural. In the specific case of the IRI, it has since its inception witnessed a deficient amount of "hard power" as rooted in military and economic capabilities, while it has relied on various distinct yet interlinked sources of ideology to project geopolitical power.

<sup>82</sup> See Telhami and Barnett 2002; Katzenstein 1996.

*Nationalism: The Determining Ideology of Modern Iran  
and the Prime Geopolitical Orbit*

The millennia-old recorded history of Iran can be regarded as the main reason for the salient importance of nationalism for an identity dubbed Iranian. As Charles Kurzman has explained:

Eventually, Iran came to be accepted as a unique but isomorphic unit in the community of nations [...]. It was granted founding-member status in the League of Nations and the United Nations. It was occupied several times by foreign powers but never colonized. Monarchs were overthrown, and the country's name changed, but Iran's sovereign status in the world system remained. These developments cannot be attributed entirely to the intertwined ideologies of globality and nationalism, but they could not have come to pass without persistent mobilization in Iran around the global idea of nationhood.<sup>83</sup>

Yet, it is important to stress the multiple facets and functions of what can be referred to as nationalism. We can distinguish between more inclusive (to be discussed below when examining “Third-World nationalism”) or exclusive forms of nationalism (e.g. Aryanism), each informing different geopolitical imaginations. We will also investigate the much-discussed relation between nationalism and Islamism.

*Persian Ultra-nationalism and the “Aryan Myth”: Importing Racial Nationalism Made in Europe*

The idea, or “myth”, of nationalism has its roots in Europe of the latter half of the eighteenth century. A century later it found its way to Iran. Iranian nationalism has been heavily influenced by a European intellectual tradition that promoted the ideas of progress and the nation, rather than being defined *against* Europe.<sup>84</sup> Ali Ansari explains the historical context of its emergence during a period of European power and Iranian decline:

By the turn of the twentieth century the blueprint of “national emancipation” drawn from European intellectuals was in the ascendant. Iranian nationalists drank enthusiastically from the well. Centralisation; modernisation; retreat of religion from the public sphere; and development of a

<sup>83</sup> Kurzman 2005: 156.

<sup>84</sup> Ansari 2012: 3–14.

nation-state founded on a single biologically determined, exclusive, ethnic group were all apparently appropriated with enthusiasm.<sup>85</sup>

In fact, the import of the European idea of the nation and nationalism on racial grounds reserved a unique place for Iran and enabled its racist, Orientalist disposition:

Indeed, Iran was almost unique among non-European countries in being able to ideologically integrate itself with a European frame of reference. Unlike the Arabs or the Turks, European doctrines of ethnic nationalism did not explicitly exclude the Iranians. On the contrary, “Iranians” as a national idea were very much part of the European family.<sup>86</sup>

This went as far as Iranians claiming to also belong to the “Aryan race”, a concept they imported from Europe by the twentieth century.<sup>87</sup> In Pahlavi Iran (1925–1979), deployed by the state in its effort to construct a “nation-state”, nationalism in the form of a Persian-centred Aryanist ideology of cultural superiority—especially over anything “Arab”—became dominant,<sup>88</sup> thereby also helping to “other” the competing ideologies of socialism and Islamism:

Iranian “ultra-nationalism” demonstrates affinity with “orientalist” views about the supremacy of the Indo-European peoples and the mediocrity of the Semitic race. Late nineteenth-century figures such as Mirza Fath Ali Akhun[d]zadeh or Mirza Aqa Khan Kermani were the forerunners of the Aryan *myth* adopted by the Pahlavi state and secular intellectuals. Iranian nationalist discourse idealised the status of pre-Islamic Persian empires, whilst negating the Islamicisation of Iran by Muslim forces [from the early 7th century onwards—AFN].<sup>89</sup>

Two observations can be made here. The first concerns the views held towards Semites. While Arabs, and for that matter Arab countries, have been considered backward and inferior, the views held towards the self-proclaimed Jewish state of Israel established in the mid-twentieth century

<sup>85</sup> Ibid.: 29–30.

<sup>86</sup> Ibid.: 30.

<sup>87</sup> Zia-Ebrahimi 2011; Motadel 2013.

<sup>88</sup> See Ansari 2012: 30–31.

<sup>89</sup> Adib-Moghaddam 2006: 17. For pertinent quotes, in fact anti-Arab diatribes, from those two figures, see Ansari 2012: 30.

were different. Sharing the fate of being situated in an Arab-majority region, a quasi-natural bond between Iran and Israel was imagined. As such, the “Jewish state” was not perceived in its ethno-linguistic Semitic disposition but as an entity of European offspring, much in line with its characteristic as a European colonial settler-state. This perception partly formed the basis for the last Shah’s ties with Israel as ‘both view themselves as culturally and politically disconnected from the region where they are forced to face their regional foes through the lens of a Manichean mindset’.<sup>90</sup> The second purports to the idea of the quasi-mutilation of the “Iranian-Aryan civilization” by what ultra-nationalists refer to as “the backward Arab religion of Islam”. This translates into the view that post-revolutionary Iran is effectively been ruled by an alien, Arab caste of clergymen—thus often combining Islamophobia, anti-Arab and anti-Turk resentments with a simultaneous attachment to the U.S., Israel and Western European nations. Moreover, there is an ultra-nationalism nostalgically reminiscent of the geographical span of past Persian empires that sees Iran spanning from the western borders of China to the eastern shores of the Mediterranean.<sup>91</sup>

Such views also have a structuring effect upon the domestic and international political realms, hence providing for material consequences. *Domestically*, nationalism in its exclusivist dimension has socially, politically and economically privileged the Persian ethno-linguistic group, to the detriment of Iranian society’s ethnic, cultural, religious and linguistic diversity.<sup>92</sup> *Internationally*, state élites—not only in Iran—have pursued the construction and consequently the demonization of “the other”, which was a determining factor in fostering conflict and even violent confrontation.<sup>93</sup> As Adib-Moghaddam argued in his Constructivist-inspired *The International Politics of the Persian Gulf: A Cultural Genealogy*, between the 1979 revolution in Iran and the end of the Iraq–Iran War in 1988 mutually exclusive identity constructions ‘transmuted regional relations into an atypical period of hostility’<sup>94</sup>. This cultural dimension prevailed over the *Realpolitik* one, where the regional twin-pillar security system following the 1969 Nixon Doctrine that turned Iran and Saudi

<sup>90</sup> Parsi 2007: 5.

<sup>91</sup> See, for example, the German-language blog <http://tangsir2569.wordpress.com>.

<sup>92</sup> Asgharzadeh 2007. See also Elling 2013.

<sup>93</sup> See, for example, Ruf 2002, 2012.

<sup>94</sup> Adib-Moghaddam 2006: 11.

Arabia into highly armed status-quo powers had created a level of regional stability and security.<sup>95</sup> Yet, the adherence to the ‘Iranianist *idea*’ with its desire to revive ‘Persian grandeur’ towards establishing the ultimate “Great Civilization” (*Tamaddon-e Bozorg*)—as showcased in the Shah’s 1971 celebration in Persepolis of allegedly 2500 years of Iranian empire—<sup>96</sup> created anxiety among Iran’s Arab neighbours of a looming security threat emanating from a racially based Iranian desire for regional pre-eminence.<sup>97</sup> This Aryan-Persian “self” found its powerful counterpart in the idea of a pan-Arabic *Volksgeist*, which led to a disastrous clash of identity and legitimacy politics, and ultimately helped sustain the fervour in the eight-year long Iraq–Iran War.<sup>98</sup> Finally, the Second Persian Gulf War of 1991 put an end to this period dominated by the romantic narratives of Persian and Arab nationalisms, heralding a new era of state-centred regional politics.<sup>99</sup>

### *Nationalism-Based Geopolitical Imagination*

If nationalism with its key reference points of Iranian culture (*farhang*) or civilization (*tamaddon*) is taken as prime identity, then the resulting geopolitical imagination sees the country of Iran at its core and extends to those areas where the Persian language is spoken. Thus, the part of the world whose dominant cultural characteristic can be linked to Iranian civilization ranges from Kurdistan through the Caucasus and Tajikistan to India. As a result, the geopolitical realm in which Iran is regarded to assume the role of a natural hegemon would include the southern half of the Caspian Sea, the Persian-speaking parts of post-Soviet Central Asia, Afghanistan and the entire Persian Gulf region.<sup>100</sup>

Geopolitical ambitions based on Iranian nationalism can have both accommodational and confrontational dimensions, as the following September 1970 U.S. intelligence brief on the Shah’s foreign-policy goals illustrates:

The Shah is acutely conscious of Iran’s great past and is determined to set his country on the road to a great future. He is determined to ensure for Iran a position of power and leadership to which he believes it is entitled on

<sup>95</sup> Ibid.: 12ff.

<sup>96</sup> See Nejati 2011: 354–356.

<sup>97</sup> Adib-Moghaddam 2006: 17 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>98</sup> Ibid.: ch. 2.

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.: ch. 3.

<sup>100</sup> Author’s interview with Hafeznia.

the basis of its history and standing in the region. The Shah sees the British withdrawal from the [Persian] Gulf as a development which gives Iran an opportunity to restore its historic position in the Gulf, but which also contains dangers of turmoil. [...] Considerations of this sort underlie the Shah's military and foreign policy. He wants Iran to be on good terms with its neighbors, if possible. He has no major territorial ambitions; [...] he accepts—as do almost all Iranians—the country's boundaries as they were determined by wars and treaties in the 18th and 19th centuries. He has, for example, given up Iranian claims to Kuwait and Bahrain. However, there are possible points of friction with Iraq on such matters as the boundary in the Shaat-al-Arab, and with some Arab states on seabed petroleum rights in the Gulf.<sup>101</sup>

Furthermore, part of the self-conception of an Iranian civilization can be extended to a broader defined Indo-Iranian civilization to which Iran would belong. Hence, Iran's relations to India, South Asia's dominant power, would be privileged.<sup>102</sup>

In addition to the Persian-speaking world, Iranian ultra-nationalism's anti-Arab attitude (which domestically expresses itself in racism towards Arab-speaking minorities living largely in the south-western province of Khuzestan) paints Arabs as culturally and politically inferior (by, e.g., branding their rulers as lackeys of imperial powers), thus creating a distance towards and disregard for Iran's many Arab neighbours to its west and south. Consequently, such an attitude favours links to non-Arab states in the region, above all Israel and to a lesser degree Turkey (as Turks are also largely viewed as at least culturally mediocre).

The ultra-nationalists' pejorative dismissal of Iran's "unnatural" Arab state neighbours is offset by devotion towards "the West", with Iran considering itself as being part of an Irano-European civilization. Thus, Tehran's ties to Western Europe, above all with Germany with whom an "Aryan" kinship is evoked, and by extension the U.S. are conceived as primordial.<sup>103</sup>

These push-and-pull factors are reminiscent of the geopolitical world-view that dominated under the last Pahlavi monarch. Under the Islamic Republic, Tehran's siding with Armenia, seen as being part of the wider Iranian family, in the Nagorno-Karabakh War (1988–1994) against

<sup>101</sup> SNIE 1970: 8.

<sup>102</sup> Author's interview with Hafeznia.

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.

Shia-majority Azerbaijan has been interpreted as an indication of a nationalism-based geopolitical worldview prevailing over an Islam-based.<sup>104</sup>

*Nationalism and Islamism: Mutual Exclusivity, Amalgam and Continuity*

The characterization of the relationship between nationalism as a long-standing ideology in Iran and Islamism as a more recent one oscillates between being mutually exclusive and widely reconcilable.

**Mutual Exclusivity: Western Nationalism vs. Eastern Islam(ism)**

The dilemma between a nationalism- and Islam-oriented worldview was aptly illustrated before the revolution by Ayatollah Morteza Motahhari (1920–1979), a leading religious intellectual:

If it is decided that [the] basis in determining the limits of the Iranian nation is the Aryan factor, the ultimate end of that is proclivity toward the Western world. But this proclivity in our national and political mission involves submissions and consequences, the most serious being a severance with neighbouring Islamic nations that are not Aryan and an attachment to Europe and the West. [I]f we [would choose as] the foundation of our nation our intellectual, behavioural and social heritage over the past fourteen centuries, [however] we would have a different mission and other costs [...]. Therein, Arab, Turk, Indian, Indonesian and [Chinese] would become our friends, even kinsmen.<sup>105</sup>

The mutual exclusivity suggested here is maintained by Islamic and secular (ultra-nationalists) fundamentalists alike, as they both share an essentializing view of Islam of which there is allegedly a single permissible text-based interpretation.<sup>106</sup> The same concurrence applies to the view of nationalism as being nothing more than a Western concept imported to Iran, which neglects nationalism as integral part in the creation of “nation-states” as well as its Third-Worldist context (see below).

<sup>104</sup> Ibid. See also Shaffer 2006: ch. 8.

<sup>105</sup> Motahhari (n.d.) *Islam and Iran*, Beirut: Dar al-Ta'aruf, p. 22, cited in Adib-Moghaddam 2007: 46. For a slightly different translation, see <http://www.al-shia.org/html/cng/page.php?id=1501> [12/11/2014].

<sup>106</sup> See Mir-Hosseini 2006: 641.

### Iranian Blend: Shia Islam as Religious Nationalism

Shiism, an Iranian version of Islam in the wake of the Persian Empire's Islamization in the seventh century, emerged as a way to safeguard national unity and identity in the face of the more powerful Sunni caliphates. As the late Bernard Lewis explained, Iran's Shia brand has immensely contributed to a blossoming of Islamic civilization:

Iran was indeed Islamized, but it was not Arabized. Persians remained Persians. And after an interval of silence, Iran reemerged as a separate, different and distinctive element within Islam, eventually adding a new element even to Islam itself. Culturally, politically, and most remarkable of all even religiously, the Iranian contribution to this new Islamic civilization is of immense importance. The work of Iranians can be seen in every field of cultural endeavor, including Arabic poetry, to which poets of Iranian origin composing their poems in Arabic made a very significant contribution. In a sense, Iranian Islam is a second advent of Islam itself, a new Islam sometimes referred to as *Islam-i Ajam*. It was this Persian Islam, rather than the original Arab Islam, that was brought to new areas and new peoples: to the Turks, first in Central Asia and then in the Middle East in the country which came to be called Turkey, and of course to India. The Ottoman Turks brought a form of Iranian civilization to the walls of Vienna.<sup>107</sup>

Shiism as an Iranian creation and its contributions to Islamic civilization can be taken as the most important factor for Iranians' sense of pride regarding Shiism, in other words a sort of religious nationalism.<sup>108</sup> (Its geopolitical dimension will be discussed below in the section on Islamisms.)

### Iranian *Grandeur* as Nationalist Continuity from the Monarchy to the Islamic Republic

As alluded to when evoking the role of nationalistic narratives in fomenting Iranian–Arab enmity, nationalism has become ‘the determining ideology of modern Iran’, as Ali Ansari argues in his *Politics of Nationalism in Modern Iran*:

Yet despite, or perhaps because of its pervasiveness in popular and political culture, and the ease with which it is evoked and resorted to by successive governments to secure political support and cement legitimacy, it remains

<sup>107</sup> Lewis 2001: 1–2.

<sup>108</sup> See Aghaei and Marashi 2014: chs. 9, 10, 13 and 14.

ill-defined and vigorously contested. [...] Yet whether the product of cynical manipulation, or a consequence of sincere adherence, there can be little doubt that “*nationalism*” in all its manifestations has been the ideological reference point to which all competing ideologies have ultimately had to adhere, and within which most have been subsumed.<sup>109</sup>

Ansari then goes on to point at the stark yet peculiar emergence of the nationalist discourse in the Islamic Republic:

Nothing exemplifies this process better than the ideological transformation of an Islamic Revolution which aspired to universality but within a decade had defined itself as an *Iranian* Islamic Revolution to distinguish itself from other movements emerging around the world, and to emphasise a pre-eminence and exclusivity most commonly associated with nationalist ideologies. It soon became apparent that the adjective “Iranian” was not intended as a geographic distinction, but implied barely disguised allusions to superiority on the basis not only of apparent priority but cultural sophistication.<sup>110</sup>

It is this latter reference to national superiority that forms a remarkable continuity between apparently fundamentally opposed personalities, or regimes, of Mohammad-Reza Shah (or monarchical Iran) and Ayatollah Khomeini (or the Islamic Republic to this day), who were both portrayed as “national saviours”.<sup>111</sup> Geopolitically, a case in point is both regimes’ “natural” claim to be the dominant power of the Persian Gulf,<sup>112</sup> which the IRI has not divested from in favour of a “Muslim/Islamic Gulf”, as contemplated by some Iranian officials after the revolution but abandoned after Iraq’s invasion.<sup>113</sup>

But to the same degree that nationalist sentiments have been retrieved to nourish the ideological source of power (as such reflecting much continuity), the IRI has—in order to maintain the hegemony of the Islamist narrative over others—adopted a politics of history and memory that has attached different connotations and values to Islamism and nationalism respectively by resorting to both Islamist and Third-Worldist discursive elements. While denigrating the legacy of the monarchical *Ancien Régime* primarily on socio-economic grounds (“uneven development” in socialist-inspired Third-Worldist terms), but also moral ones (secularism as an

<sup>109</sup> Ansari 2012: 1 (emphasis added).

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.: 152–197.

<sup>112</sup> See SNIE 1970.

<sup>113</sup> *Kayhan*, 29 May 1979; cited in Goodarzi 2006: 297n29.

allegedly anti-religious concept according to Islamic fundamentalism), the IRI has branded nationalism primarily as inferior to Islamism's universality, but also as a reactionary political ideology (as bourgeois, to put it in socialist terms).

### *Islamism(s): The Shia and Pan-Islamic Geopolitical Circles*

There is a great deal of confusion when it comes to terminologies such as Islamism, political Islam and Islamic fundamentalism, especially in Western discussions about Iran in particular and Muslim-majority countries in general. Islam, of course, is one of the world's three monotheistic religions, and as such a social phenomenon.<sup>114</sup> It is the second largest religion with 1.6 billion believers who live all over the world, in Muslim-majority countries as far away as Morocco and Indonesia as well as in other non-Muslim countries such as Hindu-majority India that harbours the world's third-largest Muslim population. Undoubtedly, there is also significant disagreement in academia over the degree of usefulness of any of the above-mentioned terms,<sup>115</sup> while there is consensus that Islam as a political ideology does not take a monolithic form but a multiple one.<sup>116</sup>

To provide more clarity, a necessary distinction can be made between religion-inspired political conservatism, fundamentalism and extremism—whether under the banner of Islam, Christianity, Judaism or Hinduism.<sup>117</sup> To illustrate that difference, Islamic conservatism can be identified with Turkey's AKP (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, Justice and Development Party), which has its social base in a “devout bourgeoisie” combining neo-liberal capitalism and social conservatism.<sup>118</sup> Islamic fundamentalism can embrace pan-regional movements such as the Muslim Brotherhood and, in a more radical form, state ideologies like Saudi Wahhabism—or for the Christian context, we can evoke U.S. neoconservative Evangelicalism as religion-inspired fundamentalism. Religion-inspired extremism, which as form of ultra-fundamentalism embraces violence as a political means, would then include regional political currents like al-Qaeda. In the context of the IRI's élite, we can witness an exclusively Islamist political spectrum, ranging from reformists despite their advocacy of some form of an alleged

<sup>114</sup> See Morady 2011a: 42.

<sup>115</sup> See, for example, *ibid.*: 24.

<sup>116</sup> See, for example, Rostami-Povey 2010: 14–15; Ahmad 2008.

<sup>117</sup> See Achcar 2013b; for the various religion-inspired fundamentalisms, see Ali 2003.

<sup>118</sup> For the AKP, see Gümüşçü & Sert 2009.

“Islamic democracy” (*Mardomsâlâri-e Eslâmi*),<sup>119</sup> to conservatives all the way to extremist currents calling for a non-republican, highly authoritarian, if not totalitarian, “Islamic system”, such as the vigilante militia Ansâr-e Hezbollah.<sup>120</sup> Further to the aforementioned raging controversies over classifying various Islamist strands, there are also vacillations contingent upon socio-economic changes within their respective constituencies.<sup>121</sup>

But what the terms mentioned at the outset generally refer to is a political ideology whose main reference point—for fundamentalists, in a programmatic fashion—is Islam and its “holy texts”. For the fundamentalist strand, Asef Bayat has offered this working definition: ‘ideologies and movements which, notwithstanding their variations, aim in general at establishing an “Islamic order”—a religious state, Islamic laws, and moral codes.’<sup>122</sup> What Islamic fundamentalists desire is to make Muslims (who as human-beings have multiple identities one of which is religious) “Islamic” according to a dogmatic view<sup>123</sup>—or as Aziz Al-Azmeh has referred to this phenomenon as the “super- or over-Islamization” of Muslims by Islamic fundamentalists and Orientalists alike.<sup>124</sup> Related to this is a process of idealizing as well as homogenizing Islam, as Gholam Khiabany stresses in regard to Islamism’s narrative of “the West”:

In the Islamists’ narrative the West is reduced to an imperialistic other, while Islam is celebrated as alternative; the repressive homogenous West is condemned while Islam is idealized. In both respects the extension of a single Islamic umbrella over a heterogeneous and complex collection of histories and practices is a highly political one indeed.<sup>125</sup>

Hardly any of those characteristics of Islamic fundamentalism would apply to Ayatollah Khomeini, Walter Posch argues, specifying that he can rather be considered a populist (a concept to be discussed later). He contends that there were rather his revolutionary followers who liked the designation of fundamentalism, a term that emerged in the U.S. in the wake the “Islamic Revolution”. In the absence of any synonyms in Persian or

<sup>119</sup> See Farhi 1999; Tazmini 2009: 37–38.

<sup>120</sup> See Posch 2010b.

<sup>121</sup> On Egypt’s Muslim Brotherhood, see Gümüşçü 2010.

<sup>122</sup> Bayat 2008: 41. See also Fürtig 2002: 24–28.

<sup>123</sup> Ahmad 2008: 7–10.

<sup>124</sup> Al-Azmeh 2002. See also Kermani 2005b.

<sup>125</sup> Khiabany 2006: 7.

Arabic, they invented two Persian neologisms for “fundamental-ist”: *bonyād-gar* and *osoul-gar*.<sup>126</sup>

However, for matters of simplicity, this study uses the umbrella term “Islamism”.<sup>127</sup> Iran’s Islamist brand is not a purist ideology but nurtured from various ideational sources: nationalism, anti-colonialism, anti-imperialism, Marxism and more specifically within the Islamic context, Shia political thinking and Sufi mysticism. This eclecticism can be witnessed in the writings of pre-revolutionary thinkers such as Jalal Al-e Ahmad (1923–1969) and Ali Shariati (1933–1977)<sup>128</sup> as well as some post-revolutionary academics.<sup>129</sup>

On the basis of religion, the IRI lays claim over the Shia world and more widely the Islamic world. In both orbits it views itself as constituting the core, thus claiming chief authority over those “worlds”.

### *Shia vs. Pan-Islamic Geopolitics*

As to the relevance of Islam and Islamism for the foreign policy of the IRI, the latter sees itself at the centre of two Islamic circles: one Shia, the other pan-Islamic.<sup>130</sup>

Constituting the only state with, on one hand, Shia Islam being the official religion covering almost (yet not entirely) the entire population and, on the other, the Shia clergy assuming state power, the IRI therefore claims exclusive leadership over the Shia Muslim world.<sup>131</sup> Muslims of the Shia confession can be largely found all over south-western Asia: they form a slight majority in Iraq, especially in its oil-rich south, where they had more or less dominated the government after the 2003 Iraq War, and in Kuwait; they largely inhabit southern Lebanon where Hezbollah has throughout the 2000s established itself as the country’s most powerful political organization, even enjoying trans-confessional acceptance due to its military resistance against Israeli military assaults on Lebanese territory

<sup>126</sup> Posch 2005b: 91–92.

<sup>127</sup> This will be done despite the valid criticism levelled against its use as suggesting an inherent kinship between the religion of Islam and a political usurpation thereof.

<sup>128</sup> See Al-e Ahmad 1984. On Shariati, see Rahnema 2000; Nejati 2011: ch. 11, pt. 3.

<sup>129</sup> See, for example, Bidabad 2010a, b, c.

<sup>130</sup> Author’s interview with Hafeznia. See also the discussions offered by Akbarzadeh and Barry (2016), who identify Iranism, Islamism and Shi’ism as key components of Iranian nationalism shaping the Islamic Republic’s foreign policy or “corporate identity”.

<sup>131</sup> See also Taqi Hosseini 2008.

(such as the 2006 war);<sup>132</sup> in Saudi Arabia where the Shia inhabit the oil-rich Eastern Province in a state dominated by rival Sunni Wahhabism; they form the majority in Bahrain where the House of Khalifa, a Sunni royal family, rules and the U.S. Navy's Fifth Fleet is stationed; in Afghanistan and Pakistan where they constitute one-fifth of the population; and in some parts of Central Asia, India and Bangladesh. Moreover, there are confessions that despite being not Shia in the strict sense, have some affinities, such as in Syria where the Allawites, despite forming merely one-tenth of the population, have assumed state power with the Ba'ath Arab Socialist Party after the 1970 military coup; in Sunni-majority Turkey where Alevites are scattered across Anatolia and often find themselves at odds with the Sunni-dominated polity. Hence, we can argue that Shias inhabit geostrategically important locations, particularly along the hydro-carbon-rich shores of the Persian Gulf. Therefore, relying on Classical Geopolitics, some Iranian scholars have argued that Shias effectively occupy the strategically pivotal "rimland" of the Eurasian "heartland".<sup>133</sup>

However, despite the fact that the 2000s have witnessed unprecedented strength of Shia political forces across the region, there are several problems and contradictions with the widely accepted claim about the centrality of an Iranian Shia-based geopolitics. (1) The first problem concerns the geopolitical stakes. The IRI's self-portrayal as a "Shia power" has found its echo in the anti-Iran front's invoking of the geopolitical imagination of a "Shia crescent" spanning from southern Iraq to southern Lebanon, first evoked by King Abdullah of Jordan in December 2004<sup>134</sup> and injected into U.S. foreign-policy thinking as the region's key defining conflict,<sup>135</sup> with others more alarmingly painting the spectre of a looming "Shia empire".<sup>136</sup> All these concepts share the claim that the Shia factor represents the single most important explanatory factor for Iran's post-revolutionary foreign policy that is bent on creating and exploiting a Shia-Sunni divide to further its regional hegemonic aspirations. This view

<sup>132</sup> See, for example, Deeb 2006; Achcar & Warschawski 2007.

<sup>133</sup> See Naderi 2012: 6–8.

<sup>134</sup> See Wright, Robin & Baker, Peter (2004) 'Iraq, Jordan See Threat To Election From Iran: Leaders Warn Against Forming Religious State', *Washington Post*, 4 December, p. A01.

<sup>135</sup> See also Nasr 2006.

<sup>136</sup> See Korinman & Laughland 2007: pt. IV.

has gained some currency with the rise of sectarianism in the region, mainly a result from the U.S.-led occupation of Iraq since 2003.<sup>137</sup>

However, as Charles Tripp has emphasized, the Shia–Sunni divide is more of a myth, as religious differences—however unclear—have been politicized. The rulers of Jordan and Egypt (former President Hosni Mubarak) have actively highlighted such divisions to obtain more money from the U.S. in the fight against an alleged “anti-U.S. Shiism”.<sup>138</sup> Also, Iran’s more moderate elite faction sees the Sunni–Shia rivalry within broader geopolitical conflicts, namely characterized foremost by an imperial *divide et impera* policy, but also driven by the growing post-2003 Iranian–Saudi geopolitical rivalry.<sup>139</sup> Iran’s post-Saddam Hussein Iraq policy has attempted not to elevate the Shia factor as a sectarian tool as Tehran has, in a largely Realist manner, continuously advocated a unified Iraq based on equitable representation of the various ethnicities forming that country.<sup>140</sup> However, as the crisis engulfing Iraq in 2014 has shown, no such outcome was realized, instead the Nouri al-Maliki government failed to integrate Sunnis into the political process,<sup>141</sup> which produced dissatisfaction among many sections of Iraqi society.

(2) Another problem concerns the claim of leadership within Shiism itself. As a predominantly Shia country where the Shia clergy has gained state power following the 1979 revolution, the IRI sees itself at the centre of the Shia world in which Iraq—home to the influential Shia theological schools of Najaf and Karbala—is only given the position of periphery primarily on grounds that the Shia *ulema* does not hold state power in Baghdad. Therefore, Iran’s claim, corroborated by its mainstream geopolitics scholars,<sup>142</sup> is contested especially by Iraqi Shia scholars, who refer to the important theological difference in that the Iranian *Velāyat-e Faqih* principle is largely rejected by Iraqi Shia schools of thought.

(3) The third problem lies in the nature of Shiism itself. As argued in Dabashi’s *Shi’ism: A Religion of Protest*, Shiism’s main political disposition is anti-hegemonic, thus creating stark conflicts once a Shia clergy—as in the case of the IRI—assumes state power.<sup>143</sup> Moreover, questioning Nasr’s

<sup>137</sup> See Luomi 2008; Jarrar & Hicks 2006; Ramadani 2014.

<sup>138</sup> Tripp 2010.

<sup>139</sup> See, for example, Barzegar 2008b.

<sup>140</sup> See Ganji (B.) 2006; Saghafi-Ameri 2006a; Zarif 2003a, 2007a.

<sup>141</sup> Shabani 2014.

<sup>142</sup> Hafeznia & Ahmadi 2010.

<sup>143</sup> Dabashi 2011b. See also Nekuee 2012.

*The Shia Revival* thesis, Dabashi rejects the notion of the ‘multifaceted, polyvocal, worldly, transnational, and cosmopolitan’ culture of Shiism being thus reduced to a ‘one-sided, divisive, sectarian, and factional’ system. He points out that such a perspective, amounting to an ‘imperial reinscription of the Sunni–Shi’i divide [which] is nothing new in the arsenal of old-fashioned colonialism and its (Roman) logic of divide and conquer’, serves the purpose of ‘facilitat[ing] the US military domination of a strategic area’<sup>144</sup>, all the while corroborating the ‘belligerent clericalism’ of the Shia clerical class.<sup>145</sup>

(4) The fourth problem, partly deriving from the first, rests with the tensions between a Shia- and Islam-based geopolitics of the IRI and the question of prioritization. It seems that Tehran, despite all preferences for Shiism, has come to favour a pan-Islamic geopolitics because of two inter-related reasons: (a) As a way not to validate its geopolitical foes’ “Shia crescent” discourse of favouring Shias over Sunnis, the non-sectarian (e.g. its support for the Palestinian Hamas that is Sunni) and the pan-Islamic nature of its policies and worldview has been stressed. (b) The perception of the IRI as the chief protector and vanguard of Shia can potentially undermine its reputation and reach within the Sunni-majority, indeed much larger part of the Islamic world. After all, kept in perspective, as a site for the projection of “soft power”, the pan-Islamic, largely Sunni body of people proves more important as its population is more than ten times of the Shia world’s. In this vein, Ayatollah Khamenei, in two speeches in 2006, stated:

The enemies of Islamic nations are trying to pit us against the threat of neighbors in order to push their agenda of dispute and discord among Islamic nations [...]. However, the reality is that Shiites and Sunnis have throughout history lived peacefully beside each other. They are now united and determined to fight occupiers. [...] The Islamic Revolution is an Islamic and not a Shiite revolution. If our revolution was Shiite and one separated from the Islamic world, they [the enemies] would have never objected to the revolution. The Islamic Revolution has been the most serious defender of Palestinian rights.<sup>146</sup>

<sup>144</sup> See Dabashi 2011a.

<sup>145</sup> Dabashi 2011b: 277–282.

<sup>146</sup> Cited in Hosseini (M.T.) 2008: 64–65.

Iran's claim since the 1980s to constitute the nucleus—*Umm al-Qura*, literally “the mother of all cities”—of the entire Islamic world,<sup>147</sup> as reflected in the Supreme Leader's title “Commander of the Faithful” (*Amir-ol-mo'menin*) or “Commander of the Affairs of the Muslims of the World” (*Vali Amr-e Moslemin-e Jahân*), also bears a potential for conflict. It has time and again important antagonisms with Sunni-majority powers, above all Saudi Arabia, but also Egypt and Turkey.<sup>148</sup>

### *Pan-Islamism's Third-Worldism*

Despite the fact that both pan-Islamism and Third-Worldism share the characteristic of being shaped by the Global North's domination, at first glance it seems that pan-Islamism has favoured resistance to the latter with recourse on religion whereas Third-Worldism, as an extension of socialist thinking, has largely done so in a secular manner (except for South American “liberation theology” where a combination of religion and socialism was used to further goals for social and political justice).

Having refused to recognize the international system as one dominated by oppressive superpowers (whether the “capitalist” U.S. or the “communist” Soviet Union), the IRI has since its inception theorized world politics on ideological grounds, separating the “home of Islam” (*dar ul-Islam*) from the “home of non-belief” (*dar ul-kufr*). However, as the post-revolutionary concept of the “export of the revolution” demonstrates, the IRI's *Weltanschauung* transcends the Islamic world to encompass the world's “dispossessed”.<sup>149</sup> In Ayatollah Khomeini's words, reaching beyond the Muslim nations, Iran had to ‘export our revolution to the world’ and ‘set aside the thought that we do not export our revolution, because Islam does not regard various Islamic countries differently and is the supporter of all the oppressed’.<sup>150</sup> As witnessed in the pre-revolutionary discourse, the Islamic *mostazafân–mostakbarân* (the oppressed/weakened/disherited—the oppressors/arrogant) dichotomy borrows key political beliefs and concepts, such as class struggle, from Marxism-inspired Third-Worldism.<sup>151</sup> Accordingly, Khomeini's Islamist discourse can in an idealized fashion be transmuted into advocating the “export” of an

<sup>147</sup> Khomeini 2013.

<sup>148</sup> Posch 2013a: 12.

<sup>149</sup> Author's interview with Hafeznia.

<sup>150</sup> Cited in Ehteshami 1995: 131.

<sup>151</sup> See Khajesarvi & Ghorbani 2014: 66–67.

emancipatory anti-colonial liberation struggle as a way to free the world's colonized, "the wretched of the earth" (to speak with Frantz Fanon whose 1961 book with the same title was translated by none other than Ali Shariati)<sup>152</sup> or the proletarian masses (to speak in Marxist terms) from the exploitative chains of the colonizers or the bourgeois capitalists.<sup>153</sup> (Related to this discussion will be the upcoming section dealing with the relationship between Third-Worldism and Islamism in the face of imperialism.)

We can therefore conclude that some facets of both nationalism and Islamism share core assumptions of Third-Worldism, the latter being the focus of the next section.

### *Third-Worldism: The Fountainhead of the Independence Leitmotiv*

Largely as an extension of socialism in its internationalist outlook, Third-Worldism as a world-historical idea and movement has not been free from contradictions contingent upon the specific historical setting,<sup>154</sup> the reason why the following discussion will chiefly rely on basic Third-Worldist concepts and ideas. Shared with other peoples of the Global South, Third-Worldism is nurtured by Iranians' collective memory of external influence infringing upon their political and economic self-determination.<sup>155</sup> Such a view was held not only by socialists (to whom Third-Worldism is most closely associated) but also by nationalist as well as Islamist thinkers. After many decades of great-power interference in Iranian domestic affairs, the peak of undermining Iranian sovereignty and independence was reached when in 1953 the CIA orchestrated a military *coup d'état* that toppled the nationalist government of Mossadeq and reinstalled a monarchical dictatorship. However, it is important to note that the coup succeeded not least because of internal collaborators among Iran's clergy who were likewise

<sup>152</sup> Fanon 1963. Shariati translated Fanon's work to introduce it to Iranian revolutionary circles in the diaspora. On 17 January 1961, Shariati was arrested in Paris during a demonstration in honour of Patrice Lumumba, a hero of the anti-colonial struggle, who was murdered on that same day at the hands of the CIA in collaboration with the Belgian royal house. To honour Lumumba, the IRI has named a street in central Tehran after him, which is located next to the Jalal Al-e Ahmad Expressway. For a discussion on Shariati's socialism, see Rahimi 2014.

<sup>153</sup> See also Adib-Moghaddam 2006: 24; 2007: 63; Kepel 2003: 71–73.

<sup>154</sup> See, for example, Berger 2004.

<sup>155</sup> On memories of economic exploitation in the case of Iran, see Pesaran 2011: 22–27.

opposed to Mossadeq's nationalist agenda.<sup>156</sup> Ever since, Mohammad-Reza Shah Pahlavi was pejoratively called the "American king", thus portraying him as a puppet of an external superpower. Ultimately Third-Worldism, by placing Iran within the history of the Global South, seeks to put an end to political, economic and cultural subordination to colonial powers. To break away from that colonial legacy, it then postulates an independent path that hails an emancipatory development pattern in all those afore-mentioned areas.

Although Third-Worldism made a forceful appearance with the IRI, the pre-revolutionary Iranian state was not free from it. For instance, upon the initiative of Algerian President Houari Boumédiène, the presidents of Venezuela and Mexico as well as the Shah joined a request made to the UN of holding a special session on international economic development.<sup>157</sup>

### *Third-World Nationalism*

Third-World nationalism constitutes the main political ideology of the post-World War II process of de-colonization, destined to end colonial rule and replace it with national self-determination. In that context, nationalism has been seen as a progressive ideology powerful enough to serve as a tool for popular mobilization for the revolutionary project of de-colonization. In fact, in much of the world the European exclusivist idea of the nation-state and with it nationalism was radically transformed into that afore-mentioned sense and as such established itself in international law and society ("global idea of nationhood"<sup>158</sup>) as a basically anti-colonial concept. The concept of nation developed in Europe while she was

in the process of achieving world dominance. Outside of Europe, however, the concept of nation has often functioned very differently. In some respects, in fact, one might even say that the function of the concept of nation is inverted when deployed among subordinated rather than dominant groups. Stated most boldly, it appears that *whereas the concept of nation promotes*

<sup>156</sup> For a different reading on Mossadeq, the *coup* and anti-imperialism, see Ansari 2012: 124–140.

<sup>157</sup> Berger 2004: 24. However, this episode is from the more moderate phase of Third-Worldism in the context of the UN Declaration of a New International Economic Order (NIEO).

<sup>158</sup> Kurzman 2005.

*stasis and restoration in the hands of the dominant, it is a weapon for change and revolution in the hands of the subordinated.*<sup>159</sup>

Thus, we can speak of a progressive face of nationalism, what Hardt and Negri have referred to as “subaltern nationalism”.<sup>160</sup>

In mid-twentieth-century Iran, the intellectual debates bore similarities to those dominant throughout the Global South at the height of decolonization. Third-Worldism aimed at carving out (geo-)political space within a bipolar structure in world politics towards creating an alternative to U.S.-led Western capitalist and the Soviet-led Eastern communist blocs by heeding the idea of an anti-colonial and anti-imperialist “third camp”. By the mid-1950s, non-alignment became a viable concept in international relations, hailed at the 1955 Afro-Asian Conference in Bandung (Indonesia), with the ensuing period until 1975 being dubbed across the Global South as the “Bandung era”.<sup>161</sup>

The roots of the Iranian Revolution are ideational and material, domestic and international—all of which can be covered by the analytical repertoire of Third-Worldism, or for that matter socialism or Marxism. On the material side, the early 1970s witnessed a boost in the geopolitical standing of the Shah. In 1971, Great Britain withdraws its forces from the Persian Gulf after having announced it in 1968, thus paving the way for greater influence by Iran in the shaping of Persian Gulf geopolitics.<sup>162</sup> In 1972, U.S. President Richard Nixon promises the Shah limitless purchase of U.S. conventional weapons of all kinds. A year later, during the “oil shock” of 1973–1974, the price of oil quadruples, with Iran’s oil revenues skyrocketing from less than \$1bn in 1971 to \$18bn in 1975. This prompts an all-time record budget surplus of \$2bn in 1974, which is however quickly depleted by massive arms purchases from the U.S. worth \$6bn by 1977 (with \$12bn on order). The Shah saw his ambition to make Iran one of the top five conventional military powers of the world fulfilled when the U.S. de facto designated him as the “policeman” of the Persian Gulf.<sup>163</sup> ‘Many Iranians saw this surrogacy of the shah’s regime as a sign of Iran’s complete subservience to the United States and its loss of independence’,

<sup>159</sup> Hardt & Negri 2000: 106 (emphasis in the original).

<sup>160</sup> Ibid.: 105–109.

<sup>161</sup> See Nejati 2011: ch. 1, pt. 5; Amin 2006: ch. 5.

<sup>162</sup> See Alvandi 2012.

<sup>163</sup> Ramazani 1989: 203. On Iran’s arms purchases, see Nejati 2011: ch. 12.

notes Ramazani.<sup>164</sup> Iranians' revolutionary will was therefore a result of that depletion of national revenues tightly knit to the Shah regime's international role and was exacerbated by the lack of political freedom in a country marked by extreme socio-economic imbalances, thus turning 'the revolution of rising expectations [...] into a revolution of rising alienation'.<sup>165</sup> As a result, the Shah regime seemed to unite all ills in a Third-Worldist/socialist sense: uneven socio-economic development combined with subservience to the leading imperial power.

On the ideational level, these themes were reflected upon with the publication of two works being instrumental in shaping Iran's revolutionary discourse: in 1962, Jalal Al-e Ahmad's *Gharbzadegi* (Westtoxification, or Occidentosis)<sup>166</sup> and in 1976 Ali Shariati's series of articles entitled *Bâzgasht beh khish* ("Return to oneself") are published, both of which reflective of the anti-colonial sentiment generated by the "American king".<sup>167</sup> Those two narratives, Adib-Moghaddam holds, 'represented the apotheosis of the socialist, "third-worldist" and revolutionary-Islamic *Zeitgeist* dominating Iranian society during the 1970s'.<sup>168</sup> In *Gharbzadegi*, Al-e Ahmad captured the spirit of socialist Third-Worldism when describing the world as being divided into

two poles or extremes [...]. One pole is held by the sated—the wealthy, the powerful, the makers and exporters of manufactures. The other pole is left to the hungry—the poor, the impotent, the importers and consumers. The beat of progress is in the ascending part of the world, and the pulse of stagnation is in the moribund part of the world.<sup>169</sup>

He then goes on to argue against both Cold War superpowers (arguably a precursor to the revolution's slogan "neither Eastern nor Western"), eventually accusing them of complicity in suppressing the rest of the world. Importantly, his argument is ostensibly materialist and squarely placed in the then universal struggle against colonialism:

<sup>164</sup> Ibid.

<sup>165</sup> Ibid.: 203–204.

<sup>166</sup> Al-e Ahmad 1984. In many ways, *Gharbzadegi* is a precursor of Said's *Orientalism* (see Hamid Algar's Introduction in Al-e Ahmad 1984: 15).

<sup>167</sup> See Adib-Moghaddam 2007: 49–53.

<sup>168</sup> Ibid.: 52.

<sup>169</sup> Al-e Ahmad 1984: 28–29.

Thus the day is past when we could divide the world into two blocs, East and West, or communist and noncommunist. And although the constitutions of most of the world's governments begin with this great whitewash of the twentieth century, the flirtation of the United States and Soviet Russia (the two supposed unchallenged pivots of the two blocs) over the Suez Canal or Cuba showed that the masters of the camps can sit quite comfortably at the same table. The same may be said of the Nuclear Test Ban Treaty and other happenings. Thus our age, besides being no longer the age of class conflicts within borders or of national revolutions, is no longer the age of clashing "isms" and ideologies. One must see what would-be corporate colonists and what supportive governments are secretly plotting under cover of every riot, coup d'état [*sic*], or uprising in Zanzibar, Syria, or Uruguay; one can no longer see in the regional wars of our time even the ostensible contests of various beliefs. Nowadays, many not only see through the cover of the Second World War to the expansionism of the two contending alliances' industries, but see the underlying struggles over sugar, diamonds, and oil, respectively in the cases of Cuba, the Congo, and the Suez Canal or Algeria. Many see in the bloodshed in Cyprus, Zanzibar, Aden, or Vietnam the establishment of a bridgehead designed to secure commerce, the foremost determinant of the politics of states.<sup>170</sup>

As noted earlier, the rejection of both superpower blocs was seen as a precondition to assert one's independence. Furthermore, infuriated by the legacy of Iran's 1901 oil concession to the British, Al-e Ahmad deplored Western imperialism's dealings with a corrupt domestic élite that received a small portion of the oil revenues otherwise overwhelmingly pocketed by the former, thereby impeding national development:

Once you have given economic and political control of your country to foreign concerns, they know what to sell you, or at least what not to sell you. Because they naturally seek to sell you their manufacturers in perpetuity, it is best that you remain forever in need of them, and God save the oil reserves. They take away the oil and give you whatever you want in return—from soup to nuts, even grain. This enforced trade even extends to cultural matters, to letters, to discourse.<sup>171</sup>

<sup>170</sup> Ibid.: 29.

<sup>171</sup> Ibid.: 62–63.

As such, Al-e Ahmad's anti-colonial treatise shares the spirit of his intellectual Third-World counterparts of the time.<sup>172</sup> A decade earlier, Aimé Césaire had published his *Discours sur le colonialisme* (1950), a "Third World manifesto" that unravels the brutal impact of colonialism and capitalism as well as the hypocrisy within the Western discourse on civilization and progress.<sup>173</sup> Shariati's *Bāzgasht beh khish* (1976) echoes the message of Césaire's book-length poem *Cahier d'un retour au pays natal* (1939, also translated to Persian)<sup>174</sup>, criticizing and even rejecting the West, while making the call to ascertain one's own cultural wealth.<sup>175</sup> Heavily influenced by the Leftist intelligentsia while they were in France, both Shariati's and Césaire's works impacted the writings of Iranian Marxists in the pre-revolutionary period.<sup>176</sup> Echoing the work of Al-e Ahmad's *Gharbzadegi*, Shariati's ideology coupled socialism with Islamic liberation theology, ultimately inspiring the 1965 creation of the MKO. In fact, to little surprise, *Gharbzadegi* has been identified as the dominant intellectual discourse in pre- and post-revolutionary Iran.<sup>177</sup>

*Third-Worldism and Islamism in the Face of Imperialism:  
From Revolutionary Alliance to Imperialist Triumph*

### The Revolutionary, Anti-colonial Impetus

Ultimately providing the mix for the Khomeinist revolutionary movement, Islamism merged with Third-Worldism to become a sort of Islamic

<sup>172</sup> See Prashad 2008: 78–94.

<sup>173</sup> See Césaire 2000.

<sup>174</sup> For the English translation, see Césaire 1969. The translation by Mahmoud Kiânoush bears the title *Daftar-e Bāzgasht be Zād-Boum*.

<sup>175</sup> See Behnam 2002: 188–190. As 1951-born Dabashi (2014) recounts: '[M]y generation of Iranians grew up on the poetry of Mahmoud Darwish, Ahmad Shamlou, Faiz Ahmadi Faiz, Aime Césaire [*sic*], Nazem Hekmat, Pablo Neruda, Vladimir Mayakovski, almost entirely oblivious to their Arab, Iranian, Pakistani, Turkish, African, Latin American, or Russian origins. These poets formed a liberating space out of their emotive universe, and in reading their work we did not think we had crossed any borders. Quite to the contrary: We were framed and freed in their poetry into a liberating recognition of who and what we were. Against the persistent colonial and imperial machination to instigate separatist movements to divide so as to rule us better, these poets defied the postcolonial fiction of nation-states and brought us closer to each other in the poetics of our resistance to tyranny and injustice.'

<sup>176</sup> See Shahidian 2002: 138–139.

<sup>177</sup> Boroujerdi 1992.

liberation theology, the origins of which can be traced back to the Constitutional Revolution:

Although the support of the clerical class for the constitutional revolution was not unanimous, and such prominent clerics as Sheykh Fazlollah Nuri (1842–1909) actively and adamantly opposed it, the progressive elements within the clergy were chiefly responsible for the success of the revolution. Although Seyyed Abdullah Behbahani and Seyyed Muhammad Tabataba'i led the revolutionary uprising against absolutist monarchy, the principal theoretical tract of the period was written by Sheykh Muhammad Hossein Na'ini (1860–1936). His *Tanbih al-Ummah wa Tanzih al-Millah* ["The Admonition and Refinement of the People"—AFN] (1909) is one of the most significant political texts of the early twentieth century, articulating a decidedly Shi'i anti-colonial politics. Na'ini was as much active in the course of the constitutional revolution of 1906–1911 as he was in Iraq against the British, who in 1920 had taken colonial control of that country [...].

Na'ini's *Tanbih al-Ummah wa Tanzih al-Millah* went through many successive editions, one of which, published in 1955 had an introduction by a radical cleric named Mahmoud Taleqani (1910–1979), who later became a leading revolutionary activist in the decades leading to the 1979 Islamic revolution in Iran. Almost coterminous with Taleqani was yet another major clerical revolutionary, Ayatollah Motahhari (1920–1979), who wrote extensively on a vast spectrum of social, political, and philosophical issues. On a separate track, and equally important in their revolutionary impacts, were the writings of Jalal Al-e Ahmad and Ali Shari'ati (1933–1977). Banking on both these tracks was the single-minded determination of the revolutionary ascetic Ayatollah Khomeini (1900–1989), who ultimately succeeded in bringing down the Pahlavi monarchy.<sup>178</sup>

Similar anti-colonial alliances were to be found in other parts of the Global South, going as far back as the 1920s:

In Indonesia, the Marxists, the Islamists, and the nationalists formed the main opponents of Dutch rule, and Sukarno argued that all three must consider nationalism to be "as broad as the air" in a manner similar to the Congress Party in India and the Kuomintang in China.<sup>179</sup>

<sup>178</sup> Dabashi 2008a: 47. See also Dabashi 2011a.

<sup>179</sup> Prashad 2007: 35.

In the early 1940s, at a time when in Iran socialist ideas were dominant, “Islamic socialism” emerged as a ‘political movement with an egalitarian, socialist ideology [whose] short manifesto entitled “God-Worshipping Socialists” [Socialistes-e *Khodâ-Parast*—AFN] inspired a range of organizations that in turn helped attract a large number of religious intellectuals (mainly students) to the 1977–1979 Islamic Revolution’.<sup>180</sup> This movement also argued that ‘long before Marx, [Prophet] Muhammad had been a proletarian revolutionary’.<sup>181</sup> Yet, while rejecting Marxism’s materialism, they were attracted by socialism’s revolutionary agenda whose absence they lamented for Islam-inspired ideologies.<sup>182</sup> In fact, concepts promoted by Iranian Marxists, such as social equality, revolution, colonialism and imperialism, had entered “Islamic–Iranian” thinking. Marxist ideas of anti-imperialism and the like had allowed for the emergence of ideas such as *bâzgasht beh khish* and the necessity of revolution within an ‘indigenous ideological framework’. All this also ‘paved the way for the ideologization of religious thinking and the increased politicization of Islam’.<sup>183</sup> In this vein, it was believed that ‘concepts such as equality, equality and fraternity have been best introduced and discussed by Islam. Socialism as an ideology was in fact a practical instruction manual for Islam’s teachings.’ Hence, anyone who opposed the process towards ‘socialist rule’ was deemed a *Kafir*, a disbeliever, as that route was obviously one sanctioned by God.<sup>184</sup>

However, while many religious activists were attracted by the idea of socialism during the decolonization era with its revolutionary *Zeitgeist*, in the 1950s Islamic fundamentalists were fierce enemies of the nationalists. With the radicalization of the nationalists in the 1960s, they felt a need to adapt their economic ideas. When the left-nationalist period faded away and in the context of the global neoliberal turn, these Islamists shifted away from their flirting with left-wing economic ideas back into the free-market ideology that can be seen as more compatible with their overall ideology. Finally, the collapse of the Soviet-led “socialist bloc” paved the way for some strands of Islamism (e.g. Islamists in Iran, Egypt and Turkey) to embrace liberal economic ideas more openly, including neoliberalism.

<sup>180</sup> Sadri 2008: 456–457. See Rahnema 2000: ch. 3.

<sup>181</sup> Milani (A.) 2009.

<sup>182</sup> Khajesarvi & Ghorbani 2014: 66.

<sup>183</sup> Mir-Mousavi, Ali (2005/1384) *Eslâm, Sonnat, Dolat-e Moderne* [Islam, tradition and modern government], Tehran: Nashr-e Ney, p. 333; cited in Khajesarvi & Ghorbani 2014: 66.

<sup>184</sup> Khajesarvi & Ghorbani 2014: 67.

### Incongruity of Islamist Anti-imperialism

Now, combining our discussion between political and geopolitical cultures, it can be instructive to examine the ways in which the Left and Islamists have interacted. Here, we can identify several variations. When viewing Islamism, Leftist groups vacillate between opposing it due to its perceived reactionary social, cultural and political agenda, and embracing it as ally in the fight against imperialism.<sup>185</sup> Vice versa, when Islamists view the Left, they either dismiss the latter's alleged lack of social values or embrace its devotion to fight the common enemy, Western imperialism. When it comes to the question of anti-imperialism and Islamism, the picture we have just painted suggests anti-imperialism to be a natural political project for Islamists.

However, some observations drawn from recent and contemporary history lead to a different conclusion. (1) *The case of a "common cause"*: As witnessed in the modern history of the WANA region, there have been many instances of a *de facto* alliance between Islamism and imperialist powers, which were based upon both sides' desire to suppress any progressive (secular nationalist and Leftist) alternative to their domination domestically and internationally, respectively. Cases in point are the "hegemonic pacts" between various Islamic fundamentalist sheikhdoms with first the British and then American empires (above all, the case of Saudi Arabia); the mid-1979 U.S. initiative to create a pool of pan-Islamist fundamentalists, the Mujahideen (later to be known as al-Qaeda, "the base", or Taliban), as a way to provoke a Soviet invasion of Afghanistan at a time when the communist People's Democratic Party of Afghanistan was ruling; the Western support for Muslim Brotherhood (MB) organizations (from Hamas to the Egyptian MB) as a way to keep more progressive and anti-imperial forces at bay.<sup>186</sup> (An illustration of this, in the context of the 1953 coup in Iran, will follow shortly.)

(2) *The case of "co-existing hegemonies"*: If one views capitalism and imperialism as intimately connected and mutually dependent phenomena, the positions taken in the sphere of political economy becomes crucial. It has been widely noted that the social base of many Islamist movements consists of a devout bourgeoisie with their economic policy geared towards preserving private property. This has been the case from the Islamist-bazaar alliance of the embryonic Islamic Republic up to more recent forms

<sup>185</sup> Bayat 2008: 38.

<sup>186</sup> See Ahmad 2008; Amin 2001: 189–193; Achcar 2013a: 118–125, 228–236.

of “neoliberal Islamism” denoting Islamism’s accommodation of neoliberal capitalism. While Islamist parties usually engage in social welfare and charity programmes, which is the prime reason why they have enjoyed support among the poor and beyond religious sections of society, their above-mentioned political-economic views do not call into question the economic structure that breeds those socio-economic inequalities in the first place. Therefore, for Islamism the spectre of alliance-making with internal and external capitalist forces emerges.<sup>187</sup> Importantly, the attachment to capitalism is supposedly counterbalanced by a populism which lashes out against the top echelons of society without actually undermining the latter’s economic interests, as a way to garner support among larger sections (to be discussed in more detail).

(3) Such populism extends to the foreign-policy front when Islamist forces content themselves to a mere rhetorical condemnation of U.S. and Israeli policies in the region, while action on the policy front remains absent (such as in the case of not calling into question the so-called peace treaty between some Arab states and Israel, as could be witnessed with the MB administration led by President Mohamed Morsi (30 June 2012 to 3 July 2013) in Cairo).

As a result, Islamism’s perception in the West seems to heavily rely on those premises: when engaged in weakening anti-imperial secular, Leftist or nationalist forces, thereby helping to sustain the political-economic and foreign-policy status quo (i.e. being a *de facto* ally for imperial projects of political and economic hegemony), it was often courted by the West;<sup>188</sup> but when positioning itself against imperialism, it often was conversely demonized by the West.

Despite these broad tendencies, this multifaceted relationship between Islamism(s) and imperialism needs to be analysed in concrete historical settings. As a political lesson, we can concur with Asef Bayat who, echoing Maziar Behrooz’s critique on the failure of the Iranian Left,<sup>189</sup> closes his discussion on the relationship between Islamism and imperialism by calling for a truly emancipatory objective of any anti-imperialist enterprise:

Any struggle, however heroic, that replaces imperialist supremacy with domestic forms of oppression will not serve the interests of the Muslim

<sup>187</sup> On the latter, see, for example, Achcar 2013a; Saif & Abu Rumman 2012; El-Houdaiby 2012: 132–133.

<sup>188</sup> For the post-“Arab Spring” period, see, for example, Elshokabi & Martín Muñoz 2010.

<sup>189</sup> Behrooz 2009.

majority. For decades in the Middle East, the majority of people and liberatory ideas have already been caught in the crossfire between nationalism and colonialism, Baathism and imperialism, and now Islamism and neoliberal empire, from which they are attempting to exit. Thus, the central question for progressive forces is not just how to challenge the empire, but how to realize liberation; for the ultimate end is not simply anti-imperialism, but emancipation.<sup>190</sup>

### **Reappraising the 1953 *Coup*: Third-World Nationalism as Thorn in the Side of Imperialism and Islamism**

The 1953 coup is incisive as it illustrates the stakes held by imperial powers and Islamists alike. Both were wary of the particular politics associated with the Mossadeq movement. As for the Islamists, they viewed the latter as a challenge to their political standing in the country. As Abrahamian explains:

His [Mossadeq's] main ideological contribution was of course nationalism. He wanted Iran to be independent and not become a semi-colony of the British. [...] He was espousing Iranian national interest. [...] he was very much a constitutionalist who believed in individual rights and the rule of law. He refused to exploit religion for political purposes. He obviously had religious sentiments but he was very careful not to resort to religion. He was a child of the enlightenment. He was willing to adopt Western values and create Western institutions. He was an adamant supporter of the Constitution. That is why he was even willing to accept monarchy under the umbrella of the Iranian Constitution. This combination of belief in democracy and in the broader sense, of avoiding religion into politics makes him an outstanding political figure.<sup>191</sup>

Despite Mossadeq's attempts to maintain cordial ties with Iran's religious community, his reservations towards Islamist political stances made him a target for the latter, some of whom even collaborated in the coup against him. In a 1980 speech, Khomeini expressed the Islamists' repugnance for and opposition to Mossadeq's politics: 'He [Mossadeq] was also not a Muslim [...] and I said [...] he will be slapped [in the face] and it did not take long that he was slapped [in the 1953 coup—*AFN*] and if he had lasted, he would have slapped Islam.'<sup>192</sup>

<sup>190</sup> Bayat 2008: 51–52.

<sup>191</sup> Cited in Amini (F.) 2013.

<sup>192</sup> Cited in Norouzi 2009 (quote translated by the same).

Regarding the interests of imperialism, Abrahamian, relying on previously secret documents on the 1951–53 Iran–UK/U.S. back-door negotiations on the question of oil nationalization (the so-called oil crisis), comes to question the two dominant prisms through which the coup episode had conventionally been viewed: (1) It was Mossadeq’s intransigence that prevented a mutually agreed deal to materialize. (2) The coup was a result of the Cold War in which Washington’s prime interest was to avoid a communist take-over of Iran, allegedly facilitated by Mossadeq.<sup>193</sup> In fact, Abrahamian argues that both narratives have been a mere pretext, for the real story concerned the issue of resource control, something that the UK and the U.S. were adamant not to hand over to Iran, despite their public diplomacy that suggested otherwise. This is why the coup should be firmly located ‘inside the conflict between imperialism and nationalism, between First and Third Worlds, between North and South, between developed industrial economies and underdeveloped countries dependent on exporting raw materials’.<sup>194</sup> While Britain wanted to keep its control over Iranian oil via its Anglo–Iranian Oil Company, U.S. involvement was due to the fear that Mossadeq could set a precedence that would spread across “the Third World” and thus endanger U.S. global domination:

The United States, thus, participated in the coup not so much because of the danger of communism as the repercussions that oil nationalization could have on such faraway places as Indonesia and South America, not to mention the rest of the Persian Gulf. Control over oil production did eventually pass from Western companies to local states in the early 1970s, but such a loss was deemed unacceptable in the early 1950s.<sup>195</sup>

Hence, this episode serves as illustration of the danger Third-World nationalism poses to imperialism:

[T]heir [U.S. and UK] main concern was not so much about communism as about the dangerous repercussions that oil nationalization could have throughout the world. It was precisely because of this that many Iranians admired—and continue to admire—Mossadeq. They see him as a national idol, equating him with Gandhi in India, Nasser in Egypt, Sukarno in Indonesia, Tito in Yugoslavia, Nkrumah in Ghana, and Lumumba in the

<sup>193</sup> See, for example, Kinzer 2003.

<sup>194</sup> Abrahamian 2013/1392: 4.

<sup>195</sup> Ibid.

Congo. In the age of anticolonial nationalism after World War II, Mossadeq, together with Gandhi and Nasser, appeared as trailblazers in the Third World. They remain so to the present day.<sup>196</sup>

In conclusion, we can maintain the potential wide-ranging material implications of ideational stances, in terms of political economy and geopolitics, as illustrated in the cases of Islamism or Third-World nationalism.

*Independence as Leitmotiv: Distillate from the Triad  
of Ideational Sources*

The purpose of the above discussion has been to highlight the fallacy in the bulk of the literature about Iranian foreign-policy behaviour that identifies two major ideological sources: Iranian nationalism and revolutionary Islamism. However, this duality alone of ideological sources falls short in explaining the entire relevant spectrum of ideational motivations. As cases in point, Iran's growing ties with left-wing governments in Latin America throughout the 2000s and the importance attached to the NAM neither have an Iranian nor an Islamic point of reference. Rather they symbolize an oftentimes neglected *third* ideological source, namely Third-Worldism. The latter's omission, at least in most Western accounts, could arguably be a product of the field's Western-centrism which ignores centuries of Western colonialism and the reactions it engendered throughout the Global South. In fact, the importance of Third-Worldism lies in Iran's modern history with its many instances of foreign interference.

Undoubtedly, the most significant common denominator of that ideological triad is the desire for independence—*esteqlâl*. Nurtured from the stated historical experience of colonial modernity, the theme of political independence came to run like a *Leitmotiv* through the IRI's constitution.<sup>197</sup> Or in Ramazani's summarizing words:

For Iran, the past is always present. A paradoxical combination of pride in Iranian culture and a sense of victimization have created a fierce sense of independence and a culture of resistance to dictation and domination by any foreign power among the Iranian people. Iranian foreign policy is rooted in these widely held sentiments.<sup>198</sup>

<sup>196</sup> Ibid.: 4–5.

<sup>197</sup> Ramazani 2008; Schirazi 1998.

<sup>198</sup> Ramazani 2009: 12.

During the Iraq–Iran War, Iran’s independence was forcefully put to test and ideologically as well as materially the emphasis was laid on self-reliance. In fact, independence—arguably the key Iranian foreign-policy *Leitmotive* throughout much of its modern history until the present—cannot be comprehended without reference to Third-Worldism.

Next to the independence principle, the sense of Iranian *grandeur* is arguably the second most important feature of the Iranian worldview. Constituting the most salient common denominator between the powerful narratives of nationalism and Islamism, both of which situate Iran at the centre of their respective geopolitical realms (from “Iranian civilization” to “the Islamic world”), Iran is viewed as a significant global player. Such belief in Iranian greatness helps to explain the surprising degree of continuity between the monarchy and the Islamic Republic’s foreign policy and worldview. On the one hand, the Shah famously wanted to turn Iran into the “Japan of the Middle East” while showing increasing self-confidence if not arrogance towards the civilizationally allegedly inferior West. On the other hand, diverse spectres of the IRI’s political élite display the same sense of importance, from President Khatami’s advocacy of a “dialogue among civilization” effectively ascribing “Islamic Iran” a vanguard role in that project,<sup>199</sup> to President Ahmadinejad’s declared readiness for Iran to design a “new Global Management” to solve the world’s problems, and even Ayatollah Khamenei’s belief that Iran will finally subdue the U.S. superpower (see Chap. 4). It has to be pointed out, however, that such claims are largely delusional as Iran lacks the necessary resources to assume the role of a global player. Here, comparison with the late Libyan leader Muammar Gaddafi with his pan-African and pan-Islamic ambitions can be made. This is why Hafeznia cautions that a first look at the expositions of Iran’s aspirations suggests a gap between its geopolitical ambition (*edde’â*) and its geopolitical weight (*vazn*).<sup>200</sup>

## CONCLUSION

Attempting to provide an account of Iranian geopolitical imaginations (or cultures), the chapter suggested the exploration of the major politico-ideological formations and their respective worldviews. Investigating the roots of modern Iranian political culture, *Part A* maintained that out of

<sup>199</sup> See Farhi & Lotfian 2012: n4.

<sup>200</sup> Author’s interview with Hafeznia; Abedin 2011: 617.

Iran's experience with colonial incursions and interferences, its desire for independence and the concomitant foreign-policy principle of non-alignment emerged. The experience with colonialism coupled with domestic despotism engendered, by the early twentieth century, Iranians' resistance that was sustained by three distinct yet mutually reinforcing major politico-ideological formations, namely nationalism, socialism and Islamism. This triad informed Iranians' struggle for democracy from the Constitutional Revolution to the Iranian Revolution in 1979. With respect to post-revolutionary Iran, the section closed with an investigation of the fate of the three major politico-ideological formations with the inception of the Islamic Republic. Recounting the initial post-revolutionary years, it observed a process of Islamization of both political and foreign-policy culture to the detriment of the other two politico-ideological formations. The hegemonic Islamist narrative integrated features from the two other competing ideologies of nationalism and Third-Worldism when it served the IRI's domestic or international agenda, while sidelining any features that might have jeopardized its hegemony and rule. There, we have shown the material stakes behind ideological advocacies in international affairs during the 1980s, thereby calling into question a Constructivist account of agent behaviour.

While nationalism was often easily embedded within the hegemonic discourse mainly as a way to garner popular support for the regime, the relationship towards socialism was much more conflict-ridden as it concerned the very politico-economic foundations of the new power élite. To this day, as shall be detailed in Chap. 3, socialism's insistence on social equality and a just distribution of wealth, although being shared by some strands of Islamism, collides with the realities of the "real existing Islamism" with its concentration of wealth in the hands of the IRI's power élite and the pursuit of neoliberal economic policies (above all, clientelistic privatizations and capital being favoured over labour). In terms of political freedom—being the second principle in the most famous revolutionary slogan of "*Esteqlâl, Âzâdi, Jomhouri-e Eslâmi*" ("independence, freedom, Islamic Republic"), the cosmopolitan and pluralistic disposition of Third-Worldism or democratic nationalism has since the inception of the IRI been sacrificed for allegedly more imminent goals, such as anti-imperialism—a process immensely aided by the very real imperialist interventions with its height in the 1953 *coup d'état* against Prime Minister Mossadeq.

*Part B* then sketched out the geopolitical imaginations of each of the identified major Iranian politico-ideological formations, namely nationalism, Islamism and Third-Worldism (the latter stemming from the socialist politico-ideological formation). The section engaged in a non-exhaustive comparative account of each of the three geopolitical imaginations, delineating their at times exclusive, at times overlapping worldviews. It also noted the place of each of these geopolitical imaginations in the IRI's foreign-policy outlook. It showed that despite some divergences the IRI's worldview, while favouring the Islamist worldview(s)—albeit they themselves are diverse and sometimes contradictory as the discussion of Shia vs. pan-Islamic geopolitics demonstrated—included important elements of the other two formations. Most notably, the IRI has included nationalism's insistence of the uniqueness of Iranian culture and also *grandeur*, as well as Third-Worldism's anti-imperialist posture and its inherent striving for independence. As a result, the chapter demonstrated the insufficiency to limit any understanding and explanation of the worldview of the IRI to its Islamist and nationalist elements. It rather argued that without taking into account the third pillar, that is, Third-Worldism, which after all is the primary source theorizing the principle of independence and the paradigm of development, a full comprehension of Iran's worldview is hard to attain. In other words, it is only through including the legacy of Iran's historical encounters with colonialism—and for that matter, its contemporary encounter with what it may see as imperialism—that one can better understand its contemporary behaviour towards the world.

Theoretically, the chapter engaged with the question of the driving forces behind an agent's behaviour in foreign affairs. Following a Constructivist approach, we made the effort to identify ideas that may be forceful enough to become norms in foreign policy and thus assume structural power. To explore such ideas that inherently have a geopolitical dimension, we have suggested to investigate geopolitical imaginations (or cultures) as they emanate from Iran's modern political cultures (or politico-ideological formations) and their respective worldviews. Besides the common denominator of independence that emerged from the triad of Iran's main political cultures as geopolitical *Leitmotiv*, that is, an idea assuming structural power by acquiring the status of norm that shapes grand-strategic preferences mirrored in the non-alignment principle, we have discussed the mutual relationship between each of the geopolitical imaginations (or cultures) identified. By doing so, we paid attention to an issue left unsatisfactorily unresolved by Constructivist theory, namely in

how far ideas espoused by agents might be related to—influenced or even driven by—material considerations. Therefore, we identified some material repercussions of each of the geopolitical cultures as they pertain to material gains or losses externally (contingent upon privileged geopolitical orientations, or grand-strategic preferences, that structure the outside world along a friends/foes scheme, which defines choices regarding alliance-building or conversely enmity) or internally (by assessing the domestic calculations and repercussions of geopolitical advocacy as they affect domestic power relations, including the political economy). Especially in the early years after the revolution, we identified important episodes (above all, the U.S. embassy seizure) where an agent's foreign-policy stance was closely correlated with domestic power-structure considerations, thus calling into question a Constructivist understanding thereof.

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## CHAPTER 4

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# The Islamic Republic of Iran: State–Society Complex and the Political Elite’s Political and Geopolitical Culture

## INTRODUCTION

This chapter provides a discussion of the IRI’s state–society complex, its political élite and its prevalent political and geopolitical culture. We will thus address the respective state-sanctioned political and geopolitical culture, whereas the previous chapter delineated the spectrum of political and geopolitical cultures to be found across Iranian society. This chapter’s elaborations are predicated upon the theoretical requirement formulated in Chap. 2 to explore the domestic power structure with its sources of power and its political élite, as a way to help clarify dynamics within the ideational/material nexus in the driving of foreign-policy comportment. Thus, in *Part A* we will discuss the specific manifestation of the IRI’s state–society complex, namely the military–clerical–commercial complex (Abrahamian), thus adding its peculiar clerical component to it. *Part B* first provides a basic overview of the post-war governments’ agendas. Second, we present the most dominant contemporary factions and their respective social bases. Third, we turn to a discussion of the political élite’s prevalent political as well as geopolitical culture, with a special emphasis on the ideas espoused by the IRI’s head of state and top ideologue, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei.

### (A) THE STATE–SOCIETY COMPLEX IN THE IRI: EXPLORING THE MILITARY–CLERICAL–COMMERCIAL COMPLEX

Echoing what we have proposed in Chap. 2 as the cultural roots of Iranian foreign policy, Mahmood Sariolghalam in his *The Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran*, which has been praised as ‘the first academic and practice-oriented work about the Islamic Republic’s foreign policy in Persian by a well-known scholar,’<sup>1</sup> suggests the need to explore the internal structure of a country as it forms the basis of foreign policy. Fleshing out the theoretical assumptions made in Chap. 3 on inside/outside and ideational/material dynamics, he explains:

Any nation’s foreign policy is ultimately an extension of its domestic politics, and its external behavior resulting from layers and complexities found in its economic and social structure. [...] Understanding a country’s external behavior hinges directly upon its social landscape and interlocking relationships with the internal coherence and characteristics of its elites.<sup>2</sup>

In order to examine that domestic context, which resembles what we have referred to as the state–society complex, Sariolghalam suggests considering three variables and their interaction: (a) the political culture of Iran; (b) the class, intellectual and social bases of current Iranian élites; and (c) objectives and grand strategies. Here, (a) political culture as well as (b) élite structure are regarded as impacting on (c) national strategy.<sup>3</sup> Therefore, after the previous chapter discussed on a more conceptual level of abstraction the political and geopolitical cultures of Iran (our approach being informed by Critical Geopolitics and Critical Iranian Studies (CIS) necessitates that we pluralize our understanding of political or geopolitical culture), in the effort to further unravel the ideational/material nexus within which the agent’s foreign-policy behaviour is embedded, this chapter will be dedicated to the task of examining the structure of the IRI’s political élite.

To do so, the following discussion will be devoted to an exploration of the IRI’s state–society complex, that is, institutionalized state–business–military relations. Echoing the three main institutions of modern society forming the pillars of the power élite according to Mills, half a century later Aminch and Houweling have maintained that the ‘core of a

<sup>1</sup> Review (p. 290) listed under Sariolghalam 2012.

<sup>2</sup> Sariolghalam 2002: (Pt. 1) 76.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.: (Pt. 1) 76.

state-society complex consists of institutionalized state-business-military relations within states',<sup>4</sup> or more succinctly the institutionalized power relations within the state. For Iran, Abdolvand and Liesener talk about a 'monopolistic-capitalist, religious-commercial system',<sup>5</sup> while Cyrus Bina evokes 'a capitalist state with a paramilitary polity and theocratic rule'.<sup>6</sup> As a result, when speaking of the power constellation forming the backbone of the Iranian state, we can settle with what Abrahamian referred to as the 'military-clerical-commercial complex running the country'.<sup>7</sup> These sources of power shall be discussed in the following.

### *The Supreme Leader: A Supreme Position of Power and Influence*

The peculiarity of the IRI's power structure is the position of the Supreme Leader. He derives his power formally from his religious-ideological-political role as the supreme religious jurist and leader of the "Islamic revolution", from his place on top of the political-institutional arrangement (as enshrined in the Constitution), and informally from his various direct appointments across the state-society complex. According to the Constitution, the Supreme Leader has the right to direct *all* policies, domestic and international. His Office (*Beyt*), estimated to employ 5000 people, includes a kind of parallel administration involving all key ministerial purviews, the most prominent being his chief foreign-policy advisor, former Foreign Minister Ali-Akbar Velayati (1981–1996), which escapes any outside accountability.<sup>8</sup> He has constitutional authority as well as substantial influence over the executive, legislative and judicial branches of government as well as religious institutions, the military and the media. Or put differently, the Supreme Leader constitutes the centre of gravity of Iran's power structure where the threads from various centres of power run together.<sup>9</sup> With such concentration of power in the hands of a single person, there seems to be value in applying Mills' conceptual explanations for the power élite to the Supreme Leader, as someone occupying the 'command posts of the major institutional hierarchies' of modern society

<sup>4</sup> Amineh and Houweling 2005: 8.

<sup>5</sup> Abdolvand and Liesener 2009: 32.

<sup>6</sup> Bina 2009b: 16.

<sup>7</sup> Abrahamian 2009b: 34.

<sup>8</sup> See Haghighatnejad 2019.

<sup>9</sup> See Buchta 2000; Morady 2014: 4–6. For the 1979–98 period, see Moslem 2002. For the post-Khomeini period, see Hunter 1989; Ehteshami 1995; Arjomand 2009.

(i.e. the state, corporations and the military), with his decisions or non-decisions having at least national ramifications<sup>10</sup>—yet, the only exception being that in the IRI’s case, the clerical component ought to be added to that triad of power sources. As a result, the position of the Supreme Leader, standing atop of Iran’s power élite, and the powers concentrated within it, enables him—very much like Mills’ power élite—to send out impulses in a hierarchical-authoritarian manner to the entire political system via networks of influence. Given his multiple tools to exert power and influence, the Supreme Leader’s (non-)decisions can decisively impact on the trajectory of all conceivable aspects of social life within the country and in particular the balance of power among competing factions of the political élite. However, as it has been argued by both observers and foreign-policy practitioners that at least on national-security and foreign-policy issues, rather than making decisions in a strictly hierarchical-authoritarian top-down process, Khamenei as Supreme Leader mostly relies on a bottom-up decision-making process that includes various other members of the power élite, not seldom reflecting the IRI’s élite consensus (to be detailed later).<sup>11</sup>

Supreme Leader Khamenei’s ties with political institutions highlight his extraordinary influence over state affairs. His relationship with the presidency has often been characterized by tensions, stemming from the fact that the latter emerged from popular vote (although after a pre-selection by the Guardian Council upon which the Supreme Leader exerts significant influence) within a political system in which the Supreme Leader beyond any popular reach has the final say. Amid these tensions, Khamenei often intervened in the president’s purview,<sup>12</sup> reaching a peak during Ahmadinejad’s second term. A similar contentious relationship has evolved between the Supreme Leader and the parliament, but one which witnesses more intrusive interventions by Khamenei, to the extent of blurring the lines between the system’s theocratic and legislative wings.<sup>13</sup> In this vein, parliamentary speaker Ali Larijani stated that the ninth *Majles* (2012–2016) tries to ‘take the path of the late Imam—which is the straight path—and follow the words of the Supreme Leader. [...] The ninth Majlis is

<sup>10</sup> See Mills 2000: 4.

<sup>11</sup> See, for example, Rouhani 2012.

<sup>12</sup> See, for example, Khalaji 2014: ch. 6; Murphy 2008: ch. 8; Randjbar-Daemi 2009.

<sup>13</sup> Khalaji 2014: ch. 7; Randjbar-Daemi 2009.

committed to the obedience of the Supreme Leader and the general policies designed by him.<sup>14</sup>

The extraordinary characteristic of the position of the Supreme Leader, somehow antithetical to the national elections that take place almost every two years, is that it is both *de facto* permanent and largely free from accountability, which is reflective of the extent and depth of his unique position of power. Within that constellation, Supreme Leader Khamenei has gradually but surely departed from his role as arbiter between various centres of power to their chief central authority, largely by means of his power to appoint loyalists to various positions of power and influence, thereby ensuring his own centrality by relocating political responsibility away from himself onto his appointees or other institutions (above all the presidency),<sup>15</sup> and by ‘reinforcing his constitutional control over the means of organised violence’.<sup>16</sup> Another aspect making his centralized authority immune to potential challenges is the fact that his *Beyt* is staffed with loyalists (from the IRI’s second generation) and not political operatives.<sup>17</sup> As a result, despite the fact that the Supreme Leader via the many ways in which he can exert power and influence is undoubtedly the single most potent actor, there is still controversy whether to conceive him as omnipotent given the complex web of power and influence in the country, which we shall now unravel by discussing the IRI’s military–clerical–commercial complex in the course of which we will shed light on the Supreme Leader’s relationship with each of its components.

### *A Short History of the Rise to Power of the Shia Clergy: On State–Clerical–Commercial Relations*

The clerical component is added as it constitutes an important power factor with the emergence of the IRI, and even prior to that. An exploration of the military–clerical–commercial complex will seek to identify the centres of power, whether economic, political or military. Ideology also assumes an important role here as long as it has played into one of these

<sup>14</sup> ‘Ali Larijani: Majlis is committed to loyalty to the Supreme Leader’ (in Persian), *Mehr News Agency*, 6 December 2012; cited in Khalaji 2014: 44.

<sup>15</sup> Khalaji 2014: 50; Ganji 2008.

<sup>16</sup> Randjbar-Daemi 2009: 136.

<sup>17</sup> Khalaji 2014: 23.

power dimensions. This can be particularly witnessed in the clerical component of the IRI's power structure.

*First*, the profound intertwinement between “the mosque” (i.e. religion in its institutionalized form) and the state in Iran shall be traced back historically. *Second*, it will be shown that the emergence of a Shia theocracy has been a result of a combination between internal (i.e. political, ideological, social and economic) and external (i.e. imperialism) structures as well as contingent historical circumstances of the time.<sup>18</sup>

A Shia clergy (*ulamā*) took shape when the Safavid dynasty (1501–1722) elevated Twelver Shia to become the official religion of the state. During the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, the *ulamā* grew and expanded its financial and political influence. In the wake of the conversion to Shiism—often coerced by the state—the Shia faith got firmly established within the ethnically (Arabs, Kurds etc.) and religiously (e.g. Sunni, Christians, Jews, Zoroastrians) heterogeneous Iranian society. After the dissolution of the Safavid dynasty, repression from above—both under Nader Shah (1736–1760) and Karim Khan Zand (1705–1779)—led to the weakening of the *ulamā*. However, under the rule of the Qajars (1796–1925) the clergy saw a renaissance of its economic, social and political power. Gradually, it gained a tax system of its own, assembled a notable number of followers and students, and into the last quarter of the nineteenth century controlled a major part of the judiciary and almost all of the education system and welfare institutions.<sup>19</sup> In contrast, the same time period saw the influence of the Sunni *ulamā* declining across West Asia.

The Tobacco Revolt (1891–1892), which succeeded in bringing about the cancellation of a full-monopoly tobacco concession that the Qajar monarch had granted a British colonial officer in 1890, was a sign for both an emerging capacity to forge an alliance between the *ulamā* and the bazaar, and the creation of an anti-colonial coalition of pre-capitalist and capitalist forces. Although the Constitutional Revolution marked a decisive boost for the modernization process that had begun in the 1830s, the *ulamā*—almost without opposition—were granted veto power in legislative matters.<sup>20</sup> The Twelver Shia was again proclaimed the official religion of the country and religious education became part of the school curriculum.

<sup>18</sup> The following discussion is largely based on Fathollah-Nejad and Yazdani 2011.

<sup>19</sup> Savory 1980; Arjomand 1988; Algar 1969.

<sup>20</sup> See Article 2 of that Constitution.

The process of modernization that was furthered under Reza Shah Pahlavi (r. 1925–1941) strengthened the power of the state and reduced that of the clergy. Yet, Reza Shah did not pursue an anti-clerical strategy and also did not separate the sacral from the profane, that is, Iranian society (culture, language, institutions etc.) continued to be heavily influenced by religion.<sup>21</sup> In 1941, the British forced him to abdicate and his son Mohammad-Reza Shah was elevated to the throne. Whereas Reza Shah had marginalized the clergy, the new king from the 1940s onwards closely collaborated with clergymen in order to contain the “Communist peril”. In order to topple the popular nationalist Prime Minister Mossadeq, high-ranking clergymen under the aegis of Iran’s leading Shia scholar of the time and “source of emulation” (*Marjâ-e Taqlid*), Ayatollah Seyyed Hossein Boroujerdi (1875–1961), joined forces with the monarchy and its Anglo-American backers. Indeed, there is a causal, yet not deterministic or linear, between the 1953 *coup d’état* and the 1979 revolution, since it was the U.S.-supported autocratic-repressive regime of the Shah, the lack of political freedom as well as the social and economic crises (above all, created by the Shah’s “White Revolution” at the core of which stood a land reform),<sup>22</sup> which all constituted the roots of the revolutionary movement (as already indicated above).

The dominant position held by the clergy became only viable since state control and surveillance of the “holy” institutions—which had enabled the clergy to spread its message via mosques and own press organs—was almost negligible. Moreover, the clergy’s alliance with the mighty bazaaris constituted an important source of economic power. At the same time, the non-clerical opposition faced a bitter setback as Mossadeq was eradicated from the political scene, and during the 1953–1977 period became exposed to severe state repression. By the late 1960s, the relatively short-lived democratic phase (1941–1953) came to an end because of a U.S.-supported autocratic “rule of terror”<sup>23</sup> during which non-clerical organizations and individuals were deprived of freedom of speech and means of political activism.

It was in 1963 when the Shia scholar Rouhollah Khomeini (1900–1989) first aroused serious public interest. He organized demonstrations and

<sup>21</sup> Bayat 1991: 9.

<sup>22</sup> On the White Revolution, see, for example, Abrahamian 2008a: ch. 5.

<sup>23</sup> In 1975, Amnesty International designated Iran as the country with the worldwide most severe human-rights record.

criticized the White Revolution as the monarch's reforms severely limited the clergy's traditional power—above all, in the education system, the family law and the tax sector. Consequently, Khomeini got arrested and in 1964 was sent into exile, which in fact strongly boosted his popularity. From abroad (first in Iraqi Najaf, then on the outskirts of Paris), he could easily record agitating speeches against the monarchy, which were then distributed on cassettes within Iran, mainly in Islamic institutions, but also in the bazaar.<sup>24</sup> At the same time, the Shah's government was financing those clergymen who supported the monarchy. During the revolutionary period of 1977–1979, however, many of these clergymen along with their followers and students joined Ayatollah Khomeini. In the meanwhile, when it came to the non-clerical opposition, the re-awakened nationalist party *Jebhe Melli* (National Front) had clearly lost legitimacy and popularity in the semi-democratic period between 1960 and 1963 due to its inability to formulate a clear counter-position towards the White Revolution and the Shah regime.

The birth of Shia theocracy is closely linked to the role of Ayatollah Khomeini. He indeed was an exceptional figure, since the bulk of the *ulamâ* was conservative and rather royalist than revolutionary in outlook.<sup>25</sup> In 1970, Khomeini vehemently defended the idea of a “guardianship of the supreme religious jurist”, or the “authority of the jurisconsult” (*Velâyat-e Faqih*)—authoritatively supported by Ayatollah Hossein-Ali Montazeri (who later on distanced himself from it)—and spread it among his students. It should be noted that Khomeini radically deviated from most of Shia ideas and praxis that had existed beforehand.<sup>26</sup> In contrast to the common Shia scholarly tradition, his desire was both to abolish the monarchy and to grant absolute power to a single individual from the clergy. However, ‘Khomeini's idea of Islamic government, though a radical innovation in Shi'ite history, is nevertheless stated within the traditional Shi'ite frame of reference’ as well as in contrast to Sunni Islam.<sup>27</sup>

Khomeini's key to success was his taking advantage of the political vacuum created by the Shah regime's repressive and autocratic rule as well as his successful use of popular leftist slogans. As a result, he was able to

<sup>24</sup> See Tehranian 1980.

<sup>25</sup> Floor 1980; Posch 2005b.

<sup>26</sup> For the contrasts between Khomeini's position and the common Shia doctrines, see Arjomand 1988.

<sup>27</sup> Arjomand 1988: 104–105.

mobilize people from different ideological and social backgrounds.<sup>28</sup> Apart from approving of popular anti-imperialist views, he in November 1978 told the press that any future government would be both democratic and Islamic. He even claimed that he was not at all interested in assuming power himself. In December, he also declared that in an Islamic society, men and women would enjoy the same rights. After the revolution, neither of these statements actually materialized.

In political terms, Khomeini benefitted from the revival of “political Islam” *à la* MKO and Ali Shariati. The latter died in 1977, which enabled Khomeini to become the most powerful figure of the opposition. Aside from that, Khomeini’s ascendance had been facilitated by the oppression of popular political forces (OIPFG, MKO), trade unions and professional associations, which had become active in the aftermath of the 1953 *coup*. Khomeini skilfully seized upon the opportunities presented to him, managed to gain the heart of the masses and was easily capable of outmanoeuvring the weakened *Jebhe Melli* and the FMI. Thus, for some Khomeini was a ‘cynical opportunist’, yet for others he displayed ‘a good deal of Machiavellian pragmatism’.<sup>29</sup>

### *Supreme Leader Khamenei and the Clerical–Commercial Complex*

The role of the clerical establishment, as alluded before, has undergone important changes. Before the revolution, it wielded significant influence as it was partially autonomous from the government. After the revolution, its socio-religious and political authority merged in the IRI state under the leadership of the “top jurist” Ayatollah Khomeini. But with Khamenei replacing the latter, the clerical establishment was made quite impotent (especially over the 2000s) as it was put under increasing state control. According to Mehdi Khalaji, a Shia theologian by training, this was done ‘through a bureaucratic effort that has fundamentally reshaped the role and character of the religious class within the state’.<sup>30</sup> The restructuring of the clerical establishment under Supreme Leader Khamenei has entailed elements of co-optation, privilege and coercion, while centralizing the seminary bureaucracy.

<sup>28</sup> See also Dabashi 1989.

<sup>29</sup> Adib-Moghaddam 2014: 6.

<sup>30</sup> Ibid.: 27.

The seminaries have been placed under Khamenei's absolute authority, depending on him above all for funding and political support.<sup>31</sup> Financially, Iran's Shia clerics are primarily paid by the government and Khamenei himself, with only a tiny portion funded by local *marjas* (who on their part rely on proceeds from religious taxes). Also, when not on governmental payroll, the clergy has access to a wide range of amenities and privileges, as its religious institutions are heftily budgeted by the state, 'making today's Iranian clerical establishment the wealthiest of any period in history', according to Khalaji.<sup>32</sup> The latter further details the clerical establishment's various financial resources:

Well-connected clerics and *marjas* [...] are involved in lucrative business deals, receive exclusive governmental benefits, and can borrow large amounts of money from banks without sufficient guarantees for repayment. Many charities owned by *marjas* in Iran and high-ranking clerics engage in business through corrupt dealings with the government.<sup>33</sup>

In fact, enabling him to be the chief financier of the clergy, the Supreme Leader can draw on tremendous wealth at his direct disposal: he controls much of the property that previously belonged to religious authorities and presides over profitable economic institutions such as the *Bonyád-e Mostazafân* and the Imam Reza Shrine.<sup>34</sup> In addition to that, Khamenei is in control of an organization called Headquarters for Executing the Order of the Imam (*Setâd-e Ejrá'i-ye Farmân-e Hazrat-e Emâm*), whose name refers to an edict signed by Ayatollah Khomeini shortly before his death in 1989. Khomeini's order created a new entity to manage and sell properties abandoned in the tumultuous post-revolutionary years, which since 2007 has become a business giant, holding stakes 'in nearly every sector of Iranian industry, including finance, oil, telecommunications, the production of birth-control pills and even ostrich farming'. Despite the secrecy of the organization's accounts, its holdings of real estate, corporate stakes and other assets have been estimated at about \$95bn. This remarkable wealth—one-third of Iran's GDP in 2007 and almost one-fourth of that

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.: 22.

<sup>32</sup> Ibid.: 31.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.: 30.

in 2009—<sup>35</sup>that is controlled by Supreme Leader Khamenei underpins his power in the IRI.<sup>36</sup>

In terms of coercive measures, the Special Court of Clerics—whose head is appointed by the Supreme Leader and acts independently from the judiciary—can engage in trials of clerics seen as dissenters, including inflicting the death penalty. Moreover, the centralization of the seminary bureaucracy involves the establishment of a computerized system whereby control is exerted upon clerics' private, public and political lives—hence their intellectual life.<sup>37</sup> As a result, Khamenei's ties with the clerical establishment are paradoxical, since they include the suppression of religious and political freedoms, while rewarding it when it complies with his established expectations.<sup>38</sup>

### *The Military: The IRGC Becoming the Central Body for Élite Recruitment*

Through almost all political spheres of the IRI, there is a duality of power. This is witnessed in the executive branch with the Supreme Leader versus the President; the legislative branch with the Parliament versus the Guardian Council; the armed forces with the regular army (*Artesh*) versus the IRGC. 'This duality of power is responsible not only for enormous inefficiencies and incoherence in the country's foreign and security policies, but also for the paralysis that affects the political system [...]',<sup>39</sup> Buchta noted in 2000.

In each of the spheres of foreign affairs, defence and intelligence, there are multiple institutions. In the defence sphere, there is a "dual military" structure. The intelligence community is composed of various institutions, composed of the Ministry of Intelligence and Security and the various intelligence agencies of the IRGC, including the one of its foreign-operations arm, the Qods Force.

Regarding the dual military, alongside the *Artesh*, there is the IRGC which almost immediately after the revolution was decreed into existence by Khomeini. The IRGC has become highly bureaucratized and its

<sup>35</sup> According to World Bank figures.

<sup>36</sup> Stecklow et al. 2013.

<sup>37</sup> Khalaji 2014: 29, 31.

<sup>38</sup> Ibid.: 32.

<sup>39</sup> Buchta 2000: xii.

structured internal hierarchy mirrors that of the army.<sup>40</sup> Also, they each have separate land, sea and air forces. There are several reasons for this dual-military arrangement: (1) The post-revolutionary rulers mistrusted the *Artesh* that was seen loyal to the *Ancien Régime* and consequently purged more than half its officers corps. However, the organizational structure of the *Artesh* remained intact, with the Supreme Leader replacing the Shah as commander-in-chief. (2) By creating the IRGC, the new regime provided itself with a kind of large-scale Praetorian Guard whose task was to defend the new system and the “Islamic Revolution”. (3) The decision to abstain from dissolving the *Artesh* was driven by the new rulers’ wariness to possible threats emanating from military organizations, so that it was kept as a counter-weight alongside the IRGC.<sup>41</sup> In addition to that, Khomeini decreed the creation of the *Basij*, an army of voluntary militiamen whose aim is to “defend the ideals of the revolution”. During the war with Iraq, the *Artesh* as a result of the purges it had endured did not perform well, while the IRGC took centre-stage in the “Holy Defence”.<sup>42</sup> During the latter, the *Basij* was expanded to become what the new regime called “twenty-million men army” and performed the bulk of the “human wave” assaults.

Gradually over the period of the two Khatami presidential terms, the Supreme Leader had begun a process of gradually empowering IRGC members, who then even intervened into the legislative process,<sup>43</sup> and later were given important political positions. Despite the larger size of the *Artesh* (by the turn of the twenty-first century, 400,000 men in active duty as compared to the IRGC’s 125,000 men), the IRGC has to be considered to be the more important armed force due to its close ties with the political élite. Both the *Basij* and the IRGC have become ‘to function as an avenue for upward political mobility and elite recruitment’, Mehran Kamrava noted in 2000.<sup>44</sup> A case in point is Major-General Mohsen Rezaee, who in September 1997 was replaced by the Supreme Leader after 16 years as IRGC commander. Khamenei then appointed Rezaee as secretary of the then newly established Expediency Council, by that time headed by the Supreme Leader’s rival, former president

<sup>40</sup> Kamrava 2000: 82.

<sup>41</sup> Niedermeier 2010: 66–67.

<sup>42</sup> Ibid.

<sup>43</sup> Ganji 2008: 56–57.

<sup>44</sup> Kamrava 2000: 85.

Hashemi-Rafsanjani.<sup>45</sup> ‘This set the precedent for high-level Pasdaran members to enter the political arena, first through appointments via the Supreme Leader’s office, and then later as elected officials’,<sup>46</sup> and indeed Rezaee himself later ran for president.

However, it is important to note that despite the IRGC’s hierarchical structure, politically it is not a unified body, rather ‘a network, a brotherhood, in which personalities and connections mattered far more than structures’.<sup>47</sup> Also, the sociological composition of the IRGC is so diverse, so as to make a clear categorization necessarily too simplistic. After all, by the mid-2000s at least one million people could be referred to as “former *Pasdaran*”, since at the end of the war the IRGC comprised about 300,000 soldiers. Although this section of the population can be seen as devoted to the Islamic Republic, its socio-economic and political background is diverse. It is worth recalling here that the reformist movement was also supported by “former *Pasdaran*”.<sup>48</sup> Therefore, in this study, reference to the IRGC is to be understood in its power context related to political (its top generals) and economic (its large corporations) influence.

It becomes clear that from the early 2000s onwards the balance of power within the Islamic Republic’s political élite gradually and surely shifted to the right of the political spectrum, the different factions *within* the Right henceforth constituting the main focus in the effort to locate the centre of gravity in Iran’s political power structure. The emerging power nexus became clear on the occasion of Ahmadinejad’s victory in the June 2005 presidential elections, for which the support he received from the Supreme Leader and the IRGC was critical.<sup>49</sup> Initially seen as a weak figure at the service of Khamenei, from 2009 Ahmadinejad and his supporters engaged in creating financial resources for themselves, previously provided by Khamenei’s camp and the IRGC, in order to establish political self-reliance as a way to maintain his power during his second term—leading to the first-ever split between a president and the Supreme Leader in the IRI’s post-war history.<sup>50</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Hen-Tov and Gonzalez 2011: 49–50.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.: 50.

<sup>47</sup> Ansari 2010.

<sup>48</sup> Hourcade 2006: 44–46.

<sup>49</sup> Naji 2009: ch. 2.

<sup>50</sup> Khalaji 2014: 38–40.

*Khamenei and the IRGC*

The process of Supreme Leader Khamenei ‘accumulat[ing] formidable centralized authority’ was significantly ‘aided by [the] transformation of the IRGC’s role in overseeing the country’s politics and economy’.<sup>51</sup> It is with the latter that he has formed a clerical–military nexus to consolidate his own power in particular and that of the state he oversees in general.<sup>52</sup>

After then-President Hashemi-Rafsanjani opened the door for the IRGC’s involvement in the economy in the post-war reconstruction period, it was his successor Khamenei who turned the IRGC into a military–political–economic–cultural complex exclusively loyal to him. Ever since, by Khamenei’s design, the IRGC’s economic and political activities have largely taken place free from government accountability, be it economically, politically or judicially. As Supreme Leader, Khamenei’s interest can be summarized as maintaining the IRGC’s dominance while assuring his hegemony within it, making sure not to leave its power unchecked. In line with his general strategy of holding power, Khamenei appointed IRGC commanders as well as their deputies, in many cases with the latter reporting to himself rather than to the former, thus cementing his main authority over the Guards. Moreover, Khamenei entertains clerical representatives within the IRGC who, overseeing the latter’s politics, also directly report to him, and are additionally charged with approving all promotions within the organization. As with the Guards’ exclusive loyalty to him rather than to their commanders, the actions by Qods Force commander Qasem Soleimani suggest loyalty and devotion to Khamenei and his agenda.<sup>53</sup>

*The Political Economy of the IRI: The State and Para-statal Actors*

A modern class system emerged during the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah when Iran, by entering global capitalism, experienced capitalist, uneven development.<sup>54</sup> Under the latter, the structure of the ruling class was marked by what can be referred to as a *comprador bourgeoisie*, reflecting the phenomenon of a commercial intermediary between a bourgeois

<sup>51</sup> Ibid.: 4.

<sup>52</sup> See, for example, Hen-Tov and Gonzalez 2011.

<sup>53</sup> Ibid.: ch. 8.

<sup>54</sup> Alamdari 2005: 1285; Rostami-Povey 2010: 22–23.

class whose capital and power derives from the centres of global capitalism and which acts at its service in peripheral countries.<sup>55</sup>

With the establishment of the IRI, a close link between the ideological (“Islamist”) and economic realms came into existence, or put differently an ideological grounding of the IRI’s political economy:

The newly consolidated theocracy transformed the political system into a theocratic apartheid state. Henceforth the theocracy divided the people into [...] *khodi* (the ours or loyals to the system) and *qeyr-e khodi* (aliens or enemies to the system). The division of society ran through all social groups, through families, even through every single individual who was now forced to live with two faces: in public life different from the private, towards the superior other than towards the own conscience.<sup>56</sup>

The ideological division between those loyal and those opposed to the system also had an ordering impact upon the Islamic Republic’s social and economic life:

There emerged a two-part, numerically almost equally large society: one loyal towards the new rulers, class-spanning, Islamic society with predominantly traditionalist social strata. This society was privileged, had direct access to the oil revenues, to state institutions, to institutions of power, to state-controlled economic enterprises and other advantages. And a second, equally class-spanning, towards modernity leaning society beyond Islamic relations of loyalty, i.e. without access to oil revenues, without political rights and without opportunities of influence.<sup>57</sup>

In this vein, in the IRI, clientelistic networks are linked to the organizational structure of Iranian Shia.<sup>58</sup>

While the 1980s saw a planned war-time economy, since the 1990s a process of economic liberalization has started with privatization facilitated by a new interpretation of Article 147 of the Constitution, which allows for peace-time involvement of army capacities in the economy, and gained momentum under the Ahmadinejad administration following the 2005 revision of Article 44 that originally constituted a legal obstruction to

<sup>55</sup> Malm and Esmailian 2007: 25–33; Hourcade and Khosrokhavar 1990: 878–884. On the Tudeh Party’s views, see Khajesarvi and Ghorbani 2014: 60–62.

<sup>56</sup> Massarrat 2010a: 39.

<sup>57</sup> Massarrat 2009: 41–42.

<sup>58</sup> Buchta 2000.

further privatization.<sup>59</sup> Clientelistic privatization designates the specific nature of privatization that has taken place in the IRI, one that stands in contrast to a process of privatization of state-owned property predicated on a transparent public tender,<sup>60</sup> but one that rather benefits clientelistic entities in an attempt to stabilize or to expand the power base of the government.<sup>61</sup> Also, privatization has led to a rise in unemployment.<sup>62</sup>

Yet, it shall be noted that making statements on Iran's economy is a risky undertaking, as data on basic economic indicators are not seldom unreliable, inconsistent and non-transparent. This concerns (1) data published by the CBI on inflation, foreign reserves and external debt; figures provided by government agencies on unemployment; and the Treasury's budget reports; (2) figures published by official agencies on the same topics (population, employment, investment, economic growth etc.) do not always tally; and most significantly (3) information on the balance-sheets of public enterprises, the financial status of Bonyads, direct and indirect public subsidies, and capital in- and out-flows. In fact, there is no reliable information on the size and functioning of the informal or "underground" economy. For instance, the financial and operation accounts of the IRGC or the trusts supervised by the Supreme Leader are never published. In addition, there is the problem of multiple exchange rates, which makes the conversion of the local currency into U.S. dollars for the sake of international comparison quite meaningless.<sup>63</sup>

A salient feature of its modern history, Iran draws the bulk of its income from the sale of its vast oil and gas reserves. However, given the country's multifaceted industrial infrastructure, whose GDP share has been incrementally risen, there have been doubts over Iran's designation as a rentier state in the classical sense. Yet, Iran still witnesses a key feature of the rentier state, namely the fact that élites, either those who are permanent or those elected to assume state power via the presidency, can access the immense "rent" derived largely from oil exports (for which there is no proper parliamentary oversight),<sup>64</sup> and can consequently allocate this concentration of wealth to clientelistic networks forming their social base, as

<sup>59</sup> Jafari 2013: 93.

<sup>60</sup> Of course, even in developed capitalist countries, processes of privatization do not exclude preferential treatment of individuals and groups (cronyism).

<sup>61</sup> See Ehsani 2009; Harris 2010b.

<sup>62</sup> Khajehpour 2012: 37–39.

<sup>63</sup> Amuzegar 2014: x.

<sup>64</sup> See Massarrat 2008a.

a means to consolidate their power.<sup>65</sup> As Karshenas and Hakimian stated in 2008, the challenge remains with

the capture of the state by particular interests, which undermine competition and divert energies to unproductive, rent-seeking activities, and the arbitrary interventions by different branches of the government in safeguarding the interests of particular groups at the helm of power. [...] As long as the state remains undemocratic, and hence non-transparent, in an oil economy such as Iran, government policy will be dominated by particular rent-seeking interests.<sup>66</sup>

or briefly put, with the ‘rampant rent-seeking by narrow interest groups at the helm of the state’.<sup>67</sup>

To this date, NIOC constitutes the largest economic entity in Iran. Its role can only be understood in the context of its relationship with the changing power dynamics within the state, ranging from cooperation to antagonism, with most recently the IRGC taking over a prominent role.<sup>68</sup>

The second important economic factor is the IRGC’s socio-politico-economic conglomerate, which is believed to form one- to two-thirds of GDP. Its largest entity is *Khâtam al-Anbiyâ*<sup>69</sup> that entertains a vast array of affiliated companies, estimated at 800, active in all conceivable branches of the economy, the most important of which are tied to infrastructure, energy and the military-industrial complex.<sup>70</sup> The size of the latter, at the core of which stands Khatam Equipment and Development (KED),<sup>71</sup> is considered enormous, with some experts estimating that roughly 75% of Iran’s economy is directly or indirectly linked to it, with sanctions having boosted its relative weight.<sup>72</sup> In addition to that, the IRGC has exclusive control over 60 sea ports and over a dozen airports, through which it can run a massive parallel economy, a process exacerbated by the sanctions. Furthermore, IRGC-affiliated firms have enormously benefitted from the Ahmadinejad administration that engaged in more privatizations that the

<sup>65</sup> See also Bjorvatn and Selvik 2008.

<sup>66</sup> Karshenas and Hakimian 2008: 205.

<sup>67</sup> Ibid.: 214.

<sup>68</sup> See Yong 2013.

<sup>69</sup> <http://www.khatam.com> [13/01/2015].

<sup>70</sup> Abdolvand and Liesener 2009: 29–31.

<sup>71</sup> <http://www.khatamco.com> [28/06/2014].

<sup>72</sup> Abdolvand and Schulz 2010: 32.

Hashemi-Rafsanjani and Khatami administrations combined, many of which fell into the hands of the IRGC, plus the fact that under Ahmadinejad an estimated 750 state contracts were granted to IRGC-affiliated companies. Also under his presidency, the IRGC has acquired significant political-institutional influence: More than 100 of the 290 parliamentarians were former IRGC members; 13 of 21 ministries were headed by former IRGC members, including the key resorts of the interior, intelligence, defence and oil—in other words, in all those areas where the IRGC has a significant economic or political presence.<sup>73</sup> As already noted, as Iran's most important military organization, the IRGC commands over 125,000 troops as well as the millions-strong Basij militia,<sup>74</sup> and has its own intelligence services. They thus combine economic and military sources of power resulting into unparalleled yet not solely dominant position of power within the IRI's power structure. As an important indicator for the latter, it can be noted that Mojtaba Khamenei, head of his father's Office, is considered a key IRGC associate.

The third important entity is the clerical–commercial complex consisting of a network of para-statal religious foundations (Bonyads), estimated to be in control of one-fifth of GDP.<sup>75</sup> Under the IRI, a system of Bonyads was established, whose wealth derived from the confiscation and nationalization of the assets of the Pahlavi dynasty and pre-revolutionary industrial magnates. The Bonyads soon emerged as para-governmental organizations. Loyal to the *Rahbar* and acting as religious charities, they played a key role in institutionalizing the ideology of the Islamic state by providing a wide range of social, educational and cultural activities, most particularly a parallel social safety net to the formal one. These foundations are exempted from tax and are formally or informally subsidized by the state budget and the banking system. Crucially, there is a total lack of transparency when it comes to their accounting and their operations.<sup>76</sup> As such, one can argue that they constitute less an agent than an obstacle to Iranian development.<sup>77</sup> The wealthiest among them is the *Bonyād-e Āstān-e Qods-e*

<sup>73</sup> See Thaler et al. 2010; Memarian 2011.

<sup>74</sup> The Basij were incorporated into the IRGC's command structure during the tenure Major General Mohammad-Ali Jafari who since September 2007 assumes the position of the IRGC's commander-in-chief upon the Supreme Leader's appointment.

<sup>75</sup> Molavi 2002: 176.

<sup>76</sup> Sacidi 2004; Motamed-Nejad 2009.

<sup>77</sup> Maloney 2000.

*Razavi*<sup>78</sup> located in the north-eastern Razavi Khorasan province. The foundation administers the donations made to the Imam Reza shrine complex in Mashhad (Iran's second largest city that has turned into the world's second largest Muslim pilgrimage destination); is by far the largest landowner in the province; and controls the trade emanating from the large gas reservoirs there. Another giant is the above-mentioned *Bonyâd-e Mostazafân*, the "Foundation of the Oppressed", founded on 12 July 1980 upon Khomeini's personal order.<sup>79</sup>

Aside from these vast economic areas affiliated with the state, there is also a private sector that came into existence during the Hashemi-Rafsanjani era, which accounts for one-fourth to one-third of GDP. Yet, according to Iran's Ministry of Labour and Social Affairs, the private sector harbours four-fifths of employment opportunities. This shows that most capital-intensive sectors remain in government control (above all the energy and petrochemical industries) while the private sector is focused on labour-intensive activities.<sup>80</sup>

### *Concluding Observations*

#### *The Political Economy of the IRI's Longevity: Populism and the Continuity of Class Rule*

Examining state-society relations also requires investigating the degree and functioning of "regime resilience", that is, the ways in which the state maintains power in the face of various challenges emerging from the societal level.

The politico-economic skeleton briefly outlined has produced a concentration of wealth at the hands of élite networks, which has arguably set limits to wider economic development and democratization. Various economists have hinted to the hampering of Iran's economic development.<sup>81</sup> Further to that, the combination of the eight-year war with Iraq, U.S. threats of war and economic sanctions, and the 2005 election of the Ahmadinejad faction have brought the Iranian economy and polity towards a para-militarization of the regime.<sup>82</sup>

<sup>78</sup> <http://news.aqr.ir/en> [28/06/2014].

<sup>79</sup> Malm and Esmailian 2007: 34–35, 49–51.

<sup>80</sup> Khajehpour 2009: 8; Seyf 2014.

<sup>81</sup> See, for example, Karshenas and Hakimian 2000; Coville 2002.

<sup>82</sup> Bina 2009: 18.

When it comes to the question of the distribution of wealth, the role of the political élite's populism is pivotal. Due to the role of religion in Iranian society and culture as well as the lack of political parties, populism under the charismatic leadership of Khomeini could surface. Emerging from the moment 'society enters a structural crisis of transition from an agrarian system to capitalism', as the sociologist Kazem Alamdari states, populist practices were prolonged by the war:

Populist Islamic rule, which is incompatible with the trend of modernisation and democratisation, pushed society into a permanent revolution, involving traditional authority, Islamisation of the social fabric and fragmentation of political desires. Had the war with Iraq (1981–1988) not occurred, populism could have ended more quickly after the revolution, and society would have begun its routine activities. The war, however, empowered the populist Islamist authority to mobilise the ideologically ill-treated masses and to suppress political opponents under the emotional context of defending "the land of Islam".<sup>83</sup>

In contrast to the afore-mentioned author, Abrahamian places populism within a class context in which upper classes resort to it as a largely propagandistic tool to mobilize support from the lower classes, purporting to aim at redistributing wealth to the latter's benefit without actually doing so, as the bases of a class-based political economy remain unchallenged:

[A] movement of the propertied middle class that mobilizes the lower classes, especially the urban poor, with radical rhetoric directed against imperialism, foreign capitalism, and the political establishment. In mobilizing the "common people," populist movements use charismatic figures and symbols, imagery, and language that have potent value in the mass culture. Populist movements promise to drastically raise the standard of living and make the country fully independent of outside powers. Even more important, in attacking the status quo with radical rhetoric, they intentionally stop short of threatening the petty bourgeoisie and the whole principle of private property. Populist movements, thus, inevitably emphasize the importance, not of economic-social revolution, but of cultural, national, and political reconstruction.<sup>84</sup>

<sup>83</sup> Alamdari 2005: 1286.

<sup>84</sup> Abrahamian 1993: 17.

In order to explain the durability of the IRI usually four aspects are mentioned: Political repression; the war's effects on power consolidation; the rentier state; and the mobilizing power of Shiism. However, the IRI's longevity cannot be explained by these factors alone, each of them harbouring contradictions.<sup>85</sup> Surely, as in many other countries, even advanced capitalist ones, populism can be an effective means for class rule. Yet, what is important to recognize are the policies provided by the IRI in line with its revolutionary message aiming to satisfy the socio-economic needs of various social strata. These include successful measures in the fields of education (including elimination of illiteracy and largely equitable access for both sexes), poverty reduction (urban and rural), developing the rural infrastructure, and the building of an industrial infrastructure (including important advances in science and technology) despite sanctions.<sup>86</sup> All the while, despite the dire security situation the country has faced since the revolution, military expenditures have been kept at a surprising low rate, although complemented by the rising influence of para-military organs in state and society.

Yet the constant feature remains that the power structure as rooted in the country's political economy has not changed in line with the revolutionary slogans and the objective of social justice. Studying levels of inequality in pre- and post-revolutionary Iran, Djavad Salehi-Isfahani found that inequality in 2002 was about the same as in 1972, and added:

The findings on inequality raise important questions about the nature of the Islamic Revolution. Did it significantly affect the power structure as a social revolution of its magnitude should have? This is particularly relevant in the case of Iran because, in addition to changes in the distribution of productivity, the distribution of access to oil rents also affects inequality. Since access is directly related to political power, inequality may reflect the distribution of power. Thus, the finding that inequality in 2002 was about the same as in 1972 raises questions about the significance of the Islamic Revolution as a social and political revolution.<sup>87</sup>

In other words, the class character of Iranian society has remained unchanged,<sup>88</sup> leading some scholars to interpret the 1979 revolution as

<sup>85</sup> Abrahamian 2009a.

<sup>86</sup> See Salehi-Isfahani 2009b; Rostami-Povey 2010: ch. 2.

<sup>87</sup> Salehi-Isfahani 2009a: 24–25.

<sup>88</sup> See also Behdad and Nomani 2009; Salehi-Isfahani 2006.

merely a “passive revolution”.<sup>89</sup> As a case in point, with the introduction of largely neoliberal economic policies, the working class and its movement have found themselves in a dire situation.<sup>90</sup> However, given the disregard of the Reformists, including the middle-class Green Movement,<sup>91</sup> towards the socio-economic plights of the lower classes,<sup>92</sup> the conservative ruling élite has been successful to keep the latter among its social base.<sup>93</sup>

To conclude, populism has been a double-edged sword: While it has met the needs of specific strata who form the regime’s main social base, it has kept the larger politico-economic structure untouched, as a result of which social frustration, exacerbated by sanctions, has been seen to simmer under the surface, only to be contained by a combination of compromises and repression.<sup>94</sup>

### *The Supreme Leader: Neo-sultanism and State–Society Relations*

The balance-sheet of Khamenei’s Supreme Leadership and his stewardship of the Iranian state remains controversial. On the one side, critics deplore the continuity of authoritarianism in Iran in general as well as his abandoning of his role as arbiter between élite factions to one favouring one particular faction over others (especially during the Ahmadinejad administration) and heightened militarization in state and economic matters. On the other, proponents see his reign as a success story in domestic and international affairs. According to regime ideologue Hassan Abbasi, internally the success of “Khamenei-sm” lied in preserving “Khomeini-sm” against ‘deviations of society and government [*hokoumat*]’, thereby continuing the “Islamic Revolution” instead of merely governing the “Islamic Republic”. For Abbasi, Supreme Leader Khamenei succeeded in safeguarding the ‘paradigm of Imam Khomeini’ whose merit lied—even to the extent of declaring him the man of the twentieth century—unlike other world leaders to counter Western modern ideologies (liberalism and

<sup>89</sup> Khiabany 2006: 14.

<sup>90</sup> See Malm and Esmailian 2007; Maljoo 2006, 2007a, b; Moghissi and Rahnema 2001.

<sup>91</sup> Harris 2012.

<sup>92</sup> Behdad 2001; Maljoo 2010a.

<sup>93</sup> Author’s interview with Maljoo; Maljoo 2013. See also Morady 2011a; Kian 2011; Sadeghi-Boroujerdi 2012.

<sup>94</sup> See also Adib-Moghaddam 2007: 169–178 (‘The dialectics of Iran’s emerging political economy’).

capitalism) not by resorting to equally modern ideologies (such as socialism, Marxism and even national-socialism) but instead by relying on something indigenous, in ‘bringing religion to the societal scene’, thus escaping ‘any further war among modern ideologies’.<sup>95</sup> Externally, Supreme Leader Khamenei, according to Abbasi, can be seen as the greatest figure of the early twenty-first century, as he has without entering any war, made Iran the great victor of U.S. and Israeli wars, and at the same time preserved the *Nezām* (system). According to Abbasi, Khamenei’s ‘strategic management’ skills, including ‘in the most difficult of circumstances, [has been] to preserve the country’s security in the most insecure region of the world’.<sup>96</sup>

In any case, despite the complexity in the IRI’s decision-making process, if need be Khamenei is able to change the power dynamics to his favour by using the variegated means of power and influence at his disposal. Some authors have therefore characterized his rule as “(neo-)sultanism”, a concept taken from Max Weber.<sup>97</sup> Akbar Ganji explains:

“Where domination is primarily traditional, even though it is exercised by virtue of the ruler’s personal autonomy, it will be called patrimonial authority,” Max Weber wrote in *Economy and Society* in 1922; “where it indeed operates primarily on the basis of discretion, it will be called sultanism.” Sultanism is both traditional and arbitrary, according to Weber, and it expresses itself largely through recourse to military force and through an administrative system that is an extension of the ruler’s household and court. Sultans sometimes hold elections in order to prove their legitimacy, but they never lose any power in them. According to Weber, sultans promote or demote officials at will, they rob state bodies of their independence of action and infiltrate them with their proxies, and they marshal state economic resources to fund an extensive apparatus of repression. Weber might have been describing Khamenei.<sup>98</sup>

<sup>95</sup> Abbasi 2010.

<sup>96</sup> Ibid.

<sup>97</sup> See Ganji 2008, 2009; Ansari 2013. See also Weber 1978: 232–240, 1020; Chehabi and Linz 2020.

<sup>98</sup> Ganji 2008.

Turning to state–society relations in the IRI, he then situates this form of “neo-sultanism” within wider Iranian politics and society, which he sees as dynamic and pluralistic:

Iran today is indeed a neosultanate, not a totalitarian state, nor even a fascist one. Such regimes create single-voiced societies, and many different voices can be heard in Iran today. Contemporary Iran is still officially an Islamic theocracy, but no single ideology dominates the country. In the totalitarian Soviet state, there was nothing but Marxism and the official Bolshevik version of it at that. In Iran, liberalism, socialism, and feminism have all been tagged as alternatives to the ruling ideology, and many Iranians openly identify with these currents. Iran has no single all-embracing party in charge of organizing society. It has dozens of parties [...] and although they are not as free or autonomous as parties in democratic countries, they represent views that deviate from the government’s. To some extent, too, Khamenei has to address their concerns.<sup>99</sup>

Therefore, it can be concluded that despite the concentration of wealth and power within the IRI’s élite networks, the state cannot be seen as being immune to changes called upon by diverse societal groups who have shown themselves eager to exploit the limited political avenues at their disposal, as has been witnessed in the presidential victories of Khatami and Rouhani.

### (B) THE POLITICAL ELITE’S POLITICAL AND GEOPOLITICAL CULTURE

A systemic examination of Iranian foreign policy is a difficult undertaking because of the ideological (worldview), political (factionalism) and institutional complexities in which it is situated.<sup>100</sup> The present part will give an overview of the competing factions forming the IRI’s political élite and, heeding Sariolghalam’s call, investigate its ‘class, intellectual and social bases’.<sup>101</sup>

<sup>99</sup> Ibid.

<sup>100</sup> On factionalism and foreign policy decision-making, see Maleki 2002; McDowell 2008; Haghighatjoo 2006; Bjorvatn and Selvik 2008: 2316–2317; Entessar 2009a. On the IRI’s national-security policy, see Chubin 1994, 2002; Byman et al. 2001.

<sup>101</sup> Sariolghalam 2002: (Pt. 1) 76.

### *Post-war Governments and Their Agendas*

As noted, in the absence of political-party structures, factionalism has dominated the political and economic life of post-revolutionary Iran.<sup>102</sup>

In the 1980s, a bipolar factionalist structure materialized, one populist-revolutionary or radical (the so-called Islamic Left, *Chap-e Eslâmi*) and the other conservative. The radicals were in favour of a classless society, the export of the “Islamic Revolution”, interventionist and austere socio-cultural policies and state interventionism in the economy. The conservatives, on their part, demanded private property rights, the securing of the revolution at home, and traditional *fiqh* (Islamic jurisprudence) over a state-led societal reshaping. Enjoying wide support amongst voters, the radicals dominated popular-based institutions like the parliament and the government, while the conservatives controlled the Guardian Council. At the end, the latter proved to be stronger, relying on the historically grown alliance between the bazaar and the mosque, and their advocacy of a free-market economy being in line with traditional Shia practice. In fact, while claiming adherence to the Khomeinist doctrine, the factions’ establishment of new platforms and alliance-building was rendered possible by the constitution’s ambiguities.

State institutions and political decisions were controlled by those supporting Khomeini during the revolution and their affiliates, all being loyal to the ayatollah’s doctrine of *Velâyat-e Faqih*, the new state’s key governing principle. In contrast to the rest of society that suffered from exclusion from the political process through oppression, the existing diversity of ideological views and political interests within this Khomeinist political élite led to the emergence of different factions as well as viewpoints on a variety of issues.

### *The Reconstruction and Reform Period: 1989–2005*

In the 1990s, after the war was brought to a close, the severity of the problems affecting the country led the factions to embrace the need for major shifts in both ideology and practice. After Khomeini’s death, two main political strands emerged: One seeking to pragmatically liberalize the system; the other loyal to the conservative state and seeing a threat to such reformist ambitions. As a result, the position of both the “Islamic Left” and a newly emerging third faction was boosted. Assembled around the

<sup>102</sup> See Moslem 2002.

key figure of Hashemi-Rafsanjani, a “modern right” or “pragmatic conservative” faction emerged, which espoused liberal economic and social policies, and finally—initially supported by the new Supreme Leader Khamenei and the conservatives—transformed the state into being less ideological, more pragmatic and less religious. It was also under Hashemi-Rafsanjani that the clientelistic privatization process helped not only members of the clergy to acquire wealth (the “millionaire mullahs”), but also a new caste of non-clerical *nouveaux riches* to emerge.<sup>103</sup>

That political and social opening paved the way for the success of the reformist movement leading to Mohammad Khatami’s two-term presidency (1997–2005). In that period, vibrant public debates about socio-political issues emerged. Not least under the impact of secular ideas, “religious intellectuals” (*Roshanfekrân-e Dini*) tackled the question about the compatibility of Islam and democracy—and provided a positive answer.<sup>104</sup> Although the views on Islam held by those “religious reformers” were indeed liberal-minded, they have not been able to substantiate their claim that their interpretation of Islam is indeed compatible with democracy and human rights.<sup>105</sup> Despite the relatively lively exchange between different persuasions, the core of the debate still lacked a secular character. Rather, ideas embracing “Islamic reformism” or “Islamic pluralism”<sup>106</sup> acquired hegemony, which were mostly loyal to a theocratic republic. Particularly during Khatami’s second term, conservative forces in control of state media and the judiciary led a campaign against secular ideas and groups that had gained some societal approval.

The ultimate failure of reformism—due to repression by the hardliners and the lack of the reformers’ political backbone—led to the disillusionment of vast sectors of society; ‘people increasingly came to regard the reformists’ leaders as apologists for the theocratic regime’, as Rostami-Povey states in 2010.<sup>107</sup> In retrospect, the reformists cemented the intra-Islamist discourse and politics in the IRI. As Posch rightly points out,

It is [...] a fact that neither Khatami nor any other politician or thinker among the forces of reform stood against the system of the “rule of the jurisprudent” or even demanded that Iran’s political system be also opened

<sup>103</sup> Klebnikov 2003. See Malm and Esmailian 2007: ch. 4.

<sup>104</sup> Amirpur 2011.

<sup>105</sup> Sarkohi 2014.

<sup>106</sup> Rostami-Povey 2010: 52.

<sup>107</sup> Ibid.: 55.

to secular parties. Thus, the political process is limited to the political spectrum of the Tehrani Islamists scene [with] factions faithful to Khomeini.<sup>108</sup>

*The Neo-conservative Period: 2005–2013*

The decisive second round of the 2005 presidential elections pitted Hashemi-Rafsanjani against the mayor of Tehran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, a newcomer to the national political scene. The latter's victory has been due to the former's bad reputation among many segments of society who viewed him as a representative of the few rich. Thus, Ahmadinejad's victory has demonstrated that important sections of the population were not satisfied with the legacy of the previous post-war administrations who had neglected the issue of socio-economic justice.<sup>109</sup>

Offering an alternative reading, in a study published after this election, Djavad Salehi-Isfahani attempted to explain the return of populist politics in Iran relating it to poverty and inequality—both central issues of the country's political debate before as well as after the revolution. His findings show that contrary to common assumptions poverty had substantially declined over the previous years—and is low compared to both international standards and the pre-revolution years. Nonetheless, the IRI's successes in reducing poverty have not translated into less inequality. In fact, inequality, after falling in the immediate post-revolutionary period, has overall remained at the level of the early 1970s. The economist further notes:

This finding should not be surprising because in general lower poverty does not imply lower inequality, and the link is even less obvious in the case of an oil exporting country. International evidence suggests that growth should lower poverty, but the evidence for inequality is mixed. Economic growth can in the initial phase worsen inequality before improving it.<sup>110</sup>

On the question why populism resurfaced, Salehi-Isfahani concludes:

Estimates of the trends in poverty and inequality based on extensive survey data [...] question the importance of poverty and inequality as underlying factors in the rise of populism in Iran. They show that at least on this account the Revolution has not failed its most ardent supporters. After increasing sharply during the war with Iraq, poverty has declined fairly continuously

<sup>108</sup> Posch 2011c.

<sup>109</sup> See also Abrahamian 2008a: 183–194; Ansari 2007: Pt. 1.

<sup>110</sup> Salehi-Isfahani 2009a: 18.

and is now considerably lower than it was before the Revolution. Furthermore, the sharpest reduction in poverty took place during the period of pro-market reforms under the Rafsanjani and Khatami administrations, thus undermining the thesis that resurgent populism in Iran is a reaction to these reforms. [...] But, as far as the rise of populism in recent years is concerned, rising inequality could not be blamed for pushing a large number of voters away from reformists and into the populist camp because there was no increase in inequality immediately preceding the 2005 election.<sup>111</sup>

In yet another account, University of Tehran sociologist Ali A. Saeidi traces the roots of populism back to the 1979 revolution which replaced neo-patrimonial authority by one of charismatic authority personified in the figure of the *Rahbar*. Hence, populist economics was introduced by Khomeini, veiling his often contradictory ideas about society and state, at times calling the poor and the “oppressed” the pillars of the revolution, at others the *bazaaris*. Ultimately, the era of economic populism came to a halt with the demise of Khomeini. Saeidi concludes his study:

The revolutionary situation pushed the state to implement its rhetorical promises and its populist economic policies through subsidisation, direct control of prices and two-tier pricing based on coupon allocation for certain products during the period 1980–1988. Consequently, the budget deficit worsened tremendously as a result of pervasive subsidies on food, bank credit and foreign exchange. The budget deficit also deteriorated violently because of a steep decline in tax collection. Although it seemed that Rafsanjani’s and Khatami’s governments [...] showed their awareness of the underlying populist policies by proposing far-reaching rational economic reforms, both reforms have been hampered by these undeclared populist economic policies as a result of political instability.<sup>112</sup>

Salehi-Isfahani adds:

To diminish the causal role of poverty and inequality in the populist backlash [...] is not to argue that broad economic dissatisfaction had nothing to do with the voters’ switch from liberal and reformist politics of President Khatami to populist and conservative politics of President Ahmadinejad.

<sup>111</sup> Ibid.: 24.

<sup>112</sup> Saeidi 2001: 234.

The challenge is to explain the appeal of populism around 2005, at a time of relative prosperity, falling poverty, and stable inequality.<sup>113</sup>

It is a remarkable but little noticed fact that significant popular political shifts in Iran, first in late 1970s and again in 2005, have taken place during economic booms. One possible explanation for such shifts toward populism is the understandable tendency of the lower classes to turn to a leader with a modest personal fortune (Khomeini in 1979 and Ahmadinejad in 2005) at times when the state is in a position to dispose of a large amount of oil money. Lack of transparency in the Iranian economy in general, and about how the oil rent is distributed in particular, thus fuels envy and complicates politics precisely at times when the economy is poised for rapid growth.<sup>114</sup>

However, he cautions that firm conclusions about the interplay between the economy on the one hand and social and political change on the other could not be drawn with certainty.<sup>115</sup>

According to Iranian political economist Mohammad Maljoo, the rise of the Ahmadinejad faction can in fact be seen against the background of disillusioned former IRGC members who were sidelined in the previous 16 years, i.e. during the Hashemi-Rafsanjani and Khatami administrations, when merely one part of the bourgeoisie (or power élite) ruled the country. With Ahmadinejad assuming the presidency, supported by groups who were at the margins of economic and political power, the milieu associated with his administration underwent a process of *embourgeoisement*, Maljoo argues. As a result, factional infighting among the IRI's political élite intensified. Class analysis then sheds light on these intra-bourgeois, hence intra-class power struggles—a key theme in Iranian politics during Ahmadinejad's second term (2009–2013) when it came to define the domestic and international course of the country.<sup>116</sup>

### *Factionalism and Social Bases*

The most important source of income in the IRI is, as indicated, rents deriving from oil and gas sales. This gives the political élite relative independence from society, exacerbated by the fact that economically state-society relations are not regulated by taxes but by a web of direct and

<sup>113</sup> Salehi-Isfahani 2009a: 25.

<sup>114</sup> Ibid.: 26.

<sup>115</sup> Ibid.

<sup>116</sup> See BBC PTV 2013; author's interview with Maljoo.

indirect subsidies.<sup>117</sup> As Akhavi-Pour and Azondanloo have argued in a 1998 article, social, political and economic policies in the IRI are not shaped by religious ideology but by the economic bases of the different political factions.<sup>118</sup>

As already stated, in the absence of party structures, factions with a poor degree of “party discipline” have evolved in specific periods, whose boundaries have proven to be fluid and which are often centred around influential figures. The first phase after Khomeini’s demise was marked by post-revolutionary politics under the duumvirate of Supreme Leader Khamenei and President Hashemi-Rafsanjani, which finally broke in 1994. From 1997 on, Khatami coined the term *eslâh-talab* (reform), a project to which Hashemi-Rafsanjani lent his support. The latter political configuration lasted until the 2004 parliamentary elections and was ultimately ended with the 2005 presidential election.<sup>119</sup> In the following, four political factions of the political élite, which are a result of a long-term process of political differentiation, that were dominant in the 2000s shall be presented.<sup>120</sup>

### *The Traditional Conservatives*

The most powerful and best organized faction of the political élite are the conservatives (*mohâfezeh-kârân*) or the traditional Right (*Râst-e Sonnatî*), who originated in the revolutionary alliance between the clergy and the bazaar. As shall be seen, there are some overlaps with the Hashemi-Rafsanjani camp. The bulk of that group consists of (1) clerics and religious figures in Qom and Tehran, including some influential ayatollahs from the Society of Seminary Teachers of Qom and also some Hashemi-Rafsanjani affiliates; (2) the conservatives’ main organization is the once-almighty Coalition of Islamic Societies, rooted in the Bazaar, and its aligned organizations as well as the Combatant Clergy Association, influential conservative clerics who organized themselves semi-formally in the early 1980s and soon became dominant in the Guardian Council, the Special Court for the Clergy and the Assembly of Experts; and (3) many influential IRGC figures. Most Friday prayer imams, who also act as the

<sup>117</sup> Rakel 2009b: 112; Maloney 2000.

<sup>118</sup> Akhavi-Pour and Azondanloo 1998.

<sup>119</sup> Posch 2005a: 2.

<sup>120</sup> For a reflection on some of the terms used in the following categorization, such as “left”, “right” and “neo-conservative”, and their Western origins, see Ansari 2007: 19–22.

*Rahbar*'s representatives to the provinces, also belong to this camp.<sup>121</sup> As a result,

[t]he conservatives are thus in a strategic control of key institutions of the state, extending from the office of the leader at the top into the depths of the bureaucracy, and can therefore shape and influence the overall policy postures of the Islamic Republic in a variety of ways.<sup>122</sup>

However, with the ascendance of the so-called principalists (see below), Ahmadinejad replaced the bureaucratic apparatus of the state with his affiliates.

The social base of the conservatives is composed of various sections of the middle class, most importantly the devout bourgeoisie (including high- to low-ranking preachers and bazaaris, who favour a continued commitment to Islamist ideology), but also including some with more moderate and technocratic tendencies. Both of these sections promote a mercantile economy and the right to private property. Its economic sources mainly derive from official state sources (fiscal instruments, like taxes, fees and borrowings, as well as revenues from oil and gas sales, like foreign exchange), and the bulk of existing non-official sources connected to a vast area of religious institutions (religious taxes, mosques, holy sites and Bonyads). Therefore, this faction has had the institutional as well as the financial means to keep its dominant position in the country's politics and economy.<sup>123</sup>

#### *The Centrists: The Pragmatic Conservatives*

With obvious overlaps with the former faction, rooted in a shared past of political alliance, this centrist camp is alternatively called "modernists", the "modern Right" (*Râst-e moderne*), technocrats or pragmatic conservatives. This camp, embracing regime technocrats and bureaucratic insiders, many of whom belonging to the Executives of Construction Party, is basically the circle of power around one of the founding fathers of the IRI, a key political figure ever since and one of Iran's wealthiest men, (the late) Hashemi-Rafsanjani. In contrast to the traditional conservatives, they are in favour of modernizing the economy. Here, tendencies vary from partial

<sup>121</sup> Kamrava 2007: 88; Posch 2010b: 4.

<sup>122</sup> Kamrava 2007: 88.

<sup>123</sup> Akhavi-Pour and Azodanloo 1998: 75–81.

liberalization so as not to alienate the more traditional constituencies they share with the traditional conservatives, to a neoliberal opening that can benefit the upper middle class. After the Hashemi-Rafsanjani presidency, they have lent their support to the reformist Khatami administration, with which they largely share a common outlook on social, economic and political issues.<sup>124</sup>

Their economic sources derive from the official fiscal instruments mentioned above as well as the network of companies that benefited from Hashemi-Rafsanjani's liberalization of the economy in the 1990s.

### *The Reformists (1997–2004)*

The reformists' (*Eslâh-Talabân*) key proclaimed goals are the reform of the IRI by giving more weight to democratic elements (however, short of disbanding the position of the *Rahbar*) and human rights, creating what they call an "Islamic democracy". Ideologically, they stand in the "nationalist-religious" (*melli-maz'habi*) tradition dating back to the 1950s and 1960s.<sup>125</sup> Their origins can be traced back to various developments. By the latter half of the 1980s when among the conservative camp a group emerged calling for moderation, pragmatism and reform in domestic and foreign affairs. In 1988, more moderate clerics from the Combatant Clergy Association formed a rival group named the Association of Combatant Clerics. In 1997, now clearly identified as *Eslâh-Talabân*, their candidate Mohammad Khatami won the presidency. Two reformist organizations, made up of civil-service and private-sector professionals as well as moderate clerics, were founded: The Islamic Iran Participation Front party and the Mojahedin of the Islamic Revolution Organization, 'a circle of intellectuals and technocrats radical in economic policies but relatively liberal in cultural matters'.<sup>126</sup>

The reformist coalition can be divided in centre-right and centre-left: (1) The before-mentioned modern or technocratic right (*Râst-e moderne*), mostly identified with Hashemi-Rafsanjani. (2) The already mentioned Islamic Left, former revolutionary firebrands, who after being politically sidelined during the Khamenei and Hashemi-Rafsanjani administrations had turned into moderates who were henceforth favouring the democratization of the system, the promotion of private businesses and

<sup>124</sup> Posch 2005a: Table 1.

<sup>125</sup> Kamrava 2007: 88–90.

<sup>126</sup> Abrahamian 2008a: 185.

privatization, and a careful opening-up of the country towards the world. These parties and organizations have enjoyed grassroots support and are active throughout the country. Beyond those élite circles, the reformist agenda appealed to many across the political spectrum, including secular democrats, and the semi-legal FMI lent their support to them,<sup>127</sup> as did various pro-democracy movements, including trade unionists, students, women, ethnic and religious minorities, in the hope to see civil liberties and human rights.<sup>128</sup> Hence, the reformists'

ability to motivate such diverse constituencies reaching from Tehran's upper-class liberals to Sunni fundamentalists and ethnic minorities whilst at the same time continuing to attract part of the vote from the Islamist and conservative sectors of society, was the key to their success, twice leading to the victory in the presidential elections of Mr Khatami.<sup>129</sup>

In general, their social base consists of the liberal-leaning intelligentsia (academics, writers, journalists and former political figures) and large segments of the middle class.

The Green Movement inside Iran that emerged in 2009 can be described as a continuation of the reformist movement as it acts within the reformist, intra-systemic opposition framework in many respects: (a) Non-violent and thus legal protestation against the authoritarian state due to memories of revolutionary violence and as a means not to provoke the use of the state's monopoly over force; (b) democratizing the IRI by building upon the concepts and ideas formulated by the reformists; and (c) countrywide party structures with experienced cadres and activists.<sup>130</sup>

The reformists' economic sources lie in the official fiscal instruments. Moreover, it can be presumed that they can draw on two additional resources: (1) that of the pragmatic conservatives when in alliance with them, such as in the 2009 presidential campaigns of Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi that were supported by Hashemi-Rafsanjani; (2) due to their personal connections to the Khomeini clan (*Beyt-e Khomeini*), institutions connected to the latter, such as the Sadr Foundation and the Holy Shrine Complex of Imam Khomeini where the latter's grandson

<sup>127</sup> Posch 2010b: 2–3.

<sup>128</sup> See Rostami-Povey 2010: 57–75.

<sup>129</sup> Posch 2010b: 3.

<sup>130</sup> Ibid.: 3–4.

Hassan Khomeini, who supported the above “Green” candidatures, assumes the position of chancellor and president.

*The Neo-conservatives (2005–2012)*

The origins of the hardliners—alternatively called revolutionary fundamentalists, radicals, ultra-conservatives, neo-conservatives, neo-fundamentalists or utopian revolutionaries—are traced back to the early days of the revolution where a group of die-hard revolutionaries entered the political stage, being ‘ardent believers in the original populist slogans of the revolution—supporting the disadvantaged and the destitute, fighting corruption and defending the Islamic Republic against its enemies’<sup>131</sup> both external and internal.

Many volunteered in the IRGC or the *Basij*, fighting both the “Holy Defence” against Iraq and internal dissenters. By the end of the war, many had reached command positions within the IRGC or entered the state bureaucracy, in many cases becoming provincial administrators and governors. However, given the emergence of a class of *nouveaux riches* as a result of then-President Hashemi-Rafsanjani’s neoliberal economic policies, socio-economic frustration settled in among many of them. However, as already noted, in a pragmatic move aimed at avoiding internal conflicts with those many thousands of returning soldiers, Hashemi-Rafsanjani opened the economy—that was set on a path of post-war reconstruction—to the IRGC and the *Basij*, where they assumed instrumental positions.<sup>132</sup>

Organizationally, the hardliners are less clearly structured than the reformists, but similar to them, their affiliated parties and organizations have often competing agendas and are riddled with personal rivalries, while being composed of a variety of often small but outspoken radical organizations (some of them vigilantes). As Posch notes, ‘Many of these groups are inspired by the *Fedâ’iân-e Eslâm*, a radical utopian Islamist movement of the 1940s and 1950s, rather than by Imam Khomeini.’<sup>133</sup> Among that latter fundamentalist milieu we can count (1) the followers of influential hardline Twelver Shia cleric Ayatollah Mohammad-Taghi Mesbah-Yazdi, seen as Ahmadinejad’s spiritual mentor, who has been a member of the Assembly of Experts where he leads a minority ultra-conservative faction, while he also directs the 1995-established Imam

<sup>131</sup> Kamrava 2007: 90.

<sup>132</sup> Ansari 2010.

<sup>133</sup> Posch 2010b: 4.

Khomeini Education and Research Institute (*Mo'aseseh-ye Âmouzeshti va Pezhooheshi-e Emâm Khomeini*) in Qom, an important academic institution with many links to the intelligence community;<sup>134</sup> and (2) *Ansâr-e Hezbollah*, a vigilante militia created on behalf of war veterans.<sup>135</sup>

A key reason for the hardliners' ascendance to power lies in the building of an anti-reformist coalition between traditional conservatives and neo-conservatives. Around 2002, as Posch points out, the entire anti-reformist political spectrum created a new framework for political action, namely the Coordination Council of Revolutionary Forces under the leadership of Hojjatoleslam Mostafa Pour-Mohammadi, who served both as Intelligence and as Interior Minister.<sup>136</sup> Soon the Council became the driving force behind sidelining the reformists and aiding the ascendance to power of Ahmadinejad and his allies.<sup>137</sup> This new right-wing faction, the Principalists (*Osoulgarâ*), integrated both traditional conservatives and hardliners. There emerged two poles of political identities, one conservative, the other utopian. The conservative current was centred around Ali Larijani, Mohsen Rezaee and Mohammad-Bagher Ghalibaf, who were referring to themselves as "moderate principalists". The utopian current was formed around Ahmadinejad and Mesbah-Yazdi, which incrementally alienated the conservative one, who even before the controversial 2009 presidential election had adopted the reformist designation of "extremists" (*efrâtigar*) when referring to Ahmadinejad—a term Khomeini had used in the 1980s to label groups that were later suppressed or purged.

The principalists' more extreme utopian current had the vision to bring about a profound transformation of the regime: Ideologically, the Islamic Republic (*Jomhouri-ye Eslâmi*) was to be disposed of its people-oriented, semi-republican pillar, and instead be transformed into an Islamic Government (*Hokoumat-e Eslâmi*) system.<sup>138</sup> Politically, this meant turning the authority of the Supreme Leader and his *Beyt* into an absolute one. Such a scenario was also approved of by the IRGC command whose former members had already been placed across the political system. For

<sup>134</sup> Mesbah-Yazdi's English website is at <http://mesbahyazdi.net/english/index.asp>; and the Institute's website is at <http://www.qabas.net/> [24/12/2010].

<sup>135</sup> Posch 2010b: 4.

<sup>136</sup> Ibid.

<sup>137</sup> Ibid.: 4–5.

<sup>138</sup> One of Khomeini's books, based on a series of lectures in Najaf by early 1970, bears the same title, *Islamic Government: Governance of the Jurist* (translated by Hamid Algar, London: Alhoda, 2002).

*Hokoumat-e Eslâmi* to materialize, then-President Ahmadinejad had to be re-elected in 2009 and the reformists had to be ultimately eliminated from the political scene.<sup>139</sup>

Especially after the June 2009 presidential election, the hardliners called the reformists ideological and religious deviators (*monharef*) who would, either consciously or not, collaborate with the West to prepare a “velvet revolution”, thus paving the way for these “enemies of God” (*mohârebeh*) to be fought by all means necessary. Yet, in the election itself, the hardliner Ali-Akbar Nateq-Nouri had declared his support for reformist contender Mousavi.<sup>140</sup>

The June 2005 presidential election won by Ahmadinejad (inaugurated in August) against Hashemi-Rafsanjani led to an alliance between reformists and conservatives, ‘sustained by an ideological affinity born of current circumstances and the defensive predicaments in which both groups find themselves’. Despite differences on the ideal nature of the domestic polity and its politics, the two camps seemed to have reached ‘broad consensus over Iran’s national security’, only ‘to differ on *degree* and perhaps even *method* but not on basic objectives’. In contrast to the radicals, both reformers and conservatives favour moderation and improved international ties.<sup>141</sup>

### *Political and Geopolitical Culture in the IRI: The Élite’s and State’s Identity Constructions and Interests*

This section deals with the IRI’s dominant political and geopolitical culture (in the singular) as shared by the political élite and sanctioned by the state. Here, geopolitical culture is understood as the combination of the prevalent geopolitical imagination and the particular institutional arrangement of the state.<sup>142</sup>

#### *“Islamic Iran”: Élite Consensus in the IRI*

If one compares the geopolitical radiuses of Iranian nationalism or civilization and Shiism, one recognizes a quasi-overlap. Thus, it could be argued that this first geopolitical circle is “Irano-Islamic”.<sup>143</sup> This point can be

<sup>139</sup> Posch 2010b: 5–6.

<sup>140</sup> Ibid.: 5–6.

<sup>141</sup> Kamrava 2007: 91.

<sup>142</sup> Ó Tuathail 2004: 85.

<sup>143</sup> Author’s interview with Hafeznia.

validated by the fact that this is shared by a diverse spectrum within the political élite, including the Supreme Leader and the Green Movement.

For instance, on 10 November 2010, the first of thenceforth regularly planned conventions for Strategic Thoughts was held in Tehran and attended by thinkers, academics and theologians. Supreme Leader Khamenei, who presided over the meeting, called for the development of an “Islamic–Iranian model for progress”, which as a “master plan” should determine the country’s path in the realms of ‘intellect, science, lifestyle and spirituality’. Using all existing capacities, he stressed, the notion of Islamic requires that model to pursue Islamic teachings when it comes to set aspirations, values or methods. ‘Our society and government are Islamic. We are proud that we could draw up our own model of progress based on Islamic resources’, Khamenei then explained. The notion of Iranian, on its part, stipulates the model to consider the historical, geographical, cultural, economic and social conditions of Iran. ‘The term also points to the origin of the model. It is actually an effort by the thinkers of the land of Iran to draw up the future of the country’, he stated.<sup>144</sup>

The Green Movement in its manifesto, the “Green Charter”, released by its most prominent leader Mousavi, defines its identity as well as that of the nation as “Iranian–Islamic”. The charter points to an allegedly consensual nature of such an identity:

The secret to the survival of the Iranian–Islamic civilization is the coexistence and convergence of national and religious values in the history of our land. In this vein, the Green Movement emphasizes the protection and strengthening of the high values of Iranian culture and our accumulated wealth in the form of our national traditions and customs, and sets as its goal making people aware of the special national and religious traditions that give us our identity.<sup>145</sup>

As such and despite its diversity, the Green Movement can barely be seen as the retrieval of Iranians’ cosmopolitan culture, as Dabashi has suggested,<sup>146</sup> since it largely neglects the socialist component of Iran’s political culture. Rather this Iranian–Islamic amalgam was initially invoked by the reformist President Khatami’s use of *Irānīyat* and *Islāmiyat*, which

<sup>144</sup> Khamenei 2010b.

<sup>145</sup> Sahimi 2010. See also Holliday 2011: 143–144.

<sup>146</sup> Dabashi 2010: ch. 8.

according to Shabnam Holliday, alongside “dialogue among civilizations” and “Islamic democracy” has constituted the three pillars of what she calls an “Islamist–Iranian counter-state discourse”.<sup>147</sup> In fact, the latter two pillars are rejected by the IRI’s more conservative sections of the political élite.

Another variant has been proffered by Abdolkarim Soroush, a prominent “religious intellectual” philosopher, who added a Western element to that Iranian–Islamic pedigree:

We Iranian Muslims are the inheritors and carriers of three cultures at once. As long as we ignore our links with the elements in our triple cultural heritage and our cultural geography, constructive social and cultural action will elude us. [...] The three cultures that form our common heritage are of national, religious, and Western origins.<sup>148</sup>

This argument, made in the context of the vastly popular dissemination in Iran of Western politico-philosophical literature in the 1990s during the reformist period, sought to legitimize the ‘appropriation and adoption’ of Western ideas.<sup>149</sup> Despite its peculiar forcefulness within the contest between reformists and their hardline critics wary of anything Western, on a more general level we can observe that Soroush’s argument is one mainly based on religion that is seen as tantamount to civilization, according to which Islamic Iran and the Christian West were ‘after all sister civilizations, and the Islamic Republic was (in theory at least) the living embodiment of this ideal’.<sup>150</sup> Here, Khiabany’s critique of “Islamic communication theory” can be adopted, namely that ‘civilisations are framed and explained in religious terms and religion is regarded as the foundation of civilisation’.<sup>151</sup> Reflecting Soroush’s idea is Khatami’s concept of the “Dialogue of Civilizations” that sought to bridge a “cultural gap” between two ‘*intellectual equals*’.<sup>152</sup> However, there is a clear hierarchy within this triad,

<sup>147</sup> Holliday 2010, 2011: ch. 5.

<sup>148</sup> Soroush, Abdolkarim (2000) ‘The Three Cultures’, in *Reason, Freedom and Democracy in Islam: Essential Writings of Abdolkarim Soroush*, translated, edited, and with a Critical Introduction by Mahmoud Sadri and Ahmad Sadri, Oxford (UK) and New York: Oxford University Press, pp. 156–170, here p. 156; cited in Ansari 2006: 246.

<sup>149</sup> Ansari 2007: 19.

<sup>150</sup> Ansari 2006: 257.

<sup>151</sup> Khiabany 2006: 7.

<sup>152</sup> See Ansari 2006: 257–259.

according to Soroush: ‘Islamic culture [...] is qualitatively and quantitatively the dominant culture of Iran.’<sup>153</sup>

Yet in another variant, “religious intellectualism” is being othered along with liberalism and socialism. In an article titled ‘Analysis and Typology of Political Thinking in Iranian Contemporary History’ (in Persian), Khajesarvi and Ghorbani discuss “religious intellectualism”, liberalism and socialism as strands—often overlapping—of political thinking in contemporary Iran, which they concede still do not have lost their public appeal. Yet, they dismiss all of them as “ideologies” that have a totalizing, non-theoretical and overtly political tendency, and as such are inadequate to present viable solutions to challenges of Iranian society as they being ideologies have a “limited expiry date”. Their representatives, according to the authors, have rather engaged in political commentary and critique, than in statements derived from “scientific research” to provide solutions for societal problems. As such, in the long term, they are ‘not able to fill the theoretical needs of society’.<sup>154</sup>

Of course, it should be noted that if we take the entire discursive field into account, the IRI has, in order to maintain the hegemony of the Islamist narrative over others, pursued a politics of history and memory to denigrate the legacy of the monarchical *Ancien Régime* by branding nationalism as a reactionary political ideology when compared to Islamism’s universal aspiration. This helps cement the hegemony of that discursive framework in the IRI. The problem, however, remains with the fact that once such an Islamic–Iranian dual identity has been defined and presented as something innate, other Iranian identities (e.g. other religions or atheists) and political cultures (above all the socialist one) are *de facto* excluded or “othered”.

*“Islam Is the Only Way”: Constructing the State’s Political Culture and Its Ramifications*

In the previous chapter, we discussed the complex interactions among Iran’s various modern political cultures (or politico-ideological formations). In the last section, we have turned to identifying the dominant state identity as constructed by the IRI’s political élite (i.e. “Islamic–Iranian”). Now, we shall identify the state’s dominant political culture as constructed in relation to alternative political cultures.

<sup>153</sup> Ibid., p. 162; cited in Ansari 2006: 246.

<sup>154</sup> Khajesarvi and Ghorbani 2014: 70.

The deification of an Islamic or, for that matter, Iranian–Islamic identity is all the more effective when coupled with the dismissal or disqualification of other political cultures—in other words, through a process of “othering”. A look at Supreme Leader Khamenei’s speeches over the last decade show that he has consistently addressed the issue of various politico-ideological formations in the effort to discuss and define the state’s prevalent political culture. His regular devotion to that topic suggests the significance, if not urgency, to engage with and clarify the question of the political culture that is being sanctioned and legitimized by the state, which can then be established as consensus within the IRI’s political élite including its various factions.

As the following discussion shall demonstrate, the effort to position Islam(ism) as the only legitimate political culture of the state embraces a discursive process of co-opting elements from other rivalling political cultures into the dominant Islamist one, while dismissing some key elements of the former. More precisely, such a process involves: (a) socialism and liberalism (the latter often invoked as euphemism for secularism, including secular nationalism) as exogenous phenomena, with their proponents being more or less painted as followers of an extrinsic idea as well as agents at the service of a malign external political agenda; (b) portraying socialism and liberalism as having failed globally, which helps undermine legitimacy for their domestic application in Iran; (c) presenting Islam as constituting the only indigenous and authentic path, able to integrate positive elements from those rivalling political cultures, while banning the latter’s allegedly negative aspects. As a result, as can be detected from Khamenei’s speeches, in economic policy terms, Islam pays attention to both workers (as does socialism) and capital (as does liberalism), but ultimately, as can be detected from his discussions, capital is being favoured over labour—in other words, Islam(ism) adopts socialism’s rhetoric but follows (neo-)liberalism as economic model.

### **The Global Failure of Socialism and Liberalism—And the Triumph of Islam(ism)**

Khamenei argues that both socialism and liberalism have not stood the test of history. While the failure of socialism could be best illustrated with the demise of the Soviet bloc (he ironically echoes liberalism-inspired arguments in this regard), that of liberalism has been proven more recently. After the 2008 global financial crisis that had above all hit the Western world, Khamenei is quoted as saying that the ‘increasing economic

problems in the west and Europe have been caused by the nature of capitalism, namely the rule of capital'.<sup>155</sup> For him this is an important reason why the West is in decline, as a result of having followed the allegedly misleading model of a "liberal economy". He then triumphantly declares: 'But they [the West—*AFN*] will not manage to make it right. This path is the path of downfall. They are going down.'<sup>156</sup>

As socialism and liberalism have allegedly failed, Islam is presented as the only authentic and viable solution. Hence, on the occasion of the Arab Revolts, or the "wave of Islamic Awakening" as Khamenei interpreted and injected it as the IRI's official reading, he again denigrates socialism and liberalism before deifying Islam(ism):

With the decline of imported and controversial ideologies such as socialism and Marxism, and with the unveiling of the real nature of western liberal democracy as a system founded on hypocrisy and deceit, it has become clear that Islam is after justice and freedom. Islam has now become the main wish of prominent figures, scholars and those who seek justice and freedom. Many youth and liberated people in Islamic countries have turned to political, cultural and social jihad, aiming to promote Islamic justice. They are strengthening the determination to stand up against the hegemony of the arrogant powers.<sup>157</sup>

Here again, by positioning "Islam" in relation to other ideologies, he presents it as the only solution. In fact, by claiming that 'Islam is after justice and freedom', he implicitly suggests that "Islam" has adopted the positive key principles of both, namely that of justice (taken from socialism) and that of freedom (adopted from liberalism).

### **Disqualifying Socialism as a Way to Preserve the Capitalist Political Economy of the State**

As noted, Khamenei denounces both liberalism and socialism as being exogenous, thus imported ideologies.<sup>158</sup> Yet, he opts to lay out the state's dominant political culture in relation to those ideologies he rejects, in doing so basically echoing the IRI's main slogan, "Neither Eastern, nor Western, (only) the Islamic Republic":

<sup>155</sup> Khamenei 2012c.

<sup>156</sup> Ibid.

<sup>157</sup> Khamenei 2011a.

<sup>158</sup> See also Khamenei 2014a.

We accept democracy [*mardom-sâlâri râ qaboul dârim*] and we also accept freedom, but we do not accept liberal democracy. Although the literal meaning of “liberal democracy” is both freedom and democracy, the term is commonly associated with certain concepts which we despise [*bizâr-im*]. We do not want to use the term for the immaculate, wholesome, righteous and pure concept that we have in mind. Therefore, we need to select a new name for our favourite system: “Islamic democracy” [*Mardom-sâlâri-e Eslâmi*] or “Islamic Republic”. Similarly, to refer to [the concepts of] the just distribution of wealth and the collective use of public wealth, which is one of the lofty and fundamental goals of Islam, we do not want to use the term “socialism”. Although the literal meaning of socialism is related to those concepts, it is associated with other concepts which we despise. For, it [socialism] has come to be associated with certain realities in society and throughout history that are unacceptable to us. Therefore, instead of the terms that were prominent among Leftists, Marxists and the like, the terms of *estekbâr* [“arrogance” or imperialism—AFN], *estez’âf* [impoverishment—AFN], [...] *mardomi-boudan* [literally, “popular” or “based on people’s will”—AFN], we have discussed and introduced them.<sup>159</sup>

It is instructive here that Khamenei recognizes the importance of socialist-inspired concepts, not least in terms of wealth distribution, but falls short of being more precise of what he actually regards as contemptible about socialism. The answer to this puzzle can be found in another speech. There, he acknowledges the important role of workers in the victory of the 1979 revolution, but he instantly dismisses labour activism in the latter’s immediate aftermath—by which we can assume he means strikes and socialist-inspired workers’ organization (as noted before). Khamenei then praises the fact that “religious labourers” had opposed the activism of other workers whom he reproaches to have followed an external political agenda (i.e. one set by the Soviet Union) and as such having *de facto* acted against the “Islamic Revolution”.<sup>160</sup>

Khamenei’s speech on the occasion of Labour Day 2013 helps clarify his stance regarding the framework for economic policy and capital–labour relations. Talking about Iran’s need to make a “quantum leap” in economic and political arenas, he argues that unlike liberal and socialist outlooks on the economy, Islam has adopted a middle way,

<sup>159</sup> Khamenei 2011a.

<sup>160</sup> Khamenei 2013b.

a moderate, humanitarian and justice-based outlook in all arenas such as this [economic] arena. It acknowledges the rights of both this side and that side. It wants them to have a feeling of brotherhood, not hostility, towards one another. It wants everybody to pay attention to their divine responsibilities.<sup>161</sup>

In other words, Khamenei claims “Islam” respects capital as well as labour, while implicitly warning of a “hostile” relationship between the two, which can be again a reference to the use of strikes by workers. In the same address, he summarizes his views as follows: ‘God has asked us to develop labor. God has asked us to respect the laborer. God has asked us to provide him with welfare and job security. God has also asked us to ensure the safety of capital.’<sup>162</sup> Despite the suggestion of capital and labour standing on equal footing, his contempt of some concepts of socialism (see above) and his suggestion that socialist views would be dominant in economic thinking result in his favouring of capital over labour.<sup>163</sup> Hence, Khamenei’s support for economic privatization does not come as surprise: ‘If the policies of Article 44 of the Constitution were implemented within the specified framework, they will definitely complement [a] justice-based economy.’<sup>164</sup>

The currency of such an anti-socialist and neoliberal line of thinking is also reflected by other parts of the IRI’s political élite, for example, the current Rouhani administration. The new centrist administration has vowed to continue and deepen the neoliberal economic policies pursued so far, while ideologically paving the way for them. For instance, it has been stated that ‘the main task of this government is the erasure of the legacy of Left-toxification [*zodoudan-e âsâr-e chap-zadegi*] in the country’, as voiced by an advisor to Rouhani, and the ‘extinction of sediments [*rosoubât*] of socialist thinking’ that is persisting in the country and results in a ‘hatred for capitalists’, as expressed by his Minister of Intelligence, Hojjatoleslam Mahmoud Alavi.<sup>165</sup>

In conclusion, we can state that the Supreme Leader’s quite regular discussion and concomitant disqualification of socialism is reflective of the

<sup>161</sup> Ibid.

<sup>162</sup> Ibid.

<sup>163</sup> For more details on his views on capital–labour relations, see Khamenei 2009a, b, 2012a.

<sup>164</sup> Khamenei 2012c.

<sup>165</sup> Cited in Amini 2014 and Mather 2014. See also ‘Intelligence Minister Assures Economic Activists of Investment Security in Iran’, *Fars News Agency*, 22 November 2014.

importance he attributes to the currency of socialist ideas and principles in today's Iran. "Othering" those ideas as exogenous and alien to Iran and dismissing some core socialist-inspired principles and actions serves the purpose of guarding against pro-labour ideas and policies suitable to change the politico-economic structure of the capitalist state he presides over.

*Khamenei's Islamist Eclecticism: The Worldview of the IRI's  
Top Ideologue*

As noted, following the revolution the new state pushed for the hegemony of an exclusively Islamist political culture through both coercion (repression against ideas and groups associated with socialism as an independent political project, as well as with secularism or liberalism) and consent (by co-opting key ideas of the competing political cultures of nationalism and socialism-inspired Third-Worldism). To illustrate the IRI's peculiar ideological mix, the worldview of Khomeini's successor and the top ideologue of today's IRI, Ayatollah Khamenei, can be seen as squarely placed within the two politico-ideological formations of Islamism and Third-Worldism (without, of course, suggesting that he can be deemed a representative of the latter).

Khamenei is not only the IRI's head of state and commander-in-chief but also its top ideologue whose regular speeches provide an important glance into the ideational framework underpinning Tehran's domestic and foreign policies. Khamenei's worldview is rooted in the ideological and political context of the pre-revolutionary period marked by secular, Leftist, nationalist and Islamist ideas (as depicted earlier). According to Akbar Ganji, '[n]o other present-day marja (senior ayatollah) or prominent faqih (Islamic jurist) has such a cosmopolitan past.' In fact, Khamenei, who was 40 when the revolution occurred, displayed great interest in particularly classical Western novels and was immersed in that pluralistic intellectual milieu of the Iranian opposition during the 1950s and 1960s. 'Unlike many other Islamists, Khamenei had contact with the most important secular opposition intellectuals and absorbed their prerevolutionary discourse', all the while being a seminary student of *sharia* law. Khamenei eventually became an admirer of Sayyid Qutb (1906–1966), an Egyptian intellectual and activist who became the Muslim Brotherhood's chief theoretician. Qutb's Islamist brand saw Islam as an instrument to realize an array of social, economic and political objectives in the revolutionary fight against the post-Ottoman authoritarian states and colonial powers alike. Universal Islam, and not Arab nationalism, was seen as being well-prepared

to confront the pillages of both colonialism and capitalism. In that, there are many similarities to Ayatollah Khomeini's ideology.<sup>166</sup> Moreover, stemming from the U.S. role in the 1953 *coup* and its ensuing support of the Shah's dictatorship, Khamenei shared the anti-Americanism of the opposition and like many of them framed the contempt for U.S. power primarily in Third-Worldist (and not religious) terms, considering the lack of development and progress in Iran as the main reason for the enmity Iran and other countries of the Global South displayed towards imperialism.<sup>167</sup>

Khamenei's speeches show his deep distrust and disdain for the government policies of the U.S. (which he prefers to call "Global Arrogance") and Israel ("the Zionist entity").<sup>168</sup> Displaying a conspiratorial moment, he often depicts U.S. foreign policy as being manipulated by a powerful bunch of Zionists and their media.<sup>169</sup>

His view on independence basically embraces self-sufficiency as the means to counter the great-powers' desire to hamper Iran's political and economic development. Invoking Khomeini, Khamenei interprets sanctions as an opportunity to bring about self-sufficiency—in other words, sanctions as enabler towards attaining the goal of becoming independent.<sup>170</sup> However, in the wake of the ratcheting-up of sanctions in the latter part of the 2000s, Khamenei increasingly admitted the toll sanctions took upon Iranians, but did not cease to call upon the same to resist this means of economic warfare that was only one additional proof of the ill intention that the enemies harboured for the Iranian nation.

On foreign policy, Khamenei has often been characterized as hardliner. In this vein, Karim Sadjadpour describes his worldview as being obsessed with the U.S., utterly suspicious of its intentions that Khamenei views as ultimately geared towards nothing less than the destruction of the Islamic Republic as a system.<sup>171</sup> However, as Posch has emphasized, it was also Khamenei who in the wake of Barack Obama's election lifted the taboo on normalizing ties with Washington.<sup>172</sup> Both dimensions find a common

<sup>166</sup> See Adib-Moghaddam 2012.

<sup>167</sup> Ganji 2013; see also Khalaji 2014: ch. 2.

<sup>168</sup> See, for example, Khamenei 2010a.

<sup>169</sup> See, for example, Khamenei 2002. For a similar view, see Mowlana 2006.

<sup>170</sup> See, above all, Khamenei 2009a, also Khamenei 2006, 2008a. Also see Sadjadpour 2008: 11–12.

<sup>171</sup> Sadjadpour 2008.

<sup>172</sup> Posch 2013a: 17.

ground in the statements by Iran's top foreign-policy officials since the time of President Ahmadinejad's second term (including the then president himself, his Foreign Minister Ali-Akbar Salehi and their respective successors Rouhani and Zarif), who all consistently emphasized that the Supreme Leader's view would constitute the official position of the IRI towards the U.S.: If Washington is sincere, not ill-minded and open to the IRI's legitimate interests, then there are no hurdles for direct bilateral talks. This formula, indeed, is reflective on the one hand of the ideological and strategic mistrust of Khamenei and other parts of the political élite towards U.S. intentions and policies, and on the other, of their realization of the need for strategic arrangement with the U.S., whose most important element would be the recognition of the IRI as a regional power and the removal of sanctions.

## CONCLUSION

In this chapter we have dealt with the IRI's internal power structure as well as its dominant political and geopolitical culture. *Part A* investigated the military-clerical-commercial complex. It has done so by highlighting the central role occupied by the Supreme Leader and delineating his links to the various components of that state-society complex. Our ensuing short discussion of the IRI's political economy started with the observation of its ideological grounding, resulting in the distribution of wealth among loyalists of the Islamist state and among others leading to the close linkage between clientelistic networks and the organizational structure of Iranian Shia. It then provided an overview of the wealthiest economic entities, which consist of both state and para-statal organizations. It concluded this first part of the chapter by reflecting on the reasons of the IRI's longevity despite expectations to the contrary. Relying on politico-economic studies it found a continuity of class rule between the monarchy and the Islamic Republic, which can be explained by populism conceived as the ruling classes' pro-poor discourse devoid of any actual politico-economic materialization.

*Part B* concerned itself with the political élite in the IRI, consisting of a wide spectrum of Islamist factions, and their prevalent political and geopolitical culture that form the state's ideology. First, a basic overview of the post-war governments' agendas was presented. As to the domestic roots of the transition from the pragmatic and reformist factions, who led the governments after the Iraq-Iran War until 2005, to the coming to

power of the neo-conservatives under the Ahmadinejad administration, it argued that two interrelated phenomena were decisive: The pragmatists' and reformists' neglect of social equality and the striving of a (younger) generation of war veterans to be finally rewarded for their sacrifices by gaining access to the state's resources. Second, it took a closer look at the political factions in identifying their respective social bases, including their main constituencies as well as their respective economic resources composed of official or non-official channels. Third, it identified and analysed the pre-eminent political and geopolitical culture—or in other words, the dominant ideological framework within which foreign policy is made in the IRI. In a first step, we identified an *über*-factional consensus among the political élite—from conservatives to Green Movement leaders—over the country's identity as Islamic as well as Iranian, and concomitantly the overarching importance given to Islam as an essentialized concept. In the next step, examining the state's political culture chiefly relying on speeches by Supreme Leader Khamenei, we have seen an acute engagement with the rivalling political cultures of socialism and liberalism. We have argued that disqualifying the latter two not only serves the purpose of portraying Islamism as the only state-sanctioned political culture, but particularly the dismissal of socialist-inspired economic actions can be understood as a way to safeguard the IRI's particular politico-economic arrangement of capital being favoured over labour. Here, our theoretical concern on the relationship between ideas and material interests was addressed, leading to the conclusion that regarding the political culture as sanctioned by the IRI state, the material concerns, that is, the safeguarding of the reigning political economy, clearly takes precedence. Lastly, we turned to Supreme Leader Khamenei's worldview in order to illustrate the state's dominant geopolitical culture. Despite his pan-Islamic leanings, we have seen an eclectic worldview composed of important pan-Islamic and Third-Worldist elements, upon which the agenda of U.S. foreign policy is being rationalized as aiming towards the undermining of Iran's independence and development.

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## EXPERT INTERVIEWS WITH

- Prof. Cyrus Bina, May 2009, London & via e-mail, 23 November 2014, on the role of culture in a capitalist environment.
- Dr. Mohammad Maljoo, January 2013, London, on the IRI's domestic power structure, political economy, capital–labour relations and élite factions' social bases.



## Foreign-Policy Schools of Thought and Debates in the IRI

### INTRODUCTION

By exploring the IRI's foreign-policy schools of thought, this chapter will deal with “geostrategic discourses”, defined as ‘particular discursive speech acts about “national security”, and the “strategic interests” of the state’, and “geopolitical discourses”, defined as the ‘crafting and design of a particular spatial account of international affairs by institutions, and by practitioners of foreign policy’.<sup>1</sup> Before doing so, *Part A* will first outline the specific framework of institutions relevant to foreign-policy decision-making in the IRI. *Part B* will then set the stage of our ensuing discussion by introducing the most important foreign-policy schools of thought in the IRI and their views on regional and global geopolitics, which expands on the analysis offered by Farhi and Lotfian. *Part C* will then delve into important foreign-policy debates and controversies of the 2000s, bringing the various schools into conversation with each other.

<sup>1</sup> Toal 2004: 98, Table 6.6.

### (A) FOREIGN-POLICY INSTITUTIONS

Involved in Iranian foreign-policy making are various institutions that operate on political, diplomatic and military levels. More precisely, their respective foci can be generally stated as follows: (1) The Supreme Leader's Office, operating on the political and religious levels, deploys executive power and authority. (2) The president and his administration as well as the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (MFA), acting on the diplomatic front, engage in public diplomacy and the projection of "soft power". (3) The IRGC and its Qods Force, in charge of military tasks, deploys "hard power". They all vary in terms of institutional culture and worldview, and can enter in collaboration, disagreement or competition towards each other.<sup>2</sup>

Of course, the MFA is important in the formulation and implementation process. Like in other countries, its influence is far from being dominant. Its role is largely dependent on decisions made by more powerful figures such as the President, whose foreign-policy powers are also dependent on his persona and his ties to the Supreme Leader, or above all the latter himself. For instance, whereas under President Ahmadinejad, who himself was quite active in foreign policy, the MFA was largely marginalized, its role was enhanced with President Rouhani's decision to assign it with the nuclear file. It is believed that the political weight in foreign-policy decision-making to an important degree depends on personalities. For instance, a strong personality holding the position of President or Foreign Minister can disproportionately impact on foreign-policy decisions.<sup>3</sup> Yet, at the end, the President or the Foreign Minister cannot operate in disregard of wider policy guidelines.<sup>4</sup>

Beyond the MFA and the Presidency, there are a number of other institutions special to the IRI that are intimately involved in the process of foreign-policy making. Relying on various accounts, they are presented in descending order of importance:

*1a—The Office of the Supreme Leader* (Beyt-e Rahbari): According to the Constitution, as noted, the Supreme Leader has the right to direct all policies, be they internal or external. He exerts influence over foreign-policy issues either personally or through his Office that importantly

<sup>2</sup> Sadeghi-Boroujerdi 2014: 14–15.

<sup>3</sup> Author's interview with Sonboli.

<sup>4</sup> Sadeghi-Boroujerdi 2014: 16.

includes his chief foreign-policy advisor Velayati. The *Rahbar* thus intervenes directly or indirectly in foreign policy. Direct intervention is made via public addresses, as well as direct commands (written or oral) to subordinates. Indirect intervention, arguably the way in which he mostly exercises his authority, is done in a great number of ways, largely through institutions and individuals appointed by him (e.g. Velayati and former Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi)<sup>5</sup> or otherwise under his command. These include: Friday-prayer leaders posted all across the country; his representatives in key institutions such as the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) and the IRGC; his representatives in foreign countries (most importantly those in Western Europe); various organizations charged with the spread of the ideological, cultural and intellectual values of the “Islamic Revolution” (the most important of which are the Islamic Propagation Organization, the Organization of Islamic Culture and Communications, and the Center for Promoting Proximity Between the Islamic Religions); his confidants acting outside of institutional frameworks<sup>6</sup> or inside of them.<sup>7, 8</sup>

Despite those wide-ranging authorities boosted by his role of the system’s top ideologue, who moreover can rely on past experiences in defence and foreign policy, strategic decisions on foreign and security policy develop out of debates within the political élite at the end of which the Supreme Leader’s decision stands:

While there is no doubt that the supreme leader wields the highest individual authority, it is equally clear that he relies on a number of councils as well as formal and informal institutions to advise him on foreign policy and national security. As a result, most decisions are made in a permanent interaction between diverse and sometimes competing power centres.<sup>9</sup>

Moreover, there are in fact some key foreign-policy issues where his Office holds the prime authority. Importantly, it is there that Iran’s Lebanon or Hezbollah policies are directed from, while leading Hezbollah figures are

<sup>5</sup> See Rozen 2012.

<sup>6</sup> See *ibid.*

<sup>7</sup> Some argue that the Chairman of the *Majlis* National Security and Foreign Policy Committee acts as mouthpiece for the Supreme Leader.

<sup>8</sup> See also Buchta 2000: 47–52.

<sup>9</sup> Khajehpour et al. 2013.

directly connected to the *Bayt*.<sup>10</sup> Yet, in the sphere of operations, Khamenei ‘affords his appointed [IRGC] commanders a great deal of autonomy’ when they engage in pursuing Iranian “strategic depth” across the region.<sup>11</sup>

*Ib—The Supreme National Security Council (SNSC):* Arguably the central body to gauge elite consensus, the SNSC was formed in 1989 after a revision to the Constitution (see Art. 176). Its membership includes representatives from all three branches of the government, the military and security apparatuses (including the commanders of the IRGC and the regular army as well as the ministers of defence, intelligence and interior), and the Supreme Leader’s representative. Assembling the politically relevant elite, some experts consider the SNSC ‘the main body that decides the direction of Iran’s foreign policy’ as ‘[d]espite differences that exist among all bodies and representatives, the council ensures a consensus among them’.<sup>12</sup>

Except for officials from the executive and legislative branches, all others are directly appointed to the SNSC by the Supreme Leader.<sup>13</sup> Until 2005, the SNSC has conversely proved to wield some influence over Khamenei in crucial foreign-policy decisions, such as in 1998 when Tehran decided not to respond militarily to the killing of its diplomats in Afghanistan by the Taliban and in 2004 when it opted to suspend nuclear enrichment.<sup>14</sup> In brief, as is the case with his relationship towards the Expediency Council, ‘Khamenei exercises substantive control but maintains some degree of latitude in the event he wants to distance himself from a given decision’.<sup>15</sup>

Although, as mentioned earlier, under Rouhani the MFA was tasked with handling nuclear negotiations, the SNSC still holds considerable power to shape nuclear policy and determine the direction of the talks. As Foreign Minister Zarif explained:

The policies and decisions on [the] nuclear issue will be made in the Supreme National Security Council, but negotiations with international parties will

<sup>10</sup> Posch 2011d.

<sup>11</sup> Sadeghi-Boroujerdi 2014: 47–48.

<sup>12</sup> Barzegar 2010a: 184.

<sup>13</sup> For the SNSC’s composition in the context of nuclear decision-making in the 2000s, see Entessar 2009a: 31–32. For its composition during the Rouhani administration, see Sadeghi-Boroujerdi 2014: 17–18.

<sup>14</sup> Khalaji 2014: 44–46.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.: 49.

be done by [the MFA]. Based on necessit[y], the Foreign Ministry is authorized to take appropriate strategies and tactics for negotiations.<sup>16</sup>

However, as described by Rouhani, in the initial years of the nuclear negotiations, decisions were not made at the SNSC but by a so-called heads' meeting (*jaleseh-ye sarân*) which included the heads of all three branches of the government, a majority of SNSC members as well as the Supreme Leader.<sup>17</sup>

*2a—The IRGC:* The IRGC's influence on foreign policy is exerted in the following ways: (1) Maintaining an active presence in Iranian embassies around the world, especially in neighbouring countries and in others deemed of high strategic and/or ideological value for the IRI; (2) the support via its foreign-operations arm, the IRGC-QF, of mostly non-state Islamist actors in regional theatres of conflict (in the Occupied Palestinian Territories, Iraq, Afghanistan, Lebanon, to a lesser extent in Sudan and Bosnia–Herzegovina,<sup>18</sup> and more recently in Syria); (3) influencing the agenda of the SNSC; (4) direct lobbying for certain foreign policies at the Office of the Supreme Leader; (5) shaping foreign-policy debates via its think-tanks. Moreover, the IRGC's influence on foreign policy is boosted because its role as a socio-politico-economic conglomerate in the IRI.

*2b—The Parliament:* The *Majlis'* foreign-policy involvement is exercised in the following ways: the monitoring of international treaties and agreements signed by Iran,<sup>19</sup> legislation pertaining to foreign policy, supervision of the foreign-policy making process via its National Security and Foreign Policy Committee and direct intervention by MPs in foreign-policy debates.<sup>20</sup>

<sup>16</sup> 'Zarif, "Supreme National Security Council is in charge of decision-making on nuclear issue"' (in Persian), *Ettelaat*, 10 September 2013; cited in Khalaji 2014: 50.

<sup>17</sup> One key conclusion from these meetings was that a chief nuclear negotiator should be nominated, who would then also coordinate efforts with other sections in charge of political, technical and legal aspects (Rouhani 2012: 110). In fact, Rohani himself was appointed to assume this role and served as such between 6 October 2003 and 15 August 2005. For the role of the SNSC in national security and foreign policy decision-making, see *ibid.*: 83–89.

<sup>18</sup> See Wehrey et al. 2009: ch. 4.

<sup>19</sup> Throughout the "nuclear crisis", the Parliament's authority to ratify the Additional Protocol to the NPT or conversely opt out of the NPT itself has been consistently highlighted by Iranian officials and by parliamentarians alike as a way to put pressure on their negotiating counterparts.

<sup>20</sup> See Seyfzadeh 2008.

2c—*The Expediency Council's Center for Strategic Research (CSR)*: Created in 1988 to mediate disputes between the Parliament and the Guardian Council, the Expediency Council plays an institutionally important role within the political system; however, it is its research arm, the CSR, that is of importance for foreign policy. CSR 'is set up for the purpose of advising the political élite in general and the Office of the Supreme Leader in particular'.<sup>21</sup> In fact, CSR's primary affiliation has been to the person of Hashemi-Rafsanjani (head of the Expediency Council). Established in 1989, CSR shifted its institutional affiliation along with him, that is, from the Office of the Presidency until 1997 to the Expediency Council thereafter. Being perhaps Iran's most influential think-tank, the CSR has been headed for 21 years by Rouhani before he assumed the presidency in summer 2013 and was succeeded by Velayati in November.

The latter case illustrates that in some instances personal affiliations are more important than institutional ones. Also, beyond those institutions, influence on the foreign-policy process is exerted by influential politicians, independent experts, think-tanks and academics. The latter groups of people are occasionally consulted by the SNSC.

### *The Role of Think-Tanks*

First of all, it is important to note that the activities of think-tanks, that is, research and policy-advising institutes, suffer from the restricted right of free expression in the IRI. As a case in point, according to Manouchehr Mohammadi, former Deputy Foreign Minister for Education and Research Affairs in charge of monitoring the activities of the Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS), the MFA's in-house think-tank, '[i]f every research fellow draws its [*sic*] own conclusion, there will be no effect on the decision-making process', which the interviewer has interpreted that during that specific period of the 2000s. '[t]his point of view outlines the intellectual *dirigisme* at work inside IPIS. All critical opinions are refuted in advance as "non-scientific" or as points of view that weaken and obscure the intellectual identity of the think tank'.<sup>22</sup> Particularly, on such sensitive issues such as the nuclear programme, secrecy and self-censorship have stalled domestic debate.<sup>23</sup> Yet, within the peculiar political framework

<sup>21</sup> Therme 2012: 4.

<sup>22</sup> Therme 2012: 3.

<sup>23</sup> Gerami 2014: ch. 2.

of the IRI, think-tank pundits concerned with foreign policy enjoy relative freedom in expressing their views. In mid-2012, the Supreme Leader has reportedly stated that differences of opinion between those pundits and himself are not regarded as opposition to the *Velâyat-e Faqih*.<sup>24</sup>

By 2010, about 100 think-tanks in various fields of social sciences and more than 50 in other fields have been counted. Most of them were financed by public funds,<sup>25</sup> thus making them not independent from the state.<sup>26</sup> An estimated 2000 researchers have been working in all these think-tanks, including those linked to universities or the private sector. Different political tendencies or centres of power maintain their own think-tanks. They have gained in influence in the multi-centre decision-making process in Iran, and are occasionally called upon to present policy options to decision-makers.<sup>27</sup> Many think-tanks retain an élitist character, which is displayed, on the one hand, by the fact that many of their most critical policy reports are not made available to the public, and on the other, by the poor level of communication that exists between them and civil society. Critics point out that the secretive nature of some think-tank publications can have negative fallouts for the policy front, so that more transparency is advisable. Another problem rests with the fact that although for Iran's international relations, the role of think-tanks in communicating with the outside world is deemed crucial, there is still an important lack of sufficient international contacts and communication.<sup>28</sup> Arguably the most important foreign-policy think-tanks (at least those visible to the Western community) are the above-mentioned CSR and IPIS, as well as the Institute for Middle East Strategic Studies (IMESS)<sup>29</sup> of the Center for Scientific Research and Middle East Strategic Studies (CMESS), and the Majlis Research Center (MCR).

### *Implications for Foreign-Policy Making*

There are a number of consequences resulting from this institutional complexity in terms of the foreign-policy decision-making process and implementation, both positive and negative. The existence of multiple

<sup>24</sup> *Tabnak*, 6 August 2012; cited in Posch 2013a: 10.

<sup>25</sup> Sonboli 2010b.

<sup>26</sup> Therme 2012: 2.

<sup>27</sup> Sonboli 2010b.

<sup>28</sup> Author's interview with Sonboli.

<sup>29</sup> Half of its budget comes from the MFA.

institutions can contribute to a system of oversight and checks-and-balances in the foreign-policy process. (This also applies to the IRI's overall political structure.) During this process, "constructive" and "obstructive power" of various power centres collude:

Our interviews [with over 30 in-depth interviews with senior Iranian political officials, analysts and members of the business community] underline that whenever a decision is made inside the closest circle around Khamenei, the policy will stand and not be challenged by other stakeholders. However, in situations where multiple layers of stakeholders and institutions are involved in the decision-making, it is more likely that decisions will be delayed as another player or interest group could undermine the initiatives of one player. Ongoing bargaining among formal and informal stakeholders usually characterizes decision-making in Iran. One may argue that this is not unique to the Iranian power structure, but what is perplexing is that in many situations, competing stakeholders push for divergent agendas, which in turn sends out confusing signals to the outside world.<sup>30</sup>

A good illustration of such parallelism (*movâzîkâri*) in the eyes of international actors has been Iran's policies in U.S.-occupied Afghanistan and Iraq. While officially Iran has supported the governments in both countries, the IRGC-QF has lent support to non-governmental forces in an effort to contain U.S. power.

In conclusion, despite its complex institutional arrangement, there are discernible patterns through which foreign-policy making and decisions are made, at the core of which stands the formation of élite consensus culminating in the finally binding decision of the Supreme Leader.

## (B) FOREIGN-POLICY SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT

Foreign-policy schools of thought in the IRI, despite their differences that we shall investigate, share a lot of common ground that is overwhelmingly focused on the role of the U.S. They see U.S. policy towards post-revolutionary Iran based on containment, driven by the desire to push back Iran's role and influence in the region even to the extent of posing an existential threat to the IRI. With the Iraq–Iran War this threat perception has been institutionalized in Iran's national security strategy and among its political-security élites. They have also seen U.S. containment policy

<sup>30</sup> Khajepour et al. 2013: 14. See also Bechner 2006.

towards Iran as unwavering, as it is regarded to constitute an indispensable feature of U.S. grand strategy to maintain its global supremacy that is contingent on avoiding the emergence of regional powers in world regions deemed vital to U.S. interests and on securing political, economic and security control there. Reacting to the U.S. threat, Iran has over the last three decades pursued a regional strategy likewise based on containment, resulting in a situation of “reciprocal containment”.<sup>31</sup> Yet, over the past decade, as noted at the outset of this study, significant changes in regional (U.S. wars and Iranian influence) and global geopolitics (post-unipolar world order) have revitalized the debates around Iranian policy among an ever-growing Iranian security and foreign-policy community.

As a starting point, understanding the difference between revolutionary and status-quo ideologies is key for understanding foreign-policy debates in contemporary Iran. While pan-Islamism and Third-Worldism are confrontational towards the international system, Shiism in its traditional form and nationalism are rather accommodating vis-à-vis the status quo.<sup>32</sup> Farhi and Lotfian have proposed a model for depicting the schools of thought within the IRI’s political élite.<sup>33</sup> They correctly point out that it is misleading to simply extrapolate from positions taken domestically to those on foreign policy, usually with reformists and centrists being identified as accommodationists, while more hardline groups are supposed to be ideologically committed to confrontation. The centre of gravity of Iranian debates may vary as a function of outside powers’ behaviour. In other words, foreign-policy schools of thought and their categorization are not contingent upon specific decision-makers but rather upon evolutions in strategic thinking caused by changes in regional and international geopolitical arenas. Yet, such categorization is complicated by the motto that “domestic politics is foreign policy”,<sup>34</sup> that is, that certain actors might adopt or alter their foreign-policy stances depending on the gains or losses they expect for their affiliated camp in domestic politics.

Farhi and Lotfian identify three broad schools, where individuals can hold several positions at the same time or move from one to another: Islamic Idealists, Regional Power Balancers (divided into Offensive and Defensive Realists) and Global Power Balancers (divided into Rejectionists

<sup>31</sup> Barzegar 2014: 89–93.

<sup>32</sup> Posch 2013a: 14.

<sup>33</sup> Farhi and Lotfian 2012.

<sup>34</sup> On this, see Fearon 1998; Schultz 2001, 2005.

**Table 5.1** Foreign-policy schools of thought in the Islamic Republic of Iran

Islamic Idealists	Regional Power Balancers	Global Power Balancers		
	Offensive Realists	Defensive Realists	Rejectionist	Accommodationists

Source: Farhi and Lotfian (2012)

and Accommodationists) (see Table 5.1). Sustained by a strong degree of nationalism, all schools concur on the importance of national sovereignty in the face of outside pressures,<sup>35</sup> or put differently they follow the independence *Leitmotiv*. This is also reflected in the IRI’s Constitution (Art. 152) that prescribes all key principles of Iranian foreign policy: preventing foreign domination over Iran, non-alignment vis-à-vis hegemonic powers, establishing relations with peace-seeking states, rejecting any Iranian hegemonic aspirations, preserving Iran’s independence in all spheres, pan-Islamism and Third-Worldism.<sup>36</sup> As such, the majority of those principles attest Iran’s desire to safeguard independence and national sovereignty (including territorial integrity).<sup>37</sup>

However, within this overall framework, there are degrees of divergence among the schools on a number of issues that shall be discussed in the following. The following discussion will build on Farhi and Lotfian’s contribution, especially their categorization of the schools, and will extensively add further empirical and analytic dimensions to it.

*Islamic Idealists*

Islamic Idealists’ key idea is their view that the “Islamic world” forms the main geopolitical source of power for the IRI. This focus on the “Islamic” character can, for example, be illustrated in the proposition that since 9 out of 11 member-states of the Organization of Gas Exporting Countries (OGEC) are “Islamic”, this fact could lend OGEC the possibility of enhancing the status of the Islamic world, including that of the IRI, within the international system.<sup>38</sup> Much like the Arab nationalist idea of a pan-Arab state,<sup>39</sup> Islamic Idealists see huge potentialities if a united “Islamic world” were to emerge.

<sup>35</sup> See, for example, Farhi and Lotfian 2013.

<sup>36</sup> Haji-Yousefi 2010c: 3.

<sup>37</sup> See Haji-Yousefi 2010c: 3–4.

<sup>38</sup> Zarghani and Dabiri 2014.

<sup>39</sup> See Lustick 1997.

Misleadingly identified with those revolutionary idealists calling for the “export of the revolution” (as discussed above), Islamic Idealists advocate pan-Islamic ecumenical unity but also dialogue between the Muslim and non-Muslim worlds. They also focus on the Palestinian liberation struggle which they framed in Islamic—rather than anti-colonial or Third-World nationalist—terms.<sup>40</sup>

Having tasted the bitter fruit of nationalism, socialism, ba‘thism, berberism and many other -isms, Muslims have realized that the solution to their problems lies not in adopting alien ideologies but in returning to the teachings of Islam. Muslims have witnessed fraudulent independence granted by the departing colonial powers. It has been a cruel hoax. Only the Islamic Revolution offers genuine independence and its example has inspired groups and peoples worldwide, especially in Lebanon (Hizbullah), Palestine ( Hamas and Islamic Jihad ) as well as in South America. In fact, prior to the Islamic Revolution, the Palestinian struggle was stuck in a nationalist quagmire; it posed no threat to the Zionists but caused immense damage to the Palestinian people and cause. In late 1987, when Islamic Jihad and Hamas emerged on the scene, it led to the first Intifadah in Palestine. *The Palestinian struggle was brought over to its natural Islamic mode.* Islamic resistance in Palestine has achieved notable successes against the Zionist occupiers since then.<sup>41</sup>

### *Pan-Islamism and “Islamic unity”*

As discussed in Chap. 3, there is a tension between Shia and pan-Islamic geopolitics.<sup>42</sup> As explained there, there is strong evidence that Tehran despite all preferences towards Shiism has come to favour, at least publicly, a pan-Islamic geopolitics. By naming the Iranian calendar year 1386 (beginning on 21 March 2007) as “Year of Solidarity”, Supreme Leader Khamenei has suggested a relative shift from Islamic “unity” (*vahdat*) to “solidarity” (*hambastegi*),<sup>43</sup> as the latter notion is less stern and can ultimately provide the basis for the establishment of “Islamic unity”.<sup>44</sup> The

<sup>40</sup> See Gharayegh Zandi 2007.

<sup>41</sup> Bangash 2014. Emphasis added.

<sup>42</sup> See, for example, Vatanka 2011.

<sup>43</sup> For their Quranic justifications, see Miri 2012 and Zand-Vaikili 2011 respectively.

<sup>44</sup> Gharayegh Zandi 2007: 70.

latter's focus is put on commonalities while avoiding sensitive issues—<sup>45</sup> a stance that seems sensible in view of creating a basis of understanding with geopolitical adversaries such as Saudi Arabia.

The concept of “Islamic unity” (*Vahdat-e Eslâmi*) is institutionally propagated by the Organization of Islamic Propaganda (*Sâzmân-e Tabliqât-e Eslâmi*) and the Ministry of Culture and Islamic Guidance (*Vezârat-e Farhang va Ershâd-e Eslâmi*), as well as by the journal of the World Forum for Proximity of Islamic Schools of Thought, *Al-Taqrîb: A Quarterly Journal of Islamic Unity*.<sup>46</sup> In reference to the IRI's designation of the Arab Revolts as an “Islamic Awakening” (*Bidâri-e Eslâmi*),<sup>47</sup> in April 2013 the World Forum organized its first Islamic Awakening and Ulema Conference, inaugurated by Khamenei. The chief proponents of pan-Islamism are Ayatollah Khamenei as well as many reformist clerics, whereas Qom's traditional clergy rather resists this idea as they emphasize the Shia character of the 1979 revolution. In terms of foreign-policy practice, the Islamic Idealist school holds that Iran should coordinate its activities with other Muslim-majority countries via organizations such as the OIC. It also suggests establishing an enduring link with the Arab countries of the region, including the stronghold of Sunni Wahhabism, Saudi Arabia, but also Sunni-majority Egypt.<sup>48</sup>

### *Deficiencies and Strengths*

However, a number of challenges and problems remain for the Islamic Idealist school: (1) The decentralized nature of Iran's clerical structure makes it hard to maintain a consistent pan-Islamic posture with many high-ranking clerics even stressing some sort of Shia superiority. (2) In the context of the IRI's geopolitical rivalry with Saudi Arabia, its Islamic-revolutionary ideology in effect contradicts any ambition to create pan-Islamic unity. A case in point, a guest editorial published on the World Forum's website by the (Pakistani Shia) director of the Institute of Contemporary Islamic Thought who in the context of the emergence of IS(IL) states that “[t]he primary promoters of sectarianism are the

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.: 88.

<sup>46</sup> <http://www.taqrîb.info/english/> [24/11/2014]. According to the website only eight issues of the *Al-Taqrîb* journal were published, with the last one in April 2011. Yet, there is a Persian-language equivalent by the name of *Andîsheh-e Taqrîb* that is still in print: <http://taqrîb.journal.taqrîb.info/> [24/11/2014].

<sup>47</sup> See, for example, Shirudi 2012.

<sup>48</sup> For the latter, see Khusrawshahi 2011.

illegitimate regimes in the Muslim East, especially Saudi Arabia and its tribal allies'.<sup>49</sup> Such a view that IS(IL) is a product of (U.S.) "imperialists", "Zionists" and their "puppet regimes" in the region—an implicit hint to Saudi Arabia and Qatar—has likewise been advanced by Khamenei.<sup>50</sup> (3) Iran's claim since the 1980s to constitute the nucleus of the entire Islamic world (as mentioned in Chap. 3), as reflected in the Supreme Leader's titles, bears the potential for conflict with Sunni-majority powers. (4) In today's international relations, the OIC is largely irrelevant, not least due to the wide gap of interests between important member-states such as Iran and Saudi Arabia. Put differently, the theoretical power of the Islamic world cannot translate into real power if there is no joint political strategy. As such, positing pan-Islamism as a foreign-policy priority can be seen as a futile exercise.<sup>51</sup> (5) On a more general level and in terms of assisting Iran's development goals, the Islamic world despite being a demographic giant with over 1.6 billion people lags behind in terms of economic, technological, scientific and military indicators, when compared to the West and even countries in Asia and South America.<sup>52</sup>

On the positive side, however, the "Islamic unity" discourse when deployed in an anti-imperial/-colonial framework as directed against imperialism and Zionism has arguably been an important factor in enhancing Iranian "soft power" in the Muslim-majority Arab world throughout the 2000s, given the numerous unpopular foreign-policy actions taken by the U.S. and Israel, and concomitantly the silence of Arab leaders.<sup>53</sup>

As a result, Islamic Idealists face the difficulty of crafting a discourse which can find acceptance in a highly diverse and non-unified Islamic world. In other words, any given discourse while attracting some (e.g. Islamist resistance movements or important sections across Arab societies) will necessarily alienate others (e.g. Arab autocratic governments or Turkey). As such, it is likely to create obstacles to a rapprochement with the bulk of Iran's pro-U.S. Arab neighbours (above all, the GCC countries) and with Western countries. In addition, the IRI's pan-Islamic ambitions enter into competition with a similar agenda pursued by other regional rivals such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey.<sup>54</sup>

<sup>49</sup> Bangash 2014.

<sup>50</sup> Khamenei 2014b.

<sup>51</sup> See Sariolghalam 2002.

<sup>52</sup> Ibid.: Pt. 2, 47.

<sup>53</sup> See Rostami-Povey 2010.

<sup>54</sup> On Turkey's pan-Islamism, see, for example, Gözaydın 2013.

### *Regional Power Balancers: Offensive and Defensive Realists*

#### *Revisiting Neo-Realist IR Theory*

Realism and Classical Geopolitics view the world along the same lines. Realism assumes that states find themselves in an international environment shaped by anarchy with the result that their security cannot be taken for granted. In such circumstances, it is rational for states to compete for security and power—a tenet shared by Classical Geopolitics. Both approaches view the state as the central actor in world politics and claim the necessity for states to retain power in this adverse environment by, at best, maximizing it.<sup>55</sup>

A prime cleavage within Realist IR theory emerged between, on the one hand, those who grant theoretical primacy to human nature (Classical Realists) and, on the other, those who accentuate the importance of international anarchy and the distribution of power within the international system (Neo-Realism or Structural Realism). In the following, the bifurcation within the Neo-Realist paradigm will be sketched out by relying on John Mearsheimer's *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (2001) where he introduces the concept of Offensive Realism that is pitted against the Waltzian, defensive variant of Realism. It is suggested here that despite Mearsheimer's accounts of Offensive and Defensive Realism in the context of the behaviour of and rivalry among great-powers, it can usefully be adapted from the global to the regional arena of "the Middle East",<sup>56</sup> where the IRI can be characterized as one of the "regional great-powers" and as such potentially exposed to rivalry vis-à-vis its peers, be they from the region itself or outside of it.<sup>57</sup>

While Classical Realists explain international politics as being shaped by the actors' innate desire for power, Structural or Defensive Realists argue that it is the position of the state in the structure of the international system that determines its behaviour. Facing the same obstacle pertaining to the absence of a central authority enforcing rules and norms or providing for overall security, in such an anarchic environment states are left to ensure their survival via self-help. At this stage, Offensive and Defensive

<sup>55</sup> See, for example, Owens 1999: 62.

<sup>56</sup> Mearsheimer (1995: 80fn4) himself states that 'it is possible to apply the concept of a system more narrowly and use it to describe particular regions [...]'.  
<sup>57</sup> Conventionally, since the 2000s, Iran, Turkey, Saudi Arabia, Israel and the U.S. are considered as major powers in Southwest Asia (see, e.g. Sonboli 2009).

Realists disagree over the best means to achieve security, with the former aiming to increase “relative power” and the latter “relative security”. To Defensive Realists, ‘[t]he first concern of states is not to maximize power but to maintain their positions in the system’,<sup>58</sup> including the balance of power. Conversely, they hold that an excessive drive for power is likely to cause hostile alliances which could eventually undermine the state’s position. Hence, they argue that war—seen as largely the result of states’ uncertainty and miscalculations—cannot produce any substantial benefits as it is unqualified to help increase “relative security”, but can even ‘jeopardize the very survival of the [power-] maximizing state’.<sup>59</sup> Rather, great-powers should act as ‘defensive positionalists’,<sup>60</sup> thus coupling efficient balancing with advantages of defence over offence.

This is exactly where Offensive Realism points its critique at, when contradicting the stance that states should focus on preserving their power rather than increasing it. Unlike “human-nature Realists” who argue that there is an inner drive for domination, Offensive Realists see the structure of the anarchic international system to be the reason why it is in the interest of great-powers to make every effort towards maximizing their relative power, for that is the optimal means to increase their security as well as their odds of survival. Instead, states should relentlessly focus on possibilities of offensive action, ‘look[ing] for opportunities to alter the balance of power by acquiring additional increments of power at the expense of potential rivals’.<sup>61</sup> Thus, the chief goal of states is to maximize their own “relative power” to the point of acquiring hegemony:

[G]reat powers recognize that the best way to ensure their security is to achieve hegemony now, thus eliminating any possibility of a challenge by another great power. Only a misguided state would pass up an opportunity to be the hegemon in the system because it thought it already had sufficient power to survive.<sup>62</sup>

<sup>58</sup> Waltz 1979: 126.

<sup>59</sup> Toft 2005: 390.

<sup>60</sup> Grieco 1988: 500.

<sup>61</sup> Mearsheimer 2001: 34.

<sup>62</sup> Ibid.: 35.

In other words, as Mearsheimer sums up, 'survival mandates aggressive behavior',<sup>63</sup> or in colloquial terms 'the aim of states is to be the biggest and baddest dude on the block'.<sup>64</sup>

However, the relentless pursuit for power, embracing offensive tactics and expansionist policies, when attempting to attain the status of regional hegemon, brings with it the possibility of war.<sup>65</sup> Moreover, in Offensive Realist thinking, once regional hegemony is attained, great-powers become status-quo states.

As a result, the key antagonism between Defensive and Offensive Realism can be illustrated on the one hand by Kenneth Waltz' argument that the push to be the dominant power in the system will always be accompanied by an increased level of vulnerability, and on the other by Mearsheimer's contention that the powerful status aimed for is ideal because nobody will be able to challenge you, and hence your security will be increasing.

### *Iran's (Neo-)Realists: Common Denominators*

Regional Power Balancers, the IRI's equivalent of Realists, constitute the bulk of the foreign-policy discourse. Like Realists elsewhere, they emphasize territorial integrity and security, which they seek to guarantee through building alliances with regional or non-regional actors, making use of "soft" (ideational) and "hard" (material) power. Divided into Offensive and Defensive Realists, they both see Iran's national security best guaranteed through the defence of territorial integrity, the avoidance of international isolation, development through expanding foreign trade and investment, and the de-militarization of the region. To achieve these goals, both currents agree upon the importance of securing the vital waterway of the Strait of Hormuz, close monitoring of foreign military forces in adjacent waters, preventing illicit trade of weapons and narcotics, and expanding defence cooperation with like-minded states.

Iran's Offensive and Defensive Realists both acknowledge the aim of the U.S. and its allies towards the regional containment of Iran in some kind of a new regional Cold War between camps led by the U.S. on one side and by Iran on the other: The Washington-led camp consists of states that maintain some kind of strategic partnership with it, while implicitly

<sup>63</sup> Ibid.: 21.

<sup>64</sup> Mearsheimer 2002.

<sup>65</sup> Mearsheimer 1994: 12.

accepting U.S. hegemony over the region. It includes Israel, those Arab states with peace accords with Israel (i.e. Egypt and Jordan) and other so-called moderate Arab states (above all Saudi Arabia and the rest of the GCC). The Tehran-led camp consists of state and non-state actors who are unwilling to accept U.S. or Israeli regional hegemony. It includes Syria as the sole state actor and prominent non-state actors such as Hezbollah and Hamas.<sup>66</sup> Turkey as a major regional power does not unmistakably belong to any of the two camps, despite its strategic leaning towards the Western camp due to its NATO membership.

However, both variants of Iran's regional power-balancers differ on the reasons behind the U.S. containment policy, on which alliances to pursue, on the nature and depth of the security threats facing Iran, and on how to elevate Iran's status in the face of Western pressure.

### *Iran's Offensive Realists*

Offensive Realism can be seen as the more aggressive version of Realism that, simply put, follows the dictum according to which offence is the best defence. Contrary to some assumptions, the Iranian proponents of this school, prominent among defence officials and the former Ahmadinejad administration,<sup>67</sup> do not necessarily advocate Iran to become a hegemonic power (i.e. contrary to Mearsheimer's Offensive Realist assumption), despite their belief that Iranian power is impressive, labelling it "the indispensable regional power". Rather, they are concerned with the U.S.—and not so much with regional actors—whose primary goal would be to limit Iran's regional power but also to reshape the IRI's politics away from Islamism.

In their reading of international realities during the 2000s, Iran's Offensive Realists do not deny that the most powerful state of the international system is the U.S. but they see its power in swift decline to the point of viewing the world order as already being multipolar. Moreover,

<sup>66</sup>Leverett and Mann Leverett 2010: 75. The notion of "Tehran-led camp" does not suggest that Tehran dictates its allies' actions, but indicates the leverage it possesses towards them.

<sup>67</sup>We can include here websites such as *Tabnak*, closely linked to Mohsen Rezaee, as well as think-tanks such as the Tabyin Center for Strategic Studies that sees itself as a venue for debate for the third generation of the "Islamic Revolution" (<http://tabyincenter.ir/>).

conceiving international affairs including regional geopolitics as a zero-sum game, they see Iran's power at a height and that of the U.S. at a low.<sup>68</sup>

### **Triumphalist Account of Iranian Power**

The argument whereby regional power and influence have gravitated from the U.S. to Iran rests on a reading of the geopolitical developments during the 2000s, which regards the IRI's regional partners as geopolitical victors, largely as a consequence of U.S. and Israeli policies: U.S. "regime change" operations that toppled anti-Iranian governments in Afghanistan (the Taliban) and Iraq (Saddam Hussein) and their ensuing occupations made Iran emerge as the most influential external actor in both countries and their respective administrations. In Iraq, the IRI's long-standing support for various Shia oppositional groups during Hussein's reign has finally paid off. In Palestine, Hamas won the 2006 Palestinian legislative elections. In Lebanon, Iran has continued to entertain intimate links with Hezbollah, arguably the country's most influential political entity whose domestic and cross-sectarian standing was boosted after its successful rebuttal of Israeli aggression in summer 2006. These aspects form the basis upon which the rise of Iran's relative power standing and its new-found geopolitical self-confidence could be attested.

### **Paradoxical Account of U.S. Power: Powerful but Vulnerable**

Iran's Offensive Realists believe that U.S. power is in swift decline globally as well as in Iran's region. The decline they see concerns foremost elements of U.S. "hard power", whereas they remain wary of U.S./Western "soft power" capabilities.<sup>69</sup>

Hence, somehow paradoxically, concern with U.S. intentions is accompanied by Offensive Realists' belief that U.S. power is in decline to the extent of making it vulnerable. For instance, President Ahmadinejad's main foreign-policy advisor (appointed in August 2008),<sup>70</sup> Hamid Mowlana, seconds the statement by Condoleezza Rice, then the U.S. Secretary of State, according to which Iran poses the greatest international challenge to the U.S., by stating that Iran has indeed caused

<sup>68</sup> For Abbasi (2010), even for the last 30 years, 'the Western world has found itself in the weakest position vis-à-vis Iran [...], and the Islamic Republic has found itself in the best position against Western hostilities'.

<sup>69</sup> More recently, some, however, even see U.S. "soft power" in decline (see e.g. Moradi and Amanlo 2014).

<sup>70</sup> <http://www.president.ir/en/11546> [30/06/2014].

‘headaches for America’s imperial policy’.<sup>71</sup> He then lays out the reasons for U.S. vulnerability:

[T]he new colonialism or the new dominance or empire, that today relies upon the subjugation of the mind, psychological warfare and new technologies, has great deficits, which is the lack of manpower, legitimacy, public acceptance, and unlimited economic and financial capacities.<sup>72</sup>

Unlike former empires, Mowlana stresses, the U.S. empire is not a creditor but a debtor. ‘Hurricane Catrina and the conquest of Iraq have shown that from bureaucratic and sub-structural angles America is very much vulnerable from the inside and the outside. Today, global tensions will be more to the detriment of America than to others.’<sup>73</sup> This paradoxical view according to which the U.S. is at once a powerful empire and vulnerable begs the question that if the above claims of U.S. vulnerability are valid, why should Iran after all be all that concerned with U.S. power?

Some close to the Ahmadinejad presidential office even predicted an imminent U.S. defeat in the wake of the latter’s post-“9/11” wars, its loss of control and influence in regional crises ultimately leading to military withdrawal. Being in such a position of relative weakness, they argued, Washington would consequently seek Iranian cooperation in order to safeguard the remnants of its strategic and security interests in the region. This would finally lead to a reduction of tensions between Tehran and Washington.<sup>74</sup>

In fact, such reading of regional developments seeing Iran as the most potent player and thus the region’s “indispensable power” and the impact this might have on future Iran–U.S. relations has been very similarly—and uncritically—replicated by U.S. proponents of a “grand bargain” with the IRI, most prominently by the Leveretts who conducted their research in Tehran precisely at a time when the Offensive Realist school was arguably the dominant one.<sup>75</sup>

<sup>71</sup> Mowlana 2006.

<sup>72</sup> Ibid.

<sup>73</sup> Ibid.

<sup>74</sup> See Mowlana and Mohammadi 2008: 119.

<sup>75</sup> See Leverett and Mann Leverett 2013a.

### **The Dual National-Security Threat: War Threats a Bluff, but “Soft War” Serious**

The national-security threat that Offensive Realists identify, as noted at the outset, consists in the U.S. posing a dual challenge to the IRI's international standing as well as to its domestic constitution. To achieve those objectives, Offensive Realists believe that the U.S. (and by extension Israel) on the one hand seeks Iran's destabilization by meddling in its domestic affairs and on the other by portraying it as a threat to its neighbours and the world. While destabilization efforts have reportedly been pursued in the context of the Bush/Cheney administration's "regime change" endeavour and were assisted by Israel,<sup>76</sup> the Offensive Realists' second claim pertains to the charge that the nuclear issue has been raised in order to help portray Iran as danger to international and regional peace and security and that regional frictions have been exploited by way of erecting the spectre of a Tehran-designed "Shia Crescent" including the creation of Shia- and Irano-phobia across the region, with the aim of Iran replacing Israel as the 'most important threat' to pro-U.S. Arab countries.<sup>77</sup>

In this vein, Iran's Offensive Realists are more concerned with U.S. "soft war" capabilities rather than with outright conventional war. Albeit they regard the U.S. military presence around the country, or encirclement, as a serious security threat, in a somehow contradictory manner they tend to dismiss the credibility of military threats issued by the U.S. and/or Israel. As for the reasons for such a view, they point to (1) the over-extension of U.S. military forces throughout the region, (2) the large costs of any Israeli assault on Iranian nuclear and military facilities given Iran's effective deterrence via its proxies and concomitantly Israel's lack of "strategic depth", and (3) the very presence of U.S. forces in the vicinity of Iranian borders make them vulnerable to Iranian "asymmetrical warfare", even more so since in most countries that harbour U.S. bases Iran enjoys larger geopolitical prowess especially since the mid-2000s, as well as ballistic missiles. However, this contradictory stance that somehow follows in the wake of Iran's sense of geopolitical confidence post-2005 does not exclude the possibility of the political élite's imprudent exuberance to the point of risking a catastrophic war.<sup>78</sup>

<sup>76</sup> See, for example, Hersh 2008, 2012.

<sup>77</sup> See Sonboli 2009: pt. 1.

<sup>78</sup> This aspect is highlighted in an open letter by a "concerned Iranian professor" in exile to the IRI leadership in late 2012; see Massarrat 2012b.

Therefore, Offensive Realists argue that the U.S. primarily resorts to “soft war” (*Jang-e Narm*), for other means have proven futile: they see military action unlikely to materialize (as just noted) and sanctions inapt to change Iran’s strategic preferences or even nuclear policy. Rather, they regard such threats as “psychological warfare” aimed at undermining the confidence of the people in the Islamic Republic and its survival, as well as dividing the political élite.

Their prime concern with U.S. “soft war” capabilities dates back to the early 1990s when Supreme Leader Khamenei referred to it as the West’s “cultural invasion/aggression” (*Tahâjom-e Farhangi*), “cultural NATO” or “cultural raid” and called upon officials to design a strategy against it. Ever since, especially during the 2000s, the West is seen as having boosted its “soft war” efforts in political, economic and cultural arenas.<sup>79</sup> Important pillars of Offensive Realist thinking are reflected in the views held by the afore-mentioned Mowlana.<sup>80</sup> A dual U.S.–Iranian citizen and a long-time professor of international communication and international relations at the American University in Washington, DC, Mowlana has extensively written about the decline of U.S. hegemony.<sup>81</sup> Capitalizing on his reputation in Iran as an academic expert, he has argued that the U.S. is launching a “soft war” against Iran by influencing clerics, professors, students, journalists, businessmen and managers of big companies.<sup>82</sup> Moreover, in a 2007 speech at the University of Tehran, Mowlana was quoted as saying: ‘We must resist against hegemony, and Iran’s current power is due to its resistance.’<sup>83</sup> In September 2009, an edited volume titled *America Is Coming to an End* (in Persian) was published by Ahmadinejad’s presidential office. It was argued there that Obama’s election was an indication of American popular support for a “strategic global retreat”. Consequently, it was claimed that the world is looking for “an alternative vision” which only the IRI could offer. In Mowlana’s words: ‘Today, only two men count: Ahmadinejad and Obama. As American influence fades, Iran must assert leadership with Ahmadinejad’s message of justice.’<sup>84</sup>

<sup>79</sup> Nâ’ini 2012.

<sup>80</sup> See Mowlana and Mohammadi 2008. For a critical view on different aspects of ‘the Mowlana phenomenon’ by sceptics of his appointment as presidential advisor, see Âshnâ 2008.

<sup>81</sup> For example, *Knowing America: Rise and Fall of an Empire* (in Persian) (Karami 2011).

<sup>82</sup> *Press TV* 2011.

<sup>83</sup> ISNA, 17 December 2007; cited in MEMRI 2010.

<sup>84</sup> Cited in Taheri 2009.

Iranian debates on the nature of “soft” threats directed against the IRI and the strategies to be employed against them takes place, for example, in a journal titled *Psychological Operations Studies Quarterly* (in Persian) produced by the IRGC section of Imam Hussein University in Tehran. Published since 2003 as a reaction to U.S. “psychological warfare”,<sup>85</sup> the journal and its website are devoted to all aspects of “soft war” and “psychological warfare”, including “soft power” capabilities at the hands of the IRI or the U.S., the role of information and communication technologies (e.g. the Internet, chat rooms and online social networks), the role of public opinion and other forms of social capital, “soft power”, the “Islamic Awakening” and so on. Also a number of books have been published in this regard, discussing, for example, the ways in which “soft war” in its various forms can be a cover for other intentions hidden under the surface,<sup>86</sup> and the political, economic and cultural costs of that “soft war” against the IRI.<sup>87</sup>

### Iranian Responses: The Primacy of the IRI’s Ideological Sources of Power

Iran’s reaction to external behaviour deemed aggressive should be nothing but resolute, according to Offensive Realists, who believe that U.S. power can only be curbed with more power (zero-sum game).<sup>88</sup> When pushing back, Iran should take into account the nature of the threat as well as the regional conditions the issuer of the threat faces (which we briefly outlined above). Hence, Iranian reactions can be distinguished between employing “hard” and “soft” elements of power. The resoluteness of Iran’s response will necessarily elevate its standing globally as well as in the eyes of Washington.<sup>89</sup> Among the levers of power at the IRI’s

<sup>85</sup> See the first issue at <http://www.swar.ir/quarterly.aspx?qid=36> [25/12/2014]. Officially named Imam Hossein Comprehensive University, it is affiliated with the IRGC, the Ministry of Science, Research and Technology as well as the Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics.

<sup>86</sup> See Moradi 1999.

<sup>87</sup> See Tahmâsebi-Pour 2011.

<sup>88</sup> For an introduction on the definitions of various game-theory scenarios, see Spangler 2013.

<sup>89</sup> In Abbasi’s view, after the faction that was “supported by the West” lost the 2009 presidential elections, the West opted for a Cold War on Iran (the proof of which is the U.S. opposition to the Iran nuclear deal facilitated by Turkey and Brazil), during which the IRI has deepened the three forms of its strategy of deterrence (*bâzdârandegi*), namely soft, semi-

disposal, Offensive Realists see its ideological sources as paramount (much like Rejectionists, as we shall see).<sup>90</sup>

#### “Hard” Responses: Asymmetrical Warfare, Proxy War and So On

In the “Cold War” pitting the U.S. camp against Iran’s, to impose costs on the adversary, Offensive Realists see the prowess of Iranian retaliatory capabilities in “asymmetric warfare” (*Jang-e Nā-motaqāren*) and proxy war (*Jang-e Niābati*) as a form of offshore-balancing. They view Iran’s strength in its regional presence in Lebanon, Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan as well as in its role as a major oil exporter who is willing to connect energy security to regional issues (see Iran’s threat to close the Strait of Hormuz in case it is being attacked). Hence, despite Offensive Realists’ desire to maintain cordial ties with regional powerhouses such as Saudi Arabia and Egypt, such attempts have proven largely unsuccessful during the 2000s. Their focus in terms of alliance-building strongly lies with Iran’s regional allies Syria, Hezbollah and Palestinian resistance groups ( Hamas and Islamic Jihad, with the latter playing a more prominent role after the rupture between Iran and Hamas over the Syrian civil war), as well as ideological and Shia networks, such as in Lebanon and Iraq. Using Iranian-made missiles, Hezbollah and the Palestinian groups are able to open two war fronts against Israel in case the latter or even the U.S. launches a war on Iran.<sup>91</sup> Special emphasis is put on the alliance with Hezbollah, who would depend on Tehran for vital support, as its strength is instrumental for the balance of power not only in Lebanon but also in the wider region.

Thus, the main strategy of the Offensive Realist school is to engage Iran’s enemies in theatres further afield, that is, at the frontlines of the Arab–Israeli conflict in the Occupied Palestinian Territories and Lebanon, so as to avoid fighting near Iran’s borders. As already noted, this should deter them to attack or destabilize Iran for fear of bearing the costs of deteriorating security throughout the entire region. The success in Iran’s deterrence strategy, they hold, has elevated Tehran’s standing vis-à-vis Washington.<sup>92</sup>

hard and hard. In this Cold War, the U.S. like other powers ‘is forced to officially recognize the reality of a powerful Iran and in future of an important global player’ (Abbasi 2010).

<sup>90</sup> For an exposition, see Mohammadi (Manouchehr) 2008.

<sup>91</sup> Sadeghi-Boroujerdi 2014: 48.

<sup>92</sup> For an exposition of Offensive Realist thinking, see, for example, Mizân 2014 (published on Supreme Leader Khamenei’s website).

Projecting “Soft Power” in the Face of U.S. “Soft War”

Another key strategy in the Offensive Realists’ offensive posture lies in the field of public diplomacy where the projection of “soft power” is pursued. Here, the tools preferred by Offensive Realists considerably vary from those of the Defensive Realists. In their application of “soft power”, Offensive Realists opt to tie regional grievances largely connected to U.S. and Israeli policies to Iran’s regional policies and the nuclear issue. Hence, by being very vocal on the Palestinian issue and vis-à-vis Israeli and U.S. military operations in the region—in other words, the IRI as leader of the “axis of resistance” (*Mehvar-e Moqâvemat*) against imperialism and Zionism—Offensive Realists have linked Iran’s own problems with those states, for example, by portraying the West as retarding Iranian development through depriving it from nuclear technology and through economic sanctions. Through this kind of contextualization, they aim to increase the popularity of the IRI among the populations of the region, thus making it difficult for the latter’s autocratic regimes to publically criticize the IRI, as well as among Muslim-majority countries globally. By doing so, Offensive Realists want to present the IRI as an alternative player willing and equipped to alleviate the grievances created by imperialism and Zionism (Table 5.2).

**Table 5.2** Defensive vs. Offensive Realism

	<i>Defensive Realism</i>	<i>Offensive Realism</i>
Objective of the state	“Relative security”; preserving balance of power; reducing tensions ( <i>détente</i> )	“Relative power”; gaining hegemony; reducing threats
Key assumptions	Costs of offensive action likely to outweigh benefits; win-win solution	Offence is the best defence; zero-sum game
Preferred policies	Status quo; balancing; alliance-building; cooperation	Power maximization; constant security competition
Preferred strategies	Comprehensive engagement	Counter-containment
Preferred levers of Iranian power	Diplomacy, economy	Ideology, military

*Note:* Own illustration based on accounts of Mearsheimer and Iranian foreign-policy schools of thought

### *Iran's Defensive Realists*

Negotiating with the U.S. is like driving a Mercedes Benz,  
while with the East it is like driving the Paykan,  
and talking with the Non-Aligned is like riding a bicycle.  
—Hassan Rouhani<sup>93</sup>

Iran's Defensive Realists—whose bastion throughout at least the 2000s was arguably CSR with its many former diplomats—<sup>94</sup> challenge key assumptions by their offensive counterparts, which shall be discussed in some detail later on:

- (1) Defensive and Offensive Realists provide different emphases when *defining national security*. In fact, Defensive Realists have a broader definition of security, one which embraces domestic stability as well as economic security and development. Meanwhile Offensive Realists tend to put a stronger focus on what they view as the ideological underpinnings of national security, while paying less attention to aspects of economic development. For instance, to achieve the goals enshrined in the IRI's 20-Year Outlook document (which will be separately discussed in the Conclusion), which shares the Defensive Realist school's definition of security, require good working relations with important international actors, including the end to sanctions, which Defensive Realists argue will be impossible to attain when Offensive Realist prescriptions are followed.
- (2) Their assumptions regarding *outcomes in foreign policy* differ starkly. Defensive Realists believe in win-win situations, so they regard Offensive Realists' zero-sum logic, above all between Iran and the U.S. in regional geopolitics, as a fallacy and as such inapt to elevate Iran's standing.
- (3) Their *reading of the distribution of power within the international system* and the position held by the U.S. differs considerably. Though agreeing that the U.S. is generally facing a decline, Defensive Realists disagree over the pace and policy ramifications

<sup>93</sup> Paraphrased from his in-depth interview given to the *Mehrnambeh* periodical (Vol. 3, No. 21, April–May 2012 / Ordibehesht 1391) to mark the publication of his memoir *National Security and Nuclear Diplomacy* (in Persian). The Paykan, an Iranian-made car, is notoriously known for its unreliability and sub-standard quality.

<sup>94</sup> According to Roberto Toscano, former Italian Ambassador to Iran (2003–08), the CSR has become a bastion for foreign-policy realists in Iran, focussing on 'the national interest with very little ideology' (cited in Slavin 2013).

of that process. While seeing U.S. decline not being imminent, Defensive Realists caution that even during this process of decline the U.S. can well damage weaker countries such as Iran.<sup>95</sup>

- (4) Defensive Realists prefer a *different constellation of coalition- or alliance-building*. Although they would not oppose the use of regional allies in Iran's deterrence strategy against the U.S. or Israel, they however clearly favour ties with states deemed important within the regional and international hierarchies. Therefore, they insist that any improvement of Iran's regional standing requires better ties with its Arab neighbours, which have been severely damaged after the revolution and the war. Hence, like the approach taken by the Hashemi-Rafsanjani administration, Defensive Realists argue for a policy of *détente* and confidence-building with key regional players like Saudi Arabia, while retaining strong but not overshadowing ties with the IRI's allies Syria and Hezbollah. Internationally, they favour relations with Western powers whom they still regard as dominating the international system.

However, stemming from their reading of international realities, there are a series of issues that they regard as not compatible with Iran's long-term objectives: They are critical of the IRI's over-emphasis on the Palestinian issue, extensive involvement in Syria and Lebanon, and overt use of Shiism, because these are seen as provocations of much more important players, which will ultimately hurt Iran's long-term strategic interests despite their potential utility in short-term gains. The long-term costs are brought about, they argue, as those specific policies hinder any needed improvement of ties with big players such as Saudi Arabia, Egypt and ultimately the U.S.

### *Global Balancers and the "America Question"*

Next to the Regional Balancers—who with their main concern on the regional strategic realm consume the bulk of foreign-policy debates in Iran—are the Global Balancers who entirely focus on the relationship towards the U.S., the importance of which is derived from the prominent role the latter has regionally (as Iran's key adversary there) and globally (as

<sup>95</sup>This is, for example, argued by Abbas Maleki (2010: 111), who served as Deputy Foreign Minister (1980–97) before heading IPIS (1989–97).

the international system's most powerful country). As such, there are overlaps between the positions held by Regional and Global Balancers, who both seek to increase Iranian security. Farhi and Lotfian divide the latter into Rejectionists and Accommodationists, whose proponents are respectively close to the Offensive and Defensive Regional Balancers.

*Rejectionists: Survival of the "Islamic Revolution" Through Anti-Americanism*

The Rejectionists are convinced that because of ideological and geopolitical reasons, the U.S. is unlikely to find an arrangement with a globally influential and independent IRI. For that reason, they regard the U.S. as a threat to the IRI's very survival. In their description of the roots of Iranian—or rather "Islamic-Iranian"—power, the causes of enmity towards the U.S., and concomitantly the reason why the U.S. poses an existential threat, Rejectionists overlap with Islamic Idealists' focus on the "Islamic character" of the IRI. What they advocate is a policy of resistance against the U.S., of a largely ideological nature drawing on the Islamic Idealists' repertoire, which they view as safeguarding Iran's global importance as well as survival. In an article on the sources of Iranian power, Manouchehr Mohammadi, a professor of international relations at University of Tehran and editor-in-chief of the MFA's *Iranian Journal of International Affairs* (IJIA), who served as Deputy Foreign Minister under Ahmadinejad, argues that, rather than "hard power", Iran's strength derives from its "soft power" that grew out of the "Islamic Revolution". That "soft power" had also deterred the U.S. from implementing its military threats against the IRI as it feared the 'further promotion of the resistance culture in other regional countries and undermining their political structures'. Hence, according to Mohammadi, this high capacity of Iranian "soft power" was the reason why the IRI has been able 'to stymie the West's threats and pressures' and even become a 'new[ly] emerging world power'.<sup>96</sup> On the occasion of the launch of a book on the Ahmadinejad administration's foreign policy that Mohammadi co-authored with the afore-mentioned Mowlana, Mansour Vâ'ezi, director of the Public Culture Council of Iran (PCCI), praised the government's "active diplomacy", combining official diplomacy with 'religious, cultural and spiritual

<sup>96</sup> Mohammadi (Manouchehr) 2008: 17

diplomacy', which had injected the element of justice into the international system.<sup>97</sup>

Focusing on the preservation of the "Islamic Revolution", Hojjatoleslam Ali Saeedi, the Supreme Leader's representative to the IRGC, has proclaimed that there is no other way for safeguarding the revolution than steadfastness (*istâdegi*) against the U.S.<sup>98</sup> On these grounds, the Rejectionists refuse any accommodation with the U.S. beyond a minimal level. Rather they see permanent enmity towards and confrontation with the U.S. as the "Islamic Revolution" and the IRI's lifeline. In that vein, they view the policies of "world arrogance" (*Estekbâr-e Jahâni*), as they prefer to call the U.S., as the very reason why the IRI has been able to establish itself as a self-sufficient, self-confident and independent player.

### *Accommodationists*

Conversely, Iran's Accommodationists view a comprehensive engagement with the U.S. as a precondition to realize Iranian goals of security and status (regionally and globally). Seeing the U.S. as the globe's unrivalled economic and political power, they argue that only productive interaction with it can enable Iran to grow in strategic (regionally and globally) and economic terms. They dismiss the chance to further Iran's ambitions through regional alliance-building with Arab states, as they see the IRI's ideological posture as not conducive to that end. In that vein, they also consider the effective countering of U.S. hegemony as an unrealistic goal.

To reach that goal, Accommodationists resort to various arguments—mostly shaped by the consequences of the U.S. invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq—including Defensive and Offensive Realist ones. To make a comprehensive bargain palatable to both Washington and Iranian Rejectionists, they rely on the possibilities of a win-win game, starting off from cooperation on issues of mutual interest (e.g. in Afghanistan and Iraq as well as fighting al-Qaeda-type terrorism).

<sup>97</sup> <http://goo.gl/TlgWdP> [26/12/2014]. The PCCI office publishes the monthly magazine *Farhang-e Omoumi* whose first issue in December 2010 helps situate it among the IRI's extreme right-wing, as it prominently features an interview with Ayatollah Mesbah-Yazdi, another interview that alleges that the pro-reform magazine *Mehrnamah* serves as mouth-piece for the regime-change opposition, and other articles such as 'Why and how does liberal imperialism conduct a *coup d'état*?' and 'Important points that someone resisting soft war ought to know' (<http://pcci.ir/component/content/article?id=1036> [26/12/2014]).

<sup>98</sup> 'Sa'idi: Sepâh dar entekhabât dekhâlat nadâsh't' [Saeedi: The Sepah did not intervene in the elections], *Tabnak*, 27 October 2010 / 5 Âbân 1389.

Another variant, geared towards the overall ambition of maximizing Iranian power, has been put forward in 2005 by the self-professed “Kissinger of Islam”<sup>99</sup> Hassan Abbasi, who is believed to have been close to the IRGC, the Supreme Leader and Ahmadinejad:

It is self-defeating to talk with subservient or second-tier countries and stay away from the principal sources of power. [...] Why should people get upset with my words? It makes no sense not to have relations with the United States and Israel.<sup>100</sup>

Yet, in order to signal Washington that striking a deal with Iran is indeed nothing less than a strategic necessity for it in order not to further lose ground in the region, they often rely on Offensive Realist prescriptions. This is done by stressing Iran’s indispensable role in regional geopolitics and its capacity to effectively obstruct U.S. aims there. This can even assume a macabre dimension, when it is argued that only a short war can make the U.S. understand the need to seek a comprehensive strategic deal (“grand bargain”) with Iran, thus seeing heightening tensions leading towards that scenario.<sup>101</sup>

### (C) FOREIGN-POLICY CONTROVERSIES AMONG SCHOOLS OF THOUGHT

In the following, by discussing key foreign-policy topics and concepts, the commonalities and divergences among the various schools shall be illuminated.

#### *The Pursuit of “Strategic Depth”: Which Sites to Prioritize?*

A key Iranian foreign-policy strategy shared by arguably all schools of thought is the concept of “strategic depth” (*Om̄q-e Stratégique*) that is aimed at safeguarding Iranian security as well as boosting its international

<sup>99</sup>Corrigan, Sean J. [U.S. Army Colonel] (2011) *Exploitable Vulnerabilities of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps*, Carlisle, PA: U.S. Army War College (USAWC Civilian Research Project), p. 6, <https://apps.dtic.mil/dtic/tr/fulltext/u2/a568444.pdf>; Taheri, Amir (2006) ‘The Frightening Truth of Why Iran Wants a Bomb’, *The Telegraph*, 16 April. See also [Hassan Abbasi: They call me the “Kissinger of Islam”], *Aftabnews*, 16 November 2010 / 25 Âbân 1389.

<sup>100</sup>Speech at Karaj College, cited in ‘Iran Faces Hard Realities after the IAEA Vote’, *EurasiaNet*, 8 October 2005.

<sup>101</sup>Author’s conversation with a prominent Iranian pundit at the sidelines of the July 2012 expert meeting in Beirut.

status. Despite this general consensus, there are differences among the schools as to the best means to ensure “strategic depth” whose realization is contingent upon the use of both “soft” and “hard power”.

One key bone of contention concerns the prioritization of geographical sites, that is, where best “strategic depth” needs to be realized, a question that is contingent upon the definition of the nature of the threat posed to Iran that differs among various schools of thought. The great variety of sites, regional and para-regional, has been put on display by the above-mentioned Hojjatoleslam Saeedi, according to whom both Iran’s vicinity (namely the Levant, Iraq, Bahrain and Yemen) but also sites faraway (namely South America) are of importance.<sup>102</sup>

The primacy of the regional arena lies in the fact that it is from there that the most serious threats to Iranian security and territorial integrity would emanate, and where consequently the creation of “strategic depth” is regarded as indispensable for Iran’s overall deterrence capability. Related to this is the expectation that Iran’s regional standing serves as the most important basis for boosting its international status, as it can be translated into political leverage on the international stage.

Regionally, the debate on how Iran should react to the uprising against the allied Assad regime in Syria can be instructive to illustrate the commonalities and differences among the schools:

It is fair to say that there is a deep appreciation across the board [Iran’s political élite—*AFN*] that Iran’s “loss” of Syria would be a severe blow to the Islamic Republic’s influence in the Levant, the regional balance of power, and thus Iran’s ability to retain strategic depth beyond its immediate borders. This would not only weaken Iran’s hand with respect to the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) states, but also impair Tehran’s ability to counter the threat, both real and imagined, of Israeli or American hegemonic encroachments closer to home.<sup>103</sup>

Indeed, some Iranian authors have argued that from a Realist viewpoint the Syrian crisis can dramatically alter the regional balance of power such that it poses nothing less than an existential threat to the IRI’s “strategic depth”, thereby also undermining the “axis of resistance”.<sup>104</sup> Yet, one could observe a difference between Offensive Realists who have seen the

<sup>102</sup> See *Fars News* 2014.

<sup>103</sup> Sadeghi-Boroujerdi 2014: 13. See also Matin 2013a.

<sup>104</sup> Abbasi and Mohammadi 2014.

survival of the Assad regime as indispensable, requiring steadfast Iranian support to that end, and Defensive Realists who have tended to view any unrepentant adherence to a regime whose legitimacy was given a hard blow ultimately detrimental to Iran's regional "soft power" and even international standing.<sup>105</sup> To make their case, Defensive Realists would stress that Iran has indeed experienced a loss in its popularity across the "Arab streets" in the wake of the Arab Revolts when it singled-out the Syrian uprising as reactionary and being outside an otherwise cherished wave of an "Islamic Awakening". However, the differences between Offensive and Defensive Realist positions have arguably been reconciled in the IRI's official line to favour a "political solution" to the Syrian crisis, while simultaneously granting vital military and related support to the Assad regime.<sup>106</sup> This demonstrates a crucial point when discussing foreign-policy schools of thought in the IRI: Rather than the prescriptions by one school being replaced by another, the deployment of a combination of various schools' prescriptions can be attested, thus making the case that continuity prevails over change.

Beyond the region, there are other considerations which lead to geographical sites to be identified as significant to or attractive for the spread of Iran's "strategic depth".

First, Islamic Idealists like Khamenei who uphold the idea of pan-Islamism see Muslim populations as the prime site for the pursuit of "strategic depth":

Muslim [p]eoples are the strategic depth of the Islamic Republic. Why does the intense propaganda of the Americans and the English try to separate Muslim peoples from the people of Iran? Why do they do this through the issue of nationality and the issue of Sunni and Shia? It is because they know that Muslim peoples are considered to be the strategic depth of the Islamic Republic.<sup>107</sup>

Here, Islamic Idealism and Offensive Realism concur in their choice of the "Muslim Middle East" as central site for "strategic depth" and in the mobilization of Islamist ideology for geopolitical gains.

<sup>105</sup> See also Ghaffari 2014.

<sup>106</sup> See Sadeghi-Boroujerdi 2014.

<sup>107</sup> Khamenei 2008b. For an overview of his statements on "strategic depth" made between 2004 and 2014, see <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/news-part-index?tid=1034> [05/12/2014].

Second, on the heels of Third-Worldist beliefs, the IRI with a view to U.S. power has over the 2000s discovered Latin America, which for a long time considered be a continent firmly placed under U.S. hegemony (“America’s backyard”), as a prime site for advancing its “strategic depth”.<sup>108</sup> This Iranian outreach was rendered possible by the “neglect” of Latin America by U.S. foreign policy during the GWOT with its focus on the WANA region and the concomitant emergence of a number of left-wing governments there who because of their own grievances initiated a process of emancipation from U.S. hegemony. In January 2012, IRIB launched HispanTV, the first-ever Spanish-language TV channel to come out of any WANA country.<sup>109</sup> Inaugurated by then-President Ahmadinejad, who during his tenure often toured the continent and fostered relations with like-minded administrations under the banner of a global alliance against U.S. global hegemony, HispanTV is seen as a tool to extend Iran’s “soft power” to that continent.<sup>110</sup> After PressTV (in English) and Al-Alam (in Arabic but also broadcast in Persian and English), HispanTV is the latest international network launched by Iran ‘in February 2003 simultaneous [*sic*] with the U.S.-led invasion of Iraq’:

By focusing on a narrative of the “oppressed”, mostly not covered by international mainstream media, particular importance has been given to an alternative view of world events. Such news are mostly related to the idea of the “downtrodden”, which is a principle emanated from the Islamic Revolution. This is the case of Palestinian prisoners [*sic*] hunger strikes in Israeli jails or social struggles in Latin America and among Latin [American] immigrants in Western societies. These news are functional to a narrative and perspective of the world system in line with the Iranian Revolution and the concept of *wilayat-e faqih*, which considers the division of the world between the oppressors and the oppressed. The policy of the oppressed is strictly related with the focus on third-world countries, a principle of the revolution [to] which Ahamdinejad [*sic*] gave special importance in its foreign policy agenda reaching the Presidency in 2005.<sup>111</sup>

<sup>108</sup> See, for example, Lotfian 2010.

<sup>109</sup> Di Rocco 2012; Taj 2012; Berman 2012.

<sup>110</sup> See, for example, Pahlavi 2012; Humire and Berman 2014.

<sup>111</sup> Di Rocco 2012: 15.

This description by a South American commentator can serve as indication for the commonalities that exist between both sides in their anti-imperialist and pro-justice worldview.

*Perception of Iranian Foreign Policy: Whose Perception Counts?*

A related area of discord pertains to the issue of how Iranian foreign policy is perceived. While all schools would not neglect the importance of perception as a way to promote or complicate the advancement of Iranian interests, they strongly differ on the question of *whose* perception counts most. Stemming from their different accounts of international reality and power and their preferred sites for Iran's pursuit of "strategic depth", the schools differ in their being vigilant of the perception that groups of people or states would harbour towards Iranian foreign policy.

Responding to a question whether the support of the Palestinian cause when pursued through official diplomacy will not be too costly to Iranian national interests, thus echoing a Defensive Realist argument, Manouchehr Mohammadi states that '[o]ur ideology has much more power and dynamisms than nationalism and Marxism'. While nationalism would constitute a national ideology and Marxism a transnational one, Islamic ideology could not abandon the Palestinian cause, before adding:

However, we don't seek to dominate others [*solteh*] but we treat our closest friends and allies [*khodi-e khod*] with loyalty; to the same degree that we fight for our country [*mamlekat*], nation [*emq-e melli*] and self-determination, they also fight for us. That is why when a Hezbollahi in Lebanon is asked what he would do when Iran is attacked, he says: "I will fight with all I have. My identity is not separate from Iran's identity." When we say that the Islamic world is our strategic depth, when we tell the Americans that if you attack Iran the whole region will go up in flames, that is what we mean. This is the impact of ideology on our country's security and prosperity. When you see that when in Gaza a genocide takes place, Bolivia and Venezuela cut their diplomatic ties with Israel, this shows ideology plays an important role even in preserving the national interest.<sup>112</sup>

By legitimizing a strong reliance on ideology to advance national interests (shared by Offensive Realism and Islamic Idealism), stressing the importance of pan-Islamism and highlighting the extraordinary degree of trust that exists between the IRI and its regional non-state allies, Mohammadi's

<sup>112</sup> Cited in Vezáratí 2009.

response to that question is basically that benefits far outweigh the potential costs evoked by Defensive Realists.

### *Framing the Nuclear Conflict with the West*

When it comes to framing the conflict with the West—conventionally referred to as the “nuclear crisis”—the similarities among the schools clearly outweigh the divergences. Yet, when it comes to preferred Iranian responses to that foreign-policy challenges, the schools’ responses importantly differ. To illustrate the quasi-consensus in the framing of the conflict (as one manufactured by the West to pressurize Iran) and the divergences in policy responses to it (in our case Offensive Realist ones), we will review a piece by Hamid Mowlana from 2006, precisely the time when Iran had arguably reached its geopolitical climax in the region. Giving it particular weight, it is noteworthy that the article that appeared in the hardline *Kayhan* daily where he has been a regular contributor during the 1990s and the 2000s Mowlana has been a regular contributor, in fact constitutes the only one penned by him (re-)published on Supreme Leader Khamenei’s website. Published on the occasion of the 55<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the nationalization of Iran’s oil industry, Mowlana says that the nuclear issue pitting Iran against ‘post-modern colonialism’ echoes Iran’s oil nationalization project and the opposition it faced back then. He then warns against U.S. ‘post-modern colonialism’ and its ill intentions, yet at the same he sees the U.S. as vulnerable. According to Mowlana, very much like Britain’s effort to reverse the Iran’s oil nationalization in the 1950s was designed to preserve its economic and political dominance over the country, today U.S.-led ‘post-modern colonialism’ has created an alarmism in order to contain Iran’s scientific advancements (above all to deprive it from its inalienable right to have a nuclear energy programme), and relies on its dominance over the Middle East to damage Iran’s scientific and political independence. He further states that much like half a century ago when Iranians managed to nationalize their oil industry and to drive out the British Empire from the Persian Gulf, today’s task would likewise be to counter ‘post-modern colonialism’ by continuing the nuclear programme. Yet, compared to 1951, today’s Iran would be in a much better position, he writes, which we can read as an implicit hint at Iran’s new-found geopolitical power by the mid-2000s. The camp that Iran is facing today in the nuclear issue, Mowlana further states, very much resembles the one back then, when Iran was threatened by economic and political

sanctions as well as by an increased military presence in the Persian Gulf. In case today those kinds of threats against Iran increase, he demands that Iran should respond by leaving the NPT.

Although such a narrative, imbued with a strong sense of nationalism and anti-colonialism, of a malign Western agenda bent on curbing Iran's development would be shared by other foreign-policy schools of thought,<sup>113</sup> the nature of responses to that challenge as proffered by Mowlana would be a bone of contention. Defensive Realists would, for example, argue that Iran withdrawing from the NPT would only facilitate if not provoke military action by lending it greater international legitimacy. Regarding the often-mentioned issue of mutual distrust, Mowlana opines that there is a double standard at work: 'Post-modern colonialism says that we don't trust you, but you should trust us.'<sup>114</sup> Such a statement implicitly rejects Defensive Realism's assumption that mutual cooperation between Iran and the U.S. is feasible, even to the extent of creating a win-win situation.

### *Controversy over Nuclear Diplomacy*

Understanding the foreign-policy approach that the administration of Ahmadinejad opted for requires an appreciation of in how far the previous one had been seen to be able to advance national interests, in other words a cost-benefit assessment. In a nutshell, the criticism levelled against the Khatami administration's Defensive Realist foreign policy has been that its approach based on cooperation and accommodation had not diminished Western hostility, rather by being too passive and lacking resolve it instead even invited more external pressure.

More precisely, Offensive Realists accuse their defensive counterparts of neglecting to take into account all levers of Iranian power, above all ideology and regional networks. Illustrating their critique, a leading diplomat of the Ahmadinejad period, Ali Bagheri, who served as the SNSC's director of foreign policy and its Deputy Secretary (2007–13) as well as an advisor to its then-Secretary and nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili (2007–13), has criticized Khatami's foreign policy for its alleged passivity:

<sup>113</sup> See Mohseni 2014.

<sup>114</sup> Mowlana 2006.

The reformist government stepped into international relations with the slogan of *détente*, which means the approach of accepting the dominant global order. This view in foreign policy, which awaits to see what share the dominant political order has for it so that it can act on that basis, is a passive approach and what America and Westerners want. This is why the dominant order doesn't have any problems with this interpretation of the Islamic system and even supports the governance of such a view in the Islamic Republic. But the view that believes in the Islamic Revolution not only being a part of the Islamic Republic but also given birth by it, while having complete understanding of the mechanisms of the dominant order, rejects its policies and approaches on principle and places the promotion of national interest at the helm of its foreign policy. On this basis the discourse of *reducing threats* instead of *reducing tensions* becomes what shapes the Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy. This discourse endeavors through preventive and proactive initiatives to not allow any potential or actual threat to take place against the country's interests. It is on the basis of a passive approach that the opponent who is your enemy even designs a scenario to confront you with tensions so that you would give up your sovereign rights. So you can see that during the tenure of the reform government, when the West told them [*sic*] either suspend your nuclear activities or we punish you via the [UN] Security Council, since the discourse of *détente* was dominant in foreign policy and entry [of Iran's case] into the Security Council was an example of tension, the enemy was easily allowed to interfere in the country's sovereign mechanisms without any justification or rational and legal reasons. And on this basis even with pride suspension of nuclear activities was accepted and in justification it was said that we did not allow the [Iran nuclear] file to go to Security Council. But they never referred to the technical, scientific, political costs and credibility loss for the country and people.<sup>115</sup>

This long quote is instructive on two levels: (1) It illustrates the Ahmadinejad administration's foreign-policy outlook that consists of rejecting the dominant world order (thus reflecting the view of Global Rejectionists) from which they deduce the task of resisting against it, in the absence of which Iran's sovereignty would necessarily be violated. The best way to defend Iran's rights would not be *détente* but the neutralization of threats through counter-threats. Rejecting the possibility of a win-win scenario in the face of stronger powers whose aim would be to limit

<sup>115</sup> Interview with Bagheri, originally published in *Hamsbahri*, special issue, 19 March 2011; cited in Farhi and Lotfian 2012: 129–130. For a similar quote, see Bagheri cited in Khalaji 2014: 47–49.

Iran's rights, Offensive Realists hence display a zero-sum game mentality as the only way to wrest Iran's rights from interfering powers. (2) Bagheri's views also shed light on the nexus between domestic politics and foreign policy within Iranian foreign-policy debates, where more offensive schools (Offensive Realists, Rejectionists and Islamic Idealists) are seen as trustworthy in upholding the ideals of the "Islamic Revolution" and the domestic constitution of the IRI, whereas especially Defensive Realists are seen as deviant in that regard.

When assessing Iran's foreign-policy performance during the Ahmadinejad period, both Defensive and Offensive Realists recognize the severity of the national-security threats during that period, they differ in their tactical preferences and the underlying logic regarding the cost-benefit analysis. The opposing view shall now be demonstrated, where the Offensive Realism's offensive "counter-containment" strategy towards the U.S. is proposed to be replaced by Defensive Realism's "comprehensive engagement":

*Counter Containment*, as a reactive strategy, has proved quite costly. Its pursuit has involved increasing political, diplomatic, economic, and social costs for the country, and has, as a result, proved contentious for the ruling elite. An important segment of the Iranian elite contend that the costs involved far outweigh the presumed benefits, and call for its discontinuation and change of track. The [Ahmadinejad] government, supported by another segment of the elite, continue to insist that the price paid—and being paid—is necessary for safeguarding Iran's independence, dignity, the new-found posture and status. While the government officially denigrates sanctions as ineffective and of marginal impact on the Iranian society and economy, pursuit of the *Counter Containment* strategy has involved, inter alia, active search for alternative sources for substitution regardless of cost; reliance on imports and domestic substitution at the expense of quality; coalition-making with like-minded countries in order to balance and challenge the U.S. power and pressure; building up of defense, intelligence and security infrastructures in a number of countries for deterrence purposes or possible retaliatory action in case of external (U.S. or Israeli) military adventure; allocation of substantial resources for public diplomacy and psychological warfare geared to refuting the current prevalent tarnished image at the international level and for promoting an alternative image of Iran—the Islamic Republic—among Muslims and "oppressed people" of the world.<sup>116</sup>

<sup>116</sup>Hadian and Hormozi 2011: 48–49.

This quote from authors affiliated to the CSR, again, is insightful on many levels: (1) It shows the Defensive Realists' divergent national-security definition as one embracing potential costs on economic development (see the deplored impact of sanctions). (2) It clarifies the preference in alliance-building where industrially advanced Western countries are clearly prioritized over others. (3) It sheds light on differing foreign-policy preferences by Iran's political élite, which would beg the question as to the underlying causes for that, be they ideological and/or material. Finally, the authors conclude by posing the choice between continuation of the 'zealous pursuit of a reactive, costly anti-U.S. Counter Containment strategy'<sup>117</sup> that would likely lead to the disaster of a direct confrontation, and "comprehensive engagement" that would pave the way for *rapprochement* and ultimately bilateral reconciliation, thereby constituting a win-win game for both sides. Echoing the arguments made by the pro-engagement camp in the U.S.,<sup>118</sup> they acknowledge that the latter choice will be a 'complex, difficult, and time-consuming' one and require political will in Tehran as well as in Washington.

### *On Categorizing the Ahmadinejad Administration's Foreign Policy*

It is difficult to unequivocally categorize the foreign policy of the Ahmadinejad administration, and perhaps for that matter that of any other administration within the specific complex foreign-policy arrangement in the IRI, in one single school. Rather, as we shall argue, one can identify multiple affiliations.

Within the spectrum of Regional Power Balancers, all evidence points to the administration following Offensive Realism (as demonstrated by the above discussion). Here, Ahmadinejad's vociferous rhetorical attacks against Israel and the U.S. enter the picture. Perhaps its most important motivation lied in the calculation of extending Iranian "soft power" throughout the "Arab streets", precisely at a time when U.S. and Israeli threats of war were at a height. Or as Ray Takeyh noted, through his 'use of Islamic discourse and his appeals to local grievances, Ahmadinejad has

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.: 49.

<sup>118</sup> See Parsi 2012a, 2012b; Fathollah-Nejad 2010: 33–36.

managed to leapfrog the sectarian divide and allow a Shi'a Persian country to capture the imagination of Sunni Arabs'.<sup>119</sup>

The use of such tactics, however, was much to the distaste of Defensive Realists who considered that approach ultimately counterproductive to Iran's national interest. In particular, Defensive Realists would sit uncomfortably with aspects of Ahmadinejad's discourse that embraced elements of messianism and apocalyptic thinking. This is the case because his belief in the return of the Mahdi, the "hidden" or Twelfth Imam, who upon the apocalypse will rid the world from evil, is one that seeks to unravel the status quo.<sup>120</sup> According to Khalaji, the emergence of that new apocalyptic ideology, introduced and led by President Ahmadinejad, is distinct from the Islamic ideology of the 1979 revolution. It is instead composed of a mixture of popular Islam, anti-clericalism, enthusiasm for military and nuclear technology, and pseudo-nationalism, thus mingling religious and secular myths.<sup>121</sup> A similar argument can be advanced about Ahmadinejad's discourse on the Holocaust, which according to Ansari combined anti-Zionism, anti-capitalism and Shia eschatology.<sup>122</sup>

Defensive Realists argue that such an ideological mixture had only boosted the conviction held by Iran's enemies that the Iranian administration could not be trusted since its beliefs embraced strong irrational elements to the point of being apocalyptic and messianic and thus potentially suicidal or offensively revolutionary, thereby rendering any conventional containment policy against Iran a futile exercise to the point of constituting appeasement. Or briefly put, the Ahmadinejad administration had been jeopardizing national security.

Regarding the categorization within Iran's Global Balancers, despite strong Rejectionist elements some have interpreted the Ahmadinejad administration's confrontational style as Global Accommodationist.<sup>123</sup> Here, they allude to his letters to Western leaders which despite their ideological "overload" included a willingness to establish contacts with the U.S. and also a call to accept Iran as a player assuming global responsibility.

<sup>119</sup> Takeyh 2009: 208.

<sup>120</sup> Haji-Yousefi 2010b, c: 14–15.

<sup>121</sup> Khalaji 2010. See also Ansari 2012: 278–282; Ahdiyyih 2008; Savyon and Mansharof 2007.

<sup>122</sup> See Ansari 2012: 264–266.

<sup>123</sup> See Haji-Yousefi 2010b.

In conclusion, it could be argued that the entire spectrum of the Ahmadinejad administration's foreign-policy discourse from anti-imperialism/-colonialism geared towards elevating Iranian regional "soft power" to its messianism and apocalypticism embraces elements of both Realism and Idealism, with the former aspect prevailing on the regional and the latter on the international arena.

*An Unsettled Conflict: How Offensive Realists Hold Iran's  
Geopolitical Successes to Their Credit*

Despite the Rouhani administration's embracement of an essentially Defensive Realist foreign policy (see the Conclusion), especially on the nuclear issue, Offensive Realist thinking has not abated. For example, Payam Mohseni, then Iran Project director at Harvard Kennedy School's Belfer Center, reports from his discussions with members of Iran's political élite during summer 2014:

I perceived the Iranians to be very confident about their rising power and regional standing, and there was no sense of urgency or need to compromise and resolve the nuclear standoff. They believed to have gained much from the regional turmoil, including in Syria and recently in Iraq with the rise of ISIS. This perception was particularly striking during my discussions with leading conservative figures of the state. Most elites also discussed the sanctions as an opportunity and divine gift for economic development and self-sufficiency—a threat that could be handled and overcome. The main difference between moderates and hardliners was that the latter were more skeptical of the utility of nuclear negotiations and the benefit of cooperating with the United States on regional matters.<sup>124</sup>

A similar schism erupted after Foreign Minister Mohammad-Javad Zarif in a December 2014 speech said: 'I maintain that as a result of these [nuclear] negotiations, it is Iran that has become more secure.' He further said that '[n]o one can beat the war drums against Iran anymore', adding that plans towards creating 'a hostile atmosphere against Iran have collapsed and the world understands that they can reach an understanding with Iran based on respect, dialogue and mutual understanding and common interests'. In response, after a meeting of the top officials of the armed forces, Maj. Gen. Mohammad-Ali Jafari, the head of the IRGC,

<sup>124</sup> Mohseni 2014.

strongly rejected that claim, instead suggesting that Iran's defensive and military capabilities have allowed the nuclear negotiators to operate from a position of strength: 'The strength of our diplomacy in the nuclear negotiations is indebted to the inspiration of the Islamic Revolution and the defensive and security powers of our system.' The strength of the system, he said, has been 'transferred' to Iran's diplomacy, which has allowed the negotiators 'with the massive support of the Islamic Revolution and military and defensive abilities to resist against the excessive demands of the arrogant powers'. 'Years before', he explained, 'we had already become a great power with deterrent abilities, and all of the components of our power have been strengthened considerably.' Now, '[w]ithout a doubt, the confidence of our negotiators stems from the defensive and military power that has been officially recognized'. On the possibility of a U.S.–Iran confrontation, Jafari said, 'America's abilities are not able to expand beyond this [...] and there is no path for America but to accept the real power of the Islamic Revolution.' Finally, he wished success for Iran's negotiators but ominously added: 'The officials of the Foreign Ministry should not miscalculate, and pursue resistance and perseverance of the achievements of the Islamic Revolution and the blood of thousands of martyrs.'<sup>125</sup>

Whereas Zarif's comments reflect key Defensive Realist beliefs—such as the focus on security rather than power gains, the significance of how Iranian behaviour is perceived especially by the international system's powerful states—the positions taken by Jafari and Mohseni's conservative interlocutors among Iran's political élite echo central aspects of Offensive Realist thinking, such as attributing Iran's geopolitical rise to its resistance, the focus on military deterrence capacities rather than diplomatic engagement, the primacy of ideological and military sources of power.

## CONCLUSION

In order to be able to follow Iranian foreign-policy, we examined the various schools of thought relying on the categorization offered by Farhi and Lotfian, which we analytically and empirically expanded. Despite all schools' shared goal of boosting Iran's regional and international clout, there are important differences of worldview and tactics, which are sometimes interrelated. Unsurprisingly, at the core of those discussions stands

<sup>125</sup> Cited in Karami 2014.

the question of how to deal with the U.S., Iran's nemesis at the regional and international levels. Importantly, part of the answer lies in the assessment of how significant the relative decline of U.S. power is. Here, the Offensive Realists' estimate of a massive decline of U.S. power has been misleading, while that of Defensive Realists has largely been in tune with the realities of international power relations at the outset of the twenty-first century (a subject to be illuminated in Chap. 7). The policy ramification of these differing evaluations is the defensive variant's more cautious and accommodationist stance, and the offensive variant's more offensive and rejectionist posture. This also translates into Defensive Realism's advocacy of a win-win approach in foreign policy as opposed to Offensive Realism's zero-sum game rationale.

### *Shifting Tendencies Rather Than Clear-cut Change*

As noted at the outset of this chapter, a strict categorization between different foreign-policy schools of thought cannot be made with certainty. Moreover, it would be misleading to claim that a shift from one school to another does signal radical change in the IRI's foreign policy. Rather it would be more adequate to understand these changes as shifting tendencies within an understanding of Iranian foreign policy as displaying more continuity than change. This is corroborated by the fact that Iranian foreign policy might combine elements from various schools at the same time, even within the same main categories. As an example, we can think of a Defensive Realist nuclear diplomacy along with an Offensive Realist Syria policy—as arguably happening under the Rouhani administration. Such eclecticism could indeed serve to increase Iranian standing, however there is a dilemma has been pointed out by Kayhan Barzegar: If the U.S. and regional powers perceive Iranian regional policy as driven by Offensive Realism, their reaction would be to pursue a policy of deterrence towards Iran; whereas when Iran is seen to pursue Defensive Realism including the desire to augment its “relative security”, other countries are likely to seek cooperation with it.<sup>126</sup>

These dilemmas have prompted critical examinations such as Sariolghalam's *The Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran* (in Persian). From a Defensive Realist or Global Accommodationist view, he advocates to prioritize relations with “the West” (U.S., Europe and Japan)

<sup>126</sup> Barzegar 2009b: 126–127.

because this would constitute the only viable way for Iran to attain its objectives in terms of development and international status.<sup>127</sup> In this vein, in order not to jeopardize Iran's 20-Year Outlook project it is argued that any Iranian confrontational posture should be watered down for the country not to be seen as a threat to international peace and stability but rather as a status-quo power. Sariolghalam bases his argument on a discussion that highlights the many contradictions and unsatisfactory nature of pursuing a foreign policy upon ideological preferences. The only case where the afore-mentioned schools do not collide is when it comes to Iran's stance towards Malaysia. While Sariolghalam recognizes its economic potentialities, Islamic Idealists have viewed close ties with Kuala Lumpur, especially under the premiership of Mahathir Mohamad (1981–2003), in a positive light and reflective of both sides' desire to build an anti-imperialist front sustained by a shared Islamic faith.<sup>128</sup>

When reviewing most schools, two contradictions crystallize: (1) While the IRI is critical of the international order and its institutions, it nevertheless expresses the desire to improve its position within that same order. (2) Iran's sense of importance as a regional and even global player is accompanied by its sense of insecurity and strategic loneliness. Given these contradictions, it is difficult to label Iran as a rising power, but rather a "conflicted aspiring power" as Farhi and Lotfian aptly put it.

### *The Modus Operandi of the IRI's Foreign Policy: The Three Realms*

Our discussion has shown important degrees of variation between the schools. Despite overlaps, there are contradictory if not mutually exclusive policy implications. The varied mix of ideologies articulated in the IRI has been widely seen as a handicap, the prime reason for the lack of a consistent and calculable foreign policy, which is regarded as a precondition to effectively advance foreign-policy aims. While Offensive Realists and Global Rejectionists have often found such unpredictability in Iranian foreign policy to be an effective tool in dissuading external foes from engaging in hostile actions as they would fear the unpredictable set of retaliatory measures Iran could adopt, Defensive Realists have interpreted this lack of coherent action and at times opportunistic use of those ideational

<sup>127</sup> Sariolghalam 2002.

<sup>128</sup> See *ibid.*: pt. 2.

elements to be a weakness which blocks the effective and coordinated deployment of foreign-policy tools.

However, some have argued that a *modus operandi* has materialized in Iran's foreign policy trying to turn that handicap (i.e. multiplicity of ideological sources) into an opportunity (towards effective foreign policy). This would be done by resorting to the principle of emphasizing specific ideological elements in specific foreign-policy areas: (1) Towards its immediate neighbours in West Asia (especially Iraq), Central Asia and Afghanistan, Iran's policies would be pragmatic as emphasis is put on territorial integrity, national sovereignty and economic development. As a case in point, as Posch has argued, when its territorial integrity is believed to be jeopardized—like most recently in the case of IS(IL)—both hardliners and moderates are driven by nationalism and advocate pragmatic, Realist positions. (2) Towards the wider region's Muslim-majority countries, Tehran underlines its revolutionary Islamic identity to produce “soft power”. (3) Towards the rest of the world, the bulk of which being the “Global South”, ideological rhetoric is likely to take centre-stage with Iran stressing anti-imperialist Third-Worldism.<sup>129</sup> Of course, such a categorization cannot be seen as exhaustive, as every single case needs to be subjected to scrutiny.

### *The Maslahat Principle: Or the Primacy of Regime Survival*

Moreover, beyond the use of different ideologies to serve specific foreign-policy goals, there is the so-called *Maslahat* principle which allows foregoing ideological prescriptions and instead pursuing a purely pragmatic foreign policy. In January 1988, Supreme Leader Khomeini issued the *Maslahat* fatwa which stands as a legal principle legitimizing the use of any kind of action by the authorities (including the destruction of mosques or the breaking of fasting) if it serves the preservation of the regime. In that vein, later in July, Khomeini agreed to the UN-mediated ceasefire, a decision he equalled to “drinking the poisoned chalice” as he had previously vowed to wage the war until total victory.<sup>130</sup> There have been other instances when the *Maslahat* principle has been effectively utilized, the most prominent being that of Iran's revolutionary government resorting to weapons purchases from the U.S. (the “Great Satan”) via its other

<sup>129</sup> See Posch 2013a: 14; Sariolghalam 2002; interview with Walter Posch (*Shargh* 2014); Hadian 2004: 57–58.

<sup>130</sup> Amirpur 2013: 20–21; Abrahamian 2008a: 65–66; Pear 1988.

declared enemy Israel (the “Little Satan”), resulting in the Iran–Contra scandal. Hence, on the one hand, the *Maslahat* principle has been regarded as the foremost sign for the IRI’s post-war abandonment of ideological zealotry and the concomitant “normalization” of its foreign policy geared towards pursuing the “national interest”,<sup>131</sup> but on the other, its purpose primarily lies in safeguarding regime survival.

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<sup>131</sup> See, for example, Abedin 2011.

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# Iran's International Relations in the Face of U.S. Imperial Hubris: From “9/11” to the Iraq War

## INTRODUCTION

After having introduced foreign-policy schools of thoughts, this chapter will discuss Iran's international relations in the wake of the 11 September 2001 terrorist attacks in the U.S. (“9/11”) and Tehran's reactions towards the momentous challenges posed by U.S. “regime change” operations in Afghanistan and Iraq on the one hand and the threat of “regime change” directed against Iran itself on the other. Addressing our theoretical query on outside–inside dynamics, it shall be asked how U.S. post-“9/11” policies and postures have affected Iranian security and foreign-policy debates, and ultimately the state–society complex.

### *Theoretical Considerations on Outside–Inside Dynamics*

It has been noted that the Critical Geopolitics scholarship has so far failed to show how a country's geopolitical thought has been the result of the relationship between its particular identity and interests on the one hand and its relations with the outside world on the other.<sup>1</sup> Such shortcoming in analytically exploring the interactions and dynamics, even interconnectedness, between the domestic and international realms, has

<sup>1</sup> See Kuus 2010.

also been critically noted by scholars concerned with IR theory more generally. For instance, Barkawi and Laffey have noticed the wider IR scholarship's deficiency in fully examining such interconnections; despite partial recognition, still 'they have not been made central to our understandings of world politics'. The authors see '[p]rocesses of mutual constitution', as they call these interconnections, 'not limited to the social and the cultural narrowly-defined in any case. The international interaction involved in political-military relations shapes the character of states and societies as well.' In fact, their argument corroborates the doubt we cast on the focus on ideational or cultural themes in foreign-policy dynamics as suggested by Constructivism and our resulting query as to the role of material patterns in this regard. To highlight the relevance of "mutual constitution" stemming from outside-inside dynamics, they present an example focusing on the role of U.S. foreign policy:

US Cold War policy towards Iran was fundamental to post-1945 Iranian history. The social forces that carried out the Iranian revolution were strengthened in multiple ways by US policy. In turn, the Iranian revolution in 1979 profoundly shaped the subsequent political history of the US. It was in part responsible for the collapse of the Carter Administration, the electoral success of Governor Reagan, and the subsequent development of an extra-legal apparatus within the Reagan Administration for the prosecution of US foreign policy, culminating in the Iran–Contra scandal. Iran–Contra was itself primarily driven by Nicaraguan resistance to US foreign policy in Central America. In other words, the resistance of some Nicaraguan peasants nearly toppled the Reagan Presidency, a situation not as novel as one might think, as Presidents Johnson and Nixon can attest with regards to similar difficulties with Vietnamese peasants. What US politics and society are is in part the result of US engagements with the Third World.<sup>2</sup>

Significant for the evolution of state–society complexes, the wider social-science literature suffers from the same sort of *malaise* by ignoring outside-inside dynamics and their ramifications. For instance, the academic literature on political liberalization and democratization neglects (with some exceptions)<sup>3</sup> external influences, instead emphasis is usually put on domestic political culture, the dynamics and nature of civil society, and domestic political economy. Whereas most literature focuses on the

<sup>2</sup> Barkawi and Laffey 2002: 115.

<sup>3</sup> Cavatorta 2009.

regional or global diffusion of democratic models and discourses, the study of the effects of infusion from external forces—for example, in the forms of foreign policies or economic globalization—has been widely neglected. In particular, little attention has been given to external pressures that might fuel authoritarian tendencies in the name of national security, especially in countries and/or governments in enmity the West (or, for that matter, any other great-power with global ambitions), or in other words to ‘the complex interaction between external and internal variables in shaping the prospects for democracy’.<sup>4</sup> Taking these limitations in the Critical Geopolitics, IR and social-sciences scholarships into account, the following discussion shall highlight significant instances of interaction between the outside and the inside, which have impacted upon national-security and foreign policy as well as the trajectory of the state–society complex.

(A) GUIDING PRINCIPLES OF IRAN’S POLICY TOWARDS  
AFGHANISTAN AND CENTRAL ASIA: REGIONAL STABILITY  
AS PRECONDITION FOR SECURITY  
AND ECONOMIC DEVELOPMENT

Before turning to a discussion of the post-“9/11” events, we will briefly highlight the main threads of Iranian foreign policy towards Afghanistan that is embedded in its larger outlook towards the entire Central Asian region. As widely noted, Iran’s regional policy towards its Caucasian, Central Asian and South Asian neighbours has been primarily driven by considerations of economic development as well as security. There are both cultural and geostrategic factors that underpin Iran’s outlook. Historically speaking, Central Asia has a Persian and Turkic language background. Until today Persian is embedded in the names of the five Central Asian “(i)stans”.<sup>5</sup> Furthermore, the Soviet collapse had a number of implications for Iran. First of all, it was largely a relief as the powerful northern superpower, who had been intervening in Iran’s affairs throughout its modern history, vanished. The immediate situation, however, was marked by insecurities as an “arc of crisis” soon erupted, ranging from the Caucasus (notably the Armenia–Azerbaijan territorial conflict over

<sup>4</sup> Brynen et al. 1995: 18–20. See also Aarts 2004.

<sup>5</sup> Hiro 2010b.

Nagorno-Karabakh, 1991–94) to Central Asia (the civil war in Tajikistan, 1992–97).<sup>6</sup> To maintain regional stability, Iran assumed a pragmatic conflict-management role. Its adoption of a foreign policy based on interest-sharing also followed from Iran's quick realization that post-Soviet Central Asia would not turn into an Islamic macro-region.<sup>7</sup> Thus, driven by commercial and strategic interests, Iran sought cooperation with Caucasian and Central Asian countries. In doing so, it acted carefully as not to clash with other more friendly powers (Russia, Turkey and Pakistan) that were also entering the post-Soviet space.<sup>8</sup>

Iran's policy towards that northern and eastern region is basically rooted in its geographic location, which makes it predestined to be a key strategic actor there. Situated at the intersection of territories and waters rich of natural resources, harbouring industrial and energy potentials, Iran has therefore been ideally placed to function as transit hub.<sup>9</sup> This position as the geo-economic hub standing at the centre between the Caucasus, Central Asia and Afghanistan, prompted it together with Turkey and Pakistan to found the Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO, headquartered in Tehran) in 1985.<sup>10</sup> One of ECO's key objectives is the expansion of transport routes in order to promote trade among member-states. Iran's aim, therefore, has been to position itself as the hub for energy supply lines and transit routes between on one side Europe, Russia and West Asia, and on the other Central Asia, Pakistan, India and China. Or in the words of then-President Hashemi-Rafsanjani, who at the 1992 ECO summit, when it was decided to include the post-Soviet Muslim-majority countries, said:

As you can see on the map, Iran links the ECO member states with one another. Cooperation should be certainly carried out via Iran. For links between the north and the south, east and the west, these countries and Europe, Europe and Asia, everything should cross Iran, oil and gas pipelines, railways, communication routes and international airports.<sup>11</sup>

<sup>6</sup> See Ehteshami 2004: 187; Hunter 2010: ch. 8.

<sup>7</sup> Atai 2008.

<sup>8</sup> Hansen 2000: 194.

<sup>9</sup> Rastbeen 2006a.

<sup>10</sup> Posch 2013a: 19–20.

<sup>11</sup> IRNA, March 1992; cited in Ehteshami and Murphy 1994: 82.

In the following decade preceding “9/11”, several key projects with Iran at their hub have been conceived:<sup>12</sup> an international north–south railway corridor in order to link the Caspian Sea to the Persian Gulf, promoted by Iran, Russia and India; a railway corridor connecting the land-locked Central Asian states to the Persian Gulf, especially pushed by India who sees Iran as its gateway to Eurasia by land, sea and rail routes;<sup>13</sup> and the Iran–Pakistan–India (IPI) pipeline positing Iran as gas supplier to Europe, China and India, the realization of which has faced strong U.S. objection (to be discussed in Chap. 7).

Of course, the tumultuous history of Afghanistan had always posed a concern regarding Iran’s aim of regional stability. But the situation aggravated in earnest when the Taliban, who had emerged in 1994 and by 1997 (the very year Khatami was elected president) gained control over nine-tenth of Afghan territory.<sup>14</sup> The Taliban regime turned out to pose a serious problem to Iran due to two major reasons. (1) Their Wahhabi brand of radical Sunni Islam was fiercely anti-Iranian and anti-Shia.<sup>15</sup> (2) While Pakistan, through its Interior Ministry and its Inter-Services Intelligence (ISI), and Saudi Arabia had been lending strong assistance to the Taliban, Iran—together with Russia and India—countered by arming and funding the oppositional Northern Alliance throughout the 1990s.<sup>16</sup> From 1996 onwards, the Iranians’ increasing concern over the Taliban led them to advocate a collective political effort to contain them, but one which had fallen on deaf ears with Pakistanis and Americans.<sup>17</sup> In 1998, tensions between Tehran and Kabul had reached a peak when eleven Iranian diplomats were killed by the Taliban. Iran reacted by flexing its muscles when it first sent 70,000 IRGC troops backed by tanks and aircraft to its Afghan border, followed by 200,000 regular army troops, before the crisis was finally settled when Lakhdar Brahimi of the UN gained the pledge from the Taliban leadership that it would de-escalate.<sup>18</sup> As a result, by 2001 prospects for reconciliation between Iran and the Taliban were barely in the cards.

<sup>12</sup> Posch 2013a: 19–20.

<sup>13</sup> Singh Roy 2012.

<sup>14</sup> Djalili 2001: 51.

<sup>15</sup> Ibid.: 51–52.

<sup>16</sup> Goodson 2003: 92; Parsi 2007: 226.

<sup>17</sup> Afrasiabi and Maleki 2003: 258, 265n6.

<sup>18</sup> Rashid 2010: 74–76.

## (B) THE EVOLUTION OF NATIONAL SECURITY AND FOREIGN POLICY (LATE 2001–EARLY 2004)

The “9/11” terrorist attacks were immediately condemned by Iran, with authorities even tolerating spontaneous candlelight vigils in Tehran in solidarity of the victims—arguably the first and so far last instance of pro-U.S. demonstrations in the history of the IRI. Within hours of the attacks, the U.S. administration identified Osama bin Laden and his terrorist network Al-Qaeda as perpetrators. Shortly thereafter, Washington promulgated a “global war on terror” (GWOT) and in particular identified Taliban-ruled Afghanistan as the country harbouring those terrorists. In October 2001, on a wave of unprecedented international solidarity for the U.S., U.S.-led NATO forces launched a military assault on Afghanistan with the aim of “regime change”.

### *From Toppling the Taliban to the “Axis of Evil” Speech: The Rise and Fall of Defensive Realism*

#### *Iranian Security Dilemma: The Enemy of My Enemy Is My Friend?*

The U.S. proclamation of its intent to conduct a military “regime change” in Afghanistan presented a security dilemma to Iran. For the IRI’s most important enemy had proclaimed a GWOT that came along with a massive military mobilization, whose first target was Iran’s immediate neighbour to the east, while the war was ominously characterized by its lack of temporal and geographical limitation. Seen from Tehran, Iran could welcome neither a surge of U.S. forces to its immediate vicinity (the Persian Gulf and Afghanistan), nor the possibility of a pro-U.S. government being installed in post-Taliban Afghanistan. Left with little choice in the face of overwhelming U.S. power on the one hand and the hostile Taliban rulers on the other, finally the Iranians pragmatically calculated that it was rather in their interest to get involved with the U.S. in this unfolding scenario in order to have a say in the future shape of Afghanistan.

Iran’s willingness to assist the U.S. was embedded in a Defensive Realist argument (arguably the dominant school of thought in the Khatami administration), through which Iran could also demonstrate to the Americans the strategic benefits that resulted from bilateral cooperation.<sup>19</sup>

<sup>19</sup> See Parsi 2007: 226.

The overall aim had been to achieve a ‘lasting understanding with the West’, in the words of national-security official Hossein Mousavian who worked with the administration during this Afghanistan crisis.<sup>20</sup> Khatami was taking important steps in that direction, whose risks were only elevated as a fierce intra-élite power struggle accompanied his presidency from the beginning, in which the reformists (who were in control of the presidency and the parliament) were facing the conservatives (who controlled the judiciary and the security services). In January 1998 in an interview with CNN, Khatami had reached out to the U.S., stating:

I believe that if humanity is looking for happiness, it should combine religious spirituality with the virtues of liberty. And it is for this reason that I say respect to the American nation because of their great civilization. This respect is due to two reasons: the essence and pillars of the Anglo-American civilization and the dialogue among civilizations.<sup>21</sup>

Khatami had even apologized for the post-revolution hostage-taking of U.S. embassy staff in Tehran, prompting the scorn of hardliners at home. On the next day, the Supreme Leader rebuffed his comments, stating the U.S. would still constitute Iran’s arch-enemy and because of its policies over the past decades be rightfully considered the “Great Satan”.<sup>22</sup> In the subsequent years, however, Khatami and his fellow reformists had made their case for détente towards the U.S. in a ferocious debate against the hardliners.

### *The Brief Moment of Defensive Realist Triumph*

Within the U.S. administration, the willingness to seek Iran’s assistance to topple the Taliban and to fight al-Qaeda had in fact existed from very early on. Secretary of State Colin Powell’s plan to assemble an international coalition in that effort (later to be turned into “Operation Enduring Freedom”) included seeking specific support from Iran.<sup>23</sup> Flynt Leverett, who served as director for Middle East affairs in the U.S. National Security Council, recalled: ‘The Iranians had real contacts with important players in Afghanistan and were prepared to use their influence in constructive

<sup>20</sup> Mousavian 2012b: 57.

<sup>21</sup> Khatami 1998.

<sup>22</sup> See Amirpur 2002: 65.

<sup>23</sup> Parsi 2007: 226.

ways in coordination with the United States.<sup>24</sup> Hence, in October 2011 when Washington was beginning its military operations, ‘a period of extraordinary strategic cooperation’ between Iran and the U.S. commenced,<sup>25</sup> which constituted nothing less than ‘the highest-level contacts between officials of the two countries since the Iran–Contra scandal’.<sup>26</sup> During these largely bilateral talks between Iranian and U.S. officials (dubbed the “Geneva Channel”), the Iranians showed a high degree of cooperativeness.

The discussions focused on “how to effectively unseat the Taliban and, once the Taliban was [*sic*] gone, how to stand up an Afghan government,” and the Iranians gave extensive assistance to the United States in the war, unaware of what was about to unfold after the success in Afghanistan. The Iranian diplomats impressed their American and European counterparts tremendously with their knowledge and expertise about Afghanistan and the Taliban. [...] The Iranians offered their air bases to the United States, they offered to perform search-and-rescue missions for downed American pilots, they served as a bridge between the Northern Alliance and the United States in the fight against the Taliban, and on occasion they even used U.S. information to find and kill fleeing al-Qaeda leaders.<sup>27</sup>

Ultimately, this unprecedented Iran–U.S. intelligence and military cooperation brought an end to Taliban rule.

Shortly thereafter, Tehran again proved its indispensable role thanks to its unrivalled contacts with various Afghan factions, this time around concerning the establishment of a post-invasion order. The December 2001 Bonn Conference, where a number of Afghan warlords and representatives from various countries met under UN auspices to set the stage for that order, had been carefully prepared weeks in advance jointly by the U.S. and Iran. Notably, however, it was ‘Iran’s influence over the Afghans and not America’s threats and promises that moved the negotiations forward’ and ultimately Iranian influence which brought the conference to a successful final agreement. Hence, Iran not only demonstrated its role vis-à-vis all attendant great-powers (the U.S., Russia, India, Germany and Lakhdar Brahimi of the UN) as the key player in stabilizing the region, but

<sup>24</sup> Cited in Porter 2006a.

<sup>25</sup> Porter 2006b: 20.

<sup>26</sup> Parsi 2007: 228.

<sup>27</sup> Ibid.: 227–228.

also, in particular, succeeded in showing the U.S. the potential benefits of better ties with it.<sup>28</sup> The Iranians now regarded this as a triumph: the Taliban regime was gone and Tehran had successfully proven its usefulness to Washington. All of this reflected Defensive Realists' goal to seek win-win scenarios.

Encouraged by the Afghan success story, both the U.S. (namely the State Department) and Iran showed interest in broadening their bilateral talks through the Geneva Channel. In fact, important U.S. circles saw a real opportunity to enter into a comprehensive dialogue, covering issues ranging from the fight against al-Qaeda, Iran's nuclear programme, its bid to join the WTO,<sup>29</sup> potential security guarantees for Iran and even the prospect of taking the country off the U.S. state-sponsors-of-terrorism list.<sup>30</sup> There was hard evidence that '[t]he post-9-11 period was the most promising moment for a U.S. opening to Iran since the two countries cut their relations in 1979'.<sup>31</sup> However, U.S. neoconservatives, who had assumed key positions in the Bush/Cheney administration, along with the right-wing Likud government of Israel were frightened about the prospect of U.S.–Iranian rapprochement, and as a consequence successfully blocked the State Department's plan to transform the successful tactical cooperation over Afghanistan into a strategic opening. In fact, both Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld and Vice-President Dick Cheney refused to lend their approval to the initiative of rapprochement with Iran.<sup>32</sup>

In Tehran, Supreme Leader Khamenei and President Khatami had both supported the collaboration over Afghanistan which Zarif (who served as Iran's Ambassador to the UN between 5 August 2002 and 25 July 2007) led for the Iranian side, something they had already regarded as a kind of strategic opening. However, when realizing that the agenda for broader bilateral talks only included U.S. concerns—Afghanistan, the nuclear issue and terrorism—while Iranian ones were being ignored, Tehran finally refused to go ahead.<sup>33</sup>

Nevertheless, all indications pointed to the fact that Iran's Defensive Realist line emerged as victor. After Israeli Prime Minister Ariel Sharon in October 2001 lashed out against the White House over the latter's Iran contacts, flatly accusing it of appeasement *à la* Chamberlain, this was seen

<sup>28</sup> Ibid.: 228–229. See also Djalili 2003.

<sup>29</sup> See [http://www.wto.org/english/thewto\\_e/acc\\_e/a1\\_iran\\_e.htm](http://www.wto.org/english/thewto_e/acc_e/a1_iran_e.htm) [29/12/2014].

<sup>30</sup> Porter 2006c: 21.

<sup>31</sup> Ibid.: 21.

<sup>32</sup> Parsi 2007: 229.

<sup>33</sup> Ibid.: 230.

in Iran as another sign for the success of Khatami's policy of détente: 'This international approval of Iran has terribly angered our staunch enemy Israel but it has given us a new opportunity to rebuild our international ties', Valiollah Shojapourian, a reformist MP triumphantly proclaimed.<sup>34</sup>

As a result, despite the absence of U.S.–Iranian cooperation entering a stage of strategic understanding beyond the tactical one over Afghanistan, the reformists' foreign-policy approach seemed to have been validated by its success, also noticed by the Supreme Leader.

*The "Axis of Evil" Speech: Imperial Hubris and the Weakness of the Defensive Realist Strategy*

Merely two months after the Bonn Conference, President George W. Bush Jr. in his "state of the union" address on 29 January 2002 listed North Korea, Iraq and also Iran as forming an "axis of evil". He called Iran a threat to world peace, accused it of pursuing nuclear weapons and of sponsoring international terrorism directed at the U.S. Bush also stated that in the IRI 'unelected few repress the Iranian people's hope for freedom'.<sup>35</sup> His speech, which could arguably be understood as a proclamation that Iran would next to be subjected to a U.S. military "regime change", led to a political earthquake in Iran whose reverberations were to leave a deep mark on Iran's domestic and foreign-policy trajectories of the following decade.

Anyone in Iran who had advocated détente and rapprochement with the U.S. found themselves duped and even humiliated in the debates following the "axis of evil" speech. It even became dangerous to further advocate such a rapprochement, whether in parliament or in the press (where journalists were even threatened with punishment in case they did so).<sup>36</sup> The reformist press expressed astonishment over why the positive domestic path that Iran had taken under Khatami was not duly recognized by U.S. officials. After all, when making 'the argument for Iranian support for coalition efforts in Afghanistan, [Khatami] had stressed, in the face of concerted hardline opposition, that the potential rewards would be worth it'.<sup>37</sup> In any case, the reformists were pushed into a corner. So when the Supreme Leader thundered 'drunken shouts of American officials', Khatami had to agree by denouncing the "axis of evil" speech as

<sup>34</sup> Ibid.: 231.

<sup>35</sup> Bush jr. 2002.

<sup>36</sup> See Ansari 2008a: 117.

<sup>37</sup> Ansari 2006: 186–187.

'war-mongering and insulting'.<sup>38</sup> The president had to publically admit that the U.S. was an arrogant and incorrigible world power—thus implicitly corroborating his opponents' stance. The conservatives' opposition to the reformists' domestic agenda of liberalization had thus been emboldened. On the public-policy front, the conservatives had an easy ride portraying their reformist opponents as naïve lackeys of the West who had ultimately brought about the humiliation of the entire nation.<sup>39</sup> The end result of all this was the weakening of the reformists whose entire political project had lost credibility and political capital among the political élite.

On the security and foreign policy front, a debate emerged over the causes for Iran's failure. The criticism largely reflecting Offensive Realist arguments, the passivity of the policy approach taken was criticized. "Axis of Evil" was a fiasco for the Khatami government', Farhi (who worked for IPIS)<sup>40</sup> holds, explaining that it 'was used by the hard-liners, who said: If you give in, if you help from a position of weakness, then you get negative results.'<sup>41</sup> Also some members of Iran's delegation to the Afghanistan talks concurred with this critique, pointing out that Iran should have demanded something in return from the U.S. for its help on Afghanistan. 'Iran made a mistake not to link its assistance in Afghanistan to American help in other areas and by just hoping that the U.S. would reciprocate', Zarif himself admitted.<sup>42</sup> Also, the critics argued that 16 years of moderate foreign policy under Presidents Hashemi-Rafsanjani and Khatami with offering many concessions did not provide Iran with any benefits in return, evoking, for example, the case of continuing sanctions. This lack of reciprocal goodwill, they argued, only validated their view that it was wrong to trust the West.<sup>43</sup> 'These policies [of détente and rapprochement pursued by the Hashemi-Rafsanjani and Khatami administrations] were not without controversy', Mousavian notes, 'and the so-called radical school, suspicious of any rapprochement or flexibility with the West on grounds that it would reduce Iran once again to a position of dependency, remained influential, if temporarily sidelined, during the 1990s.'<sup>44</sup> Now, the "axis of evil" speech had brought those radicals, who relied on Offensive Realist

<sup>38</sup> Cited in Thrupkaew 2002.

<sup>39</sup> See Ansari 2007: 25–26.

<sup>40</sup> <http://www.tabnak.ir/fa/pages/?cid=45639> [20/07/2014].

<sup>41</sup> Cited in Parsi 2007: 235.

<sup>42</sup> Cited in *ibid.*: 235.

<sup>43</sup> Mousavian 2012b: 435.

<sup>44</sup> *Ibid.*: 483n1.

arguments, in from the cold, as their suspicions had been validated. Wider implications of this episode for Iranian diplomacy followed, as Trita Parsi notes: ‘Some of these diplomats [who had negotiated with the U.S. over Afghanistan—*AFN*] were later forced to pay for the fiasco with their careers, making others in Iran’s foreign-policy circles think twice before extending a hand of friendship to the Bush administration.’<sup>45</sup>

For the reformists, Bush’s speech and subsequent verbal hostilities from Washington led to disillusionment, as Iranian conservatives’ long-held sense of scepticism over extending any friendly gesture towards the U.S. seemed to have been irreversibly corroborated. As William Beeman put it, ‘[i]t seemed that Iran could never do anything that would garner a positive reaction from a U.S. administration.’<sup>46</sup> Similarly, Khatami conceded in autumn 2002: ‘In the past years all signs of goodwill, which Iran had sent out, have been met by hardly helpful reactions.’<sup>47</sup> A decade later, Khamenei when reviewing this episode in a speech before officials of the Ahmadinejad administration, disclaimed responsibility for the failure of the reformist administration and blamed the latter’s overall foreign-policy approach from a decidedly Offensive Realist posture, and drew lessons for Iran’s ensuing nuclear diplomacy:

[W]henever we showed flexibility towards the enemy and used certain justifications to retreat, the enemy adopted bolder positions against us. For example, at one point we said that we should not give the enemy an excuse and at another point we said that we should dispel the enemy’s suspicions against ourselves. The day the statements of our government officials were contaminated with flattery for the west and western culture, they labeled us [part of the] “axis of evil”. [...] When did this happen? At a time when we used to repeatedly flatter the west, America and others in our statements. This is how they are. Regarding the nuclear issue, at a time when we cooperated with them and backed down—this really happened although we learnt a lesson from it—they advanced so much that I said in this Hussayniyyah [referring here to the part of his Office where he receives the public and delivers speeches—*AFN*] that if they continued like that, I would have to step in personally. And that was what I did. I had to step in. These things are not my responsibility. Our retreats emboldened them.<sup>48</sup>

<sup>45</sup> Parsi 2007: 235.

<sup>46</sup> Beeman 2005: 133.

<sup>47</sup> Comment made on an official trip to Spain, quoted by IRNA, 30 October 2002; cited in Amirpur 2002: 68.

<sup>48</sup> Khamenei 2012b.

However, it should be noted that—as our discussion of Iranian foreign-policy decision-making showed (see Chap. 5)—the Khatami administration's adoption of a Defensive Realist approach would not have been possible without the Supreme Leader's consent, or at the least the absence of his opposition to it. In this vein, Khamenei's—as we discussed in Chap. 4—role as Supreme Leader allows him to assume or reject political responsibility for other institutions' decisions at will. Khamenei's “step-ping-in” then involved, from 2005 onwards, a restructuring of the SNSC through the appointment of his confidants Saeed Jalili and Ali Bagheri, both former intelligence officials, to take over the nuclear negotiations adopting his favoured foreign-policy agenda—advancing Iran's nuclear activities through “resisting” outside pressure—thus undermining the authority of the president and that of other SNSC members.<sup>49</sup>

In conclusion, the “axis of evil” speech equalled a stab in the back of the wider moderate camp's Defensive Realist foreign policy, while helping undermine the reformists' domestic political agenda.<sup>50</sup> Nevertheless, it also shed light on the potential weaknesses of a Defensive Realist approach, at least when dealing with much stronger international players, with in this episode the extreme case of a sole superpower suffering from imperial hubris.

### (C) TOWARDS IRAN'S 2003 “GRAND BARGAIN” OFFER: INTRA-ÉLITE CONSENSUS IN THE FACE OF A DUAL THREAT TO NATIONAL AND REGIME SECURITY

The fallouts from the “axis of evil” speech still in full swing, a new phase of tensions was heralded by the continuation of aggressive U.S. policies that increasingly targeted Iran and Iraq from 2002 onwards.

#### *2002: Internal and External Threats Looming*

From Iran's perspective, the security situation remained dire. On the one hand, Iran's indispensable role in toppling the Taliban, instead of heralding a strategic opening with the U.S., had only aggravated its security concerns because of the heavy increase in U.S. military presence in Central

<sup>49</sup> Khalaji 2014: 46.

<sup>50</sup> Abrahamian 2008a: 192–193; Beeman 2005: 133. On this episode, see also Akbari 2004; Posch 2006; Naji 2009.

Asia and the Persian Gulf region,<sup>51</sup> contributing to the sense of being increasingly encircled by U.S. forces—thus corroborating erstwhile concerns. On the other, a number of aspects emerging throughout 2002 had made increasingly clear that the “axis of evil” speech signalled a more fundamental reorientation of U.S. foreign policy towards militarism, which put Iran at its crosshairs.

While U.S.-led forces were occupying Afghanistan, Washington proclaimed its willingness to conduct the next “regime change” in likewise neighbouring Iraq, directed threats of “regime change” against Iran itself, contemplated in its secret 2001 Nuclear Posture Review (leaked in early 2002) the use of nuclear weapons against Iran among others, before the 2002 National Security Strategy released in September prominently singled out Iran—dubbed the greatest national-security threat to the U.S.—for a possible preventive military aggression regardless of any prescriptions of international law.<sup>52</sup> Also in the latter half of 2002, the “nuclear crisis” started, fuelling Western political pressure upon Iran for its alleged pursuit of nuclear weapons.<sup>53</sup> The combination between the nuclear issue and the war on Iraq—after all, Washington had justified its aggression against Iraq on the basis of an alleged WMD programme—created anxiety in Tehran, prompting hardliners to object to negotiations with the West for fear that they would ultimately lead to Iran sharing the same destiny as its western neighbour.<sup>54</sup>

All these elements stemmed from a new U.S. national-security doctrine bearing the hallmark of a new political élite, the neoconservatives. Two prisms shaped their view on Iran: The bad memory stemming from the “hostage crisis” on the one hand, and the rampant Islamophobia that had spread over state and society in post-“9/11” America. In policy terms, as (the late) William R. Polk explained in a 2008 interview with this author:

[M]ost Americans today believe that Iran is a major leader in the struggle against America and that Iran is funding and arming opposition to America in Iraq and doing the same against Israel through the Hezbollah movement in Lebanon. No one remembers that Iran was helpful in trying to solve the Afghan problem. No one even knows about what Iran has done to try to stop the flow of drugs. Actually trying to interdict the flow of goods across its territory from Afghanistan and Pakistan, Iran has lost as many as soldiers as America has lost in the Iraq War.<sup>55</sup>

<sup>51</sup> Amirpur 2002: 70–71.

<sup>52</sup> Fathollah-Nejad 2011: 70–72; Arkin 2002.

<sup>53</sup> See Porter 2014.

<sup>54</sup> Rouhani 2012: 20, 105, 125.

<sup>55</sup> Cited in Fathollah-Nejad 2008.

On another level, the U.S. “regime change” policy was—at least rhetorically—directed against the governments of the targeted states. In this vein, in October 2002, the 70-year-old U.S. Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld, responding to a question over whether Iran was next in line after Iraq, said he would surely see the Iranian regime imploding in his own lifetime.<sup>56</sup> Significantly, the “regime change” posture coincided with emboldened public dissatisfaction in Iran during the reformist period about the path the IRI had taken in its domestic and foreign affairs.

On the one hand, an April 2002 poll showed 90% of Iranians were dissatisfied with the political system as a whole (*Nezâm*); one-fourth of them demanding a fundamental change of the system, while two-thirds called for reforms.<sup>57</sup> Although the results at first glance favoured the political path pursued by the reformists as opposed to the conservatives, they crucially showed a general dissatisfaction that large swaths of the population held towards the entire political system. In fact, at the turn of the century, disillusionment over the reformist project had become widespread even among Khatami supporters.<sup>58</sup> This resulted in the latter’s only half-hearted support for President Khatami’s re-election in 2001, primarily prompted by the desire to avoid a conservative victory.<sup>59</sup> On the other, in October 2002 a poll (commissioned by the reformist government and conducted during the summer) showed that 70% of Iranians were sympathetic to the U.S. and favoured dialogue with it, while 40% found U.S. policy towards Iran plausible. The conservatives were enraged about these revelations, calling them forgeries aimed at undermining public morale, and resorted to targeting the pollsters. Yet, as Ali Ansari cautions, both sides had missed one crucial point: ‘although many Iranians wanted dialogue, a similar number continued to be suspicious of the United States’.<sup>60</sup> Indeed, a clear majority distrusted the sincerity of the noble goals the Bush/Cheney administration was proclaiming.<sup>61</sup>

These polling results on the most central of domestic (popular support for the IRI system) and foreign (official relations with the U.S.) questions, coupled with the U.S. “regime change” posture and policy, posed a dual threat to the IRI: namely, to the country’s security and integrity, as well as to the survival of the regime, with the latter including both the reformist and conservative sections of the political élite.

<sup>56</sup> *Middle East Online*, 31 October 2002; cited in Reissner 2003: 17.

<sup>57</sup> *Iran-Report* 05/2002: 3.

<sup>58</sup> See Bina 1999.

<sup>59</sup> See Kamrava 2008: 30.

<sup>60</sup> Ansari 2003: 64.

<sup>61</sup> See Reissner 2003: 20.

Against this backdrop, in the period between the Afghanistan War—especially President Bush’s January 2002 “Axis of Evil” speech—and the start of the Iraq War in March 2003, an intense discussion about Iran’s strategy took place. A perusal over the ensuing deliberations offers insights on issues such as factionalism, “national security” and regime survival during this period, but also allows for an understanding of how considerations rooted in the external as well as the internal paved the way for a more securitized and militarized polity that should become ever more dominant over the latter part of the 2000s.

### *Time for Maslahat: Towards Intra-élite Consensus in 2002*

Public dissatisfaction with the political system created élite anxiety that in the event of war popular support could not be taken for granted.<sup>62</sup> The resulting debates also brought the opposing factions’ different conceptualizations of “national security” to the fore. While the reformists concluded that the lack of domestic democratization would weaken the country against external enemies, the conservatives primarily saw the continuation of élite in-fighting as undermining the unity indispensable for defending the nation. In this vein, on 20 July 2002, the IRGC issued a warning against the reformists, accusing them of creating discord and thereby paving the way for U.S. military intervention. Also in the effort of pushing back the reformists, about two weeks later, the conservative head of the judiciary, Ayatollah Mahmoud Hashemi Shahroudi, declared that it was unpatriotic at a time when the U.S. had placed Iran on an “axis of evil” to seek confrontation between the reformist-controlled parliament and the conservative-controlled judiciary. Such behaviour, he stressed, would be benefiting the enemy.<sup>63</sup> The anxiety over internal destabilization remained. In summer 2002, Defence Minister Ali Shamkhani warned that U.S. propaganda was aimed at de-legitimizing the system in a dual strategy of “pressure from outside” and “explosion from inside”.<sup>64</sup> ‘The possibility of the enemy’s military attack against the country, although dim, still exists’, Supreme Leader Khamenei declared in November 2002, ‘[b]ut we should anyhow be vigilant against the enemy’s efforts to develop insecurity and stir an internal collapse inside the Islamic Republic.’<sup>65</sup>

<sup>62</sup> Ansari 2003: 64.

<sup>63</sup> Amirpur 2002: 76n30.

<sup>64</sup> Interview with Shamkhani, *IRNA*, 29 July 2002; cited in Ward 2005: 563–564.

<sup>65</sup> *Tehran Times*, 12 November 2002; cited in Amirpur 2002: 75–76.

Moreover, as a result of the reformist administration's "axis of evil" fiasco, the conservatives had emerged as taking the lead in discussions on "national security". Their belief that they were the sole legitimate ruling faction was cemented, and so they claimed the right to have the last word in this debate.<sup>66</sup> Hence, a shift of the Iranian posture towards enmity with the U.S. appeared ever more likely. However, as the following perusal shows, the dual challenge to national and regime security ultimately produced a largely pragmatic path. Moreover, this was accompanied by factional competition, as a European ambassador to Tehran stated in mid-2002: 'The [factional] controversy is not about whether one should talk to the Americans, but rather who is allowed to do so.'<sup>67</sup>

The ensuing debate involved all powerful segments of the political élite, namely the traditional conservatives (including influential figures such as then-MP Mohammad-Javad Larijani), the conservative pragmatists (above all former President and acting Chairman of the Expediency Council Hashemi-Rafsanjani), the weakened reformists as well as the IRGC who was gaining in influence due to the rising importance of internal and external security. Crucially, upon the Supreme Leader's order, in April 2002—less than three months after the "axis of evil" speech—the SNSC held a meeting to deliberate about the pros and cons of negotiations with Washington. Interestingly, for the first time ever the press was allowed to report on an SNSC meeting's agenda—<sup>68</sup> a sign of the élite's willingness to prepare the public on the possibility of breaking this long-time taboo, which was now openly contemplated about because of the above-mentioned dual challenges posed by Washington's "regime change" project. Although soon afterwards Khamenei confirmed the official line that any *official* talks with the U.S. were prohibited, reports emerged that a few weeks later, in May, talks with U.S. officials were held in Cyprus. In June, Hashemi-Rafsanjani indicated that in the event of a U.S. war on Iraq, Iran might be willing to engage in limited cooperation with Washington, adding the usual qualification that this would only happen if the U.S. changed its position towards the IRI.<sup>69</sup> Therefore, one can assume that the SNSC's deliberations provided for such an approach.

<sup>66</sup> Reissner 2003: 20.

<sup>67</sup> Cited in Nass 2002.

<sup>68</sup> Reissner 2003: 19.

<sup>69</sup> Ibid.

By July 2002, the reformists restated what seemed to have been élite consensus over the matter: Mohammad-Reza Khatami, the president's brother who led the Islamic Iran Participation Front (the most important reformist party that was holding the majority in parliament), urged a change in Iran's U.S. policy, which instead ought to be more oriented towards its "national interest". Reiterating his brother's idea of a "dialogue of civilizations", he said Iran could maintain relations with all nations except for Israel. The precondition, however, would be that the U.S. got rid of their "axis of evil" policies. Only then one could discuss détente, he added. Finally, he criticized Iranian conservatives, stating that they needed an outside enemy in order to close their ranks.<sup>70</sup>

To conclude, the above outline indicates that despite ongoing public arguments between the two main opposing factions, an intra-élite consensus was established on how Iran should be dealing with the U.S. dual threat of internal and external destabilization. This consensus involved the need to find a *modus vivendi* with the U.S. that considered talking to Washington as vital and an accommodation with it crucial for both national and regime security purposes. And the fact that the hardliners' stance of rejecting an accommodational approach towards the U.S.—corroborated by the "axis of evil" episode—could not be identified in the emerging élite consensus can be seen as a sign of how the principle of *Maslahat* ultimately prevailed over the factions' ideological preferences. In fact, this new approach was largely embedded within Defensive Realism as argued by the director of the Presidency's Center for Strategic Studies, Mohammad-Reza Tajik. In late summer 2002, he called for a "non-provocative defensive strategy", advising that Tehran should seek diplomacy and crisis management rather than conflict.<sup>71</sup>

***Iran's Post-Iraq Invasion 2003 Secret "Grand Bargain" Offer:  
The Revival of Defensive Realism and Renewed Rebuttal  
Due to U.S. Imperial Hubris***

Confirming our conclusion so far was the revelation made in 2006 by Gareth Porter that shortly after the 2003 U.S. invasion of Iraq, the Iranians—upon the Supreme Leader's consent—had secretly offered a historically unprecedented "grand bargain" to Washington. Only a 'closed

<sup>70</sup> Quoted in the daily *Āftāb-e Yazd*; cited in Amirpur 2002: 68.

<sup>71</sup> Ali-Reza Shaker, 'In Interviews with the Political Desk of *Iran* Newspaper, The Country's Defense Security Officials Delve into the Defense Strategy of Khatami's Government' (in Persian), *Irān*, 28 August 2002; cited in Ward 2005: 564. See also Tajik 2002: 55ff., 66ff.

circle' of the political élite was 'aware of and involved in preparing the proposal', namely Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi, President Khatami, UN Ambassador Zarif, Ambassador to France Sadegh Kharrazi and of course Supreme Leader Khamenei. The proposal's content indicated that the IRI understood that it faced a dual threat posed to the country and the regime:

The swiftness with which the United States defeated the strongest standing Arab army—which the Iranians had failed to defeat after eight bloody years of warfare—sent shivers down the spines of America's foes in the region and beyond. [...] In Tehran, the clergy faced a new and grim reality. America's encirclement of Iran was now complete. During their twenty-four-year reign, the clerics had seldom felt so vulnerable. Only days before Bush declared "Mission Accomplished" on the USS *Abraham Lincoln* on May 1 [2003], Tehran felt it had to make one last attempt at reaching out to the United States. Figuring that the regime's very existence was at stake, the Iranians put everything on the table—Hezbollah; the Israeli–Palestinian conflict, including Hamas and Islamic Jihad; and Iran's nuclear program.<sup>72</sup>

In line with Defensive Realist provisions, Iran's crisis management crucially included a "grand bargain" offer to the Bush administration, holding out the prospect of moderation of its regional policies towards U.S. and Israeli interests and declaring neutrality in the U.S. war on Iraq. Iran's willingness for a strategic, long-term accommodation with the U.S. included the following set of demands from Washington: halting U.S. hostility (e.g. removing Iran from the "axis of evil" and the State Department's terrorist list, and stopping interference in Iran's domestic affairs), ending all sanctions, respecting Iran's national interests in Iraq and supporting Iranian demands for war reparations, recognition of Iran's security interests in the Persian Gulf as well as respecting Iran's right to full access to nuclear, biological and chemical technologies.<sup>73</sup>

A few weeks prior to the "grand bargain" offer, according to Parsi, the Iranians made a similar offer to Israel, signalling they were ready for an accommodation with it. Former IRGC commander General Mohsen Rezaee

addressed a group of American, Israeli, and Palestinian officials and semi-officials at a meeting sponsored by an American university. In an unprecedented move, Rezaee engaged in a question-and-answer session with the Israelis and discussed a bold proposal of a strategic realignment of U.S.–Iranian relations. The gist of Rezaee's plan was to work out a *modus vivendi*

<sup>72</sup> Parsi 2007: 243–244.

<sup>73</sup> See Kristof 2007; Porter 2014: 136.

regarding the Israeli–Iranian standoff; the two states would respect each other’s spheres of influence and stay out of each other’s hair. If the United States and Israel reversed its isolation policy of Iran, Tehran would modify its behavior on several key issues, including Israel.<sup>74</sup>

Such strategic accommodation with the IRI’s arch-enemies, the “Little” and the “Great Satans”, had to be face-saving in order not to undermine the regime’s ideological pillars of anti-Zionism and anti-imperialism. Aware of the significance for Washington of Iran’s public stance towards Israel, mainly due to U.S. domestic considerations (i.e. the powerful Israel Lobby), the Iranians offered a significant moderation of their Israel position by offering to adopt the so-called Malaysian or Pakistani model. This meant that Iran would retain its identity as an

Islamic state that would not recognize Israel, would occasionally criticize Israel, but would completely avoid confronting or challenging the Jewish State, either directly or via proxies. Iran would also pressure groups such as Hezbollah to refrain from provoking Israel. In return, Israel would cease to oppose a U.S.–Iran rapprochement and would recognize Iran’s role in the region, while the United States would end its policy of isolating Iran and accommodate a key Iranian role in the security of the Persian Gulf. For Iran, this was a way to slowly decouple U.S.–Iran relations from the Israeli–Iranian rivalry.<sup>75</sup>

This far-reaching proposal embracing the Malaysia/Pakistan model—indeed a clear shift in policy, very much to the Defensive Realist school’s taste—enjoyed considerable support from the IRI’s political élite, namely overwhelmingly from the MFA, from both Khatami and Hashemi-Rafsanjani, partly from the military establishment, and reluctantly from Khamenei. Although the political élite like in the Afghanistan case relied on Defensive Realism, this time around they did not fail to file a demand as exchange for Iran’s offer of moderating its policies, namely Tehran’s inclusion in regional decision-making, which was aptly communicated to the U.S. foreign-policy community and Israel alike.<sup>76</sup>

Yet, at the end, U.S. and Israeli hardliners rebuffed the offer and instead redoubled their efforts to convince the White House to militarily target

<sup>74</sup> Parsi 2007: 250.

<sup>75</sup> Ibid.: 250–251.

<sup>76</sup> See *ibid.*: 251–252.

Iran.<sup>77</sup> The main reason for the rebuttal was “imperial hubris” that reigned in Washington after the swift “regime change” in Iraq,<sup>78</sup> or in other words, ‘America was too strong and too awesome, Iran too weak and too fragile. It was hubris again’.<sup>79</sup>

### (D) RAMIFICATIONS ON IRAN'S FOREIGN POLICY AND STATE–SOCIETY COMPLEX: TOWARDS RADICALIZATION

The dual fiasco at the hands of U.S. imperial hubris—inclusion in the “axis of evil” as “reward” for crucial Iranian help over Afghanistan and the repudiation of Iran's “grand bargain” offer—significantly helped tilting the balance of power in favour of Iranian hardliners—on the foreign and domestic policy fronts alike. In Tehran, the sense of enmity towards Washington reached a climax. At the time of the U.S. invasion of Iraq, the Supreme Leader declared: ‘We are already at war with the United States, though the Americans would never dare to attack us militarily, we are already at war with them on political, economic and above all cultural levels.’<sup>80</sup>

#### *Foreign Policy*

##### *Offensive Realism Taking the Wheel of Iran's Regional Policies*

On the foreign-policy front, due to both the ultimate lack of success of the Defensive Realist approach and the tightening security situation, a two-pronged strategy was devised: (1) Complicating U.S. control of Iraq in order to deter it from launching an attack on Iran from there. (2) Assisting a “democratic” political process in Iraq that would ultimately lead to a Tehran-friendly, Shia-dominated state. To that end, then Qom-based Ayatollah Al-Sistani of SCIRI asked his fellow Iraqi Shias to refrain from resisting the U.S. occupation, while issuing a *fatwa* which rejected the idea of a post-Saddam constitution drafted by U.S. appointees, instead favouring a “one man, one vote” system leading to an Iraqi-designed constitution.<sup>81</sup>

<sup>77</sup> See Porter 2014: 136–137.

<sup>78</sup> See Ansari 2006: ch. 6); <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/showdown/themes/grandbargain.html> [30/12/2014].

<sup>79</sup> Parsi 2007: 256.

<sup>80</sup> Cited in Ghazi 2003.

<sup>81</sup> See Ganji (B.) 2006: 10–12.

The first element relied on Offensive Realism, stemming from the fact that the Defensive Realists' failure to gain concessions from the U.S. had disavowed the latter's strategy. This new offensive posture gained in credibility among strategists of all *couleurs*. As a case in point, evoking the literature on "security dilemma", in 2003 Afrasiabi and Maleki, former members of Khatami's foreign-policy team, stressed that increasing insecurity dictates a more expansive and offensive foreign policy.<sup>82</sup> To employ Iranian strategic notions, Tehran came to adopt on the one hand a policy of "active defence" (*Defâ-e Fa'âl*) and "effective presence" (*Hozour-e Mo'asser*) and on the other "reactive action" (*Amalkard-e Vâkoneshi*) to alleviate the security challenges posed by the U.S. military presence in the region and accompanying geopolitical shifts there.<sup>83</sup> The new Offensive Realist rationale read that 'America could be compelled to come to the negotiating table only if a cost was imposed on it when it did not come to the table.'<sup>84</sup>

The new strategy was sustained by a new doctrinal line emerging from the IRGC University of Command and Staff, 'emphasizing faith, devotion, popular mobilization and the use of pro-revolutionary proxies outside Iran's borders'.<sup>85</sup> This was to become the blueprint of Iran's defence strategy in neighbouring Afghanistan and Iraq. In this vein, the IRGC was granted the power to secure the borders (till then the regular army's task), and its foreign arm, the Qods Force, shifted its main focus to post-invasion Iraq.

As alluded to, in U.S.-occupied Iraq, Iran pursued the delicate strategy of both supporting the Shia-led government in Baghdad that was likewise supported by Washington, and of keeping resistance of Shia groups against the occupation (U.S. as well as Iraqi government forces) at a simmering level that simultaneously challenged the U.S. occupation but not to the extent of jeopardizing the survival of the Baghdad government.<sup>86</sup> To this end, Iran granted political, economic and financial support to the Iraqi government, while keeping under political control the most powerful armed resistance group, the Mahdi Army led by the cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, who like Al-Sistani had found refuge in Iran during Saddam Hussein's reign. Whereas immediately after the invasion, the Sadrist's fight against U.S. occupation forces enjoyed Iran's support, by the

<sup>82</sup> Afrasiabi and Maleki 2003: 259.

<sup>83</sup> Barzegar 2009b: 127–128.

<sup>84</sup> Parsi 2007: 256.

<sup>85</sup> Jamshidi, Muhammad-Hossein (2001) *Basis and History of Military Thought in Iran* (in Persian), Tehran: IRGC College of Command, pp. 600–604; cited in Ward 2005: 564.

<sup>86</sup> Author's interviews with Nirumand and Bina.

mid-2000s when the occupation had increasingly found itself in a “quagmire”, Iran had to tame the growing prowess of Sadrist resistance so as not to endanger the survival of the befriended Baghdad government, before by the turn of the decade these contradictions evaporated when the Sadrists finally joined the political process in Iraq.<sup>87</sup> In other words, Iran’s reliance on Iraqi Shia groups such as al-Sadr’s has been of a tactical nature in the face of the relative rise of insecurity, a move for short-term interest rather than towards a long-term aim.<sup>88</sup>

In Afghanistan, Iran pursued a similar strategy that was geared towards keeping U.S. forces so much engaged in fights so as to deter them from attacking Iran from the east. This even included Iranian support of some Taliban elements to counter NATO’s influence.<sup>89</sup> Similarly to the Iraqi case, the strategy also relied on “soft power” when extending the same kinds of support to the Hamid Karzai government,<sup>90</sup> which was likewise supported by Washington, and occasionally but to a minimal extent to anti-occupation forces there—again not to endanger Iran’s overall goal of stability geared towards economic development.<sup>91</sup>

However, the problem remained that this new Offensive Realism-based strategy relied on language that was geared to be provocative and threatening, which inherently brought with it ‘the difficulty for Iran’s neighbors and the United States to view Tehran’s deterrence policy as truly defensive rather than coercive and serves to keep every country in the region on its guard’.<sup>92</sup> Along with the fiery rhetoric of President Ahmadinejad, especially but not exclusively, the Defensive Realists later attacked the excessive use of provocative language that invited more international pressure against the country.<sup>93</sup>

### *Emboldened Global Rejectionists Paving the Way for the “Look to the East” Policy*

On the level of Global Balancers, this period saw the rise of the Global Rejectionist stance as put forward by the principalists (*Osoulgarâ*), a hard-line conservative formation created in 2002 to sideline the reformists and

<sup>87</sup> Information gathered at the expert meeting in Paris. See also Dabashi 2010: 66–67.

<sup>88</sup> Barzegar 2009b: 129.

<sup>89</sup> Koepke 2013: 18.

<sup>90</sup> Ramazani 2007.

<sup>91</sup> See Jalilvand 2014.

<sup>92</sup> Ward 2005: 575.

<sup>93</sup> See Vaezi 2008.

aiding the rise of Ahmadinejad.<sup>94</sup> Seeing their long-held suspicion over U.S. intentions validated, the principalists pointed out that the reformists' and moderates' flexibility and compromises did not halt U.S., or more broadly Western, accusations of terrorism, WMD development and human-rights abuses. Highlighting the West's double standards, they argued that it is not interested in democracy, human rights (alluding to its alliance with regional autocracies), fighting WMD proliferation (pointing to its role in Iraq's WMD use against Iran and its political cover for Israel's nuclear arsenal) and even regional stability (evoking divide-and-rule policies as well as policies of destabilization as a means to justify its long-term military presence). Instead, Washington's real aims were to control client-states and their oil resources.<sup>95</sup>

All these criticisms provided the grounds on which the call for a re-orientation of Iranian foreign policy gained currency among the political élite, namely away from the U.S.-led Western camp with whom accommodation deemed illusive and which increasingly exhibited an inimical posture towards Iran, instead towards Asian countries in a policy dubbed the "Look to the East". According to Rouhani, who served as Iran's top nuclear negotiator (6 October 2003–15 August 2005), his successor in that role Ali Larijani (who had also replaced him as SNSC director after 16 years) from the very beginning took a position that was reflective of a 'new path that was chosen': continuing the nuclear talks with the Europeans would be futile, whereas doing so with "Eastern" countries (i.e. Asian, especially UNSC veto powers Russia and China) would be more beneficial to Iran.<sup>96</sup> Yet, a path that favoured "the East" over Europe in the nuclear talks, Rouhani held in his memoirs, was 'one that was far-away from the realities of the international scene'<sup>97</sup> (a theme to be critically examined in Chap. 7).

### *State–Society Complex: Externally Aided Para-militarization*

Since the early 2000s, the political élite saw the increasing sidelining of its reformist faction. As a fallout from the "axis of evil" speech, '[t]he liberal euphoria had evaporated', notes Abrahamian. 'This gave the

<sup>94</sup> Posch 2010b: 4–5.

<sup>95</sup> See Mousavian 2012b: 435–436.

<sup>96</sup> Rouhani 2012: 599–600.

<sup>97</sup> Ibid.: 624.

conservatives the opportunity to win a series of elections—for municipal councils in 2003, for the Majlis in 2004, and for the presidency in 2005.<sup>98</sup> In fact, in the presidential elections, ‘the unknown Ahmadinejad won on the double platform of strengthening national security and fulfilling the populist promises of the Khomeini era’.<sup>99</sup> And as Ansari pointed out, ‘[t]he international stage was an arena in which domestic political rivalries could be played out [...] as well as the vital means for consolidating domestic control.’ In this vein, the new Offensive Realist defence strategy turned out to be much to the gusto of the Ahmadinejad faction in this key aim to establish domestic hegemony. Not only were the hardliners’ politico-ideological preferences satisfied by the mobilization of Islamist ideology and forces abroad, but also ‘the strategy of accentuating confrontation abroad paid dividends in terms of the president’s standing at home’.<sup>100</sup>

In fact, a process of securitization and militarization of the state–society complex, including the boosting of power of the authoritarian state vis-à-vis civil society, was set in motion against the backdrop of external pressure (the increasingly belligerent posture of the U.S. and Israeli administrations, exacerbated by the revelations of war preparations since 2003 and the conduct of covert war against Iran since at least 2004, and the official allocation of “democracy promotion” funds by the U.S. since 2007) and the hardliners’ political instrumentalization thereof. For instance, when in June 2003 student demonstrations shook the IRI, the overt support voiced by the Bush administration played into the hands of Iran’s hardliners while also helping to close the ranks of the political élite.<sup>101</sup>

Ultimately, ‘[o]ne can argue that after the coup of 1953, the “axis of evil” speech was the second most damaging thing the United States has done against the cause of democracy in Iran’.<sup>102</sup> Dabashi continues,

[W]hile the United States was in the middle of its military invasion of Afghanistan (on one side of Iran) and about to attack Iraq (on its other side), the designation of the Islamic Republic as a member of the “Axis of Evil” amounted to an open declaration of war against Iran—and whatever success, or hope and aspiration for change, the reform movement had

<sup>98</sup> Ansari 2007: 67.

<sup>99</sup> Abrahamian 2008a: 193.

<sup>100</sup> Ansari *op. cit.*

<sup>101</sup> Peimani 2003.

<sup>102</sup> Dabashi 2007: 202–203.

managed to secure or institutionalize went up in smoke. Once again [after Iraq's 1980 assault on Iran—*AFN*] the regime and the country were braced for a fight for survival, and all reformist bets were off. The terror that President Bush's "Axis of Evil" address created in Iran put courageous Iranians, who had actively opposed the criminal atrocities of the Islamic Republic for decades, in a false light: they could be accused of being allied with the imperial hubris of an empire now plotting to invade their country. Because there had not been such an explicit threat for about two decades, dissident Iranians had been able actively to oppose the medieval theocracy ruling over their destiny. With one speech, President Bush managed to turn all of them into traitors to their own country.<sup>103</sup>

These dynamics following Bush's speech were also recognized by some European foreign-policy officials. For instance, former British Foreign Secretary Jack Straw (2001–06) argued that Khatami was undermined by U.S. neo-conservatives, which ultimately led to Ahmadinejad's 2005 presidential victory.<sup>104</sup> In fact, when Ahmadinejad was competing against his reformist presidential contenders Mostafa Moeen and, he brought up the "axis of evil" episode, accusing both of having advocated a "submissive" foreign policy that had proved damaging to Iran.

As to the military component of the state–society complex, the forceful resurgence of "national security" boosted the IRGC's importance and legitimacy in the eyes of the political élite, as it constituted the most important military-security organ capable of defending the country as well as the regime against external and internal threats, both of which suspected to be instigated by Washington. The path was thus cleared for the IRGC's rise to the highest echelons of political power in the IRI, where they became the central body for élite recruitment.<sup>105</sup>

With the balance of power within the political élite gradually shifting to the right of the political spectrum, the different factions *within* the Right took centre-stage in the power structure. The emerging power nexus became clear on the occasion of Ahmadinejad's victory in the June 2005 presidential elections, for which the support he received from the Supreme

<sup>103</sup> Ibid.: 202.

<sup>104</sup> See Straw 2013. Others, however, did not agree on the pertinence of this dynamic, as witnessed in the author's conversation with then long-time Chairman of the German parliament's Committee on Foreign Affairs in February 2013.

<sup>105</sup> See Hen-Tov and Gonzalez 2011; Hourcade 2006; Ansari 2010.

Leader and the IRGC were critical.<sup>106</sup> Initially seen as a weak figure at the hands of Khamenei, the Ahmadinejad–principalists alliance evolved into a political factor to reckon with in the years ahead—much to the dislike of the Supreme Leader—before dissipating in the early 2010s.<sup>107</sup>

## CONCLUSION

This chapter looked at the most turbulent period in the post-war history of the IRI, namely the years following “9/11”. While in Iran a domestic crisis was in full swing—combining a fierce intra-élite power struggle with deep public dissatisfaction with the entire political élite—within weeks and months the U.S. engaged in military occupations of Iran’s eastern (Afghanistan) and western (Iraq) neighbours while threatening the third “regime change” to be conducted against Iran itself. Most notably, U.S. President George W. Bush’s “axis of evil” speech abruptly ended a decade of relative calm in Iran’s external relations.

The discussion provided a number of important insights into the nature and trajectories of Iranian foreign policy and the role of élite deliberations. We observed the close relationship between the notions of “national security” and “regime survival” as a product of the threat posed by the U.S. to both of them, sustained by the fact that the nature of the Iranian regime provides the ground for such conflation. We have then seen instances of immense foreign-policy flexibility on the part of the IRI in the face of this dual threat, which led to the formation of élite consensus despite deep-seated factional divergences over domestic politics. This élite consensus manifested itself, first in the decision to aid the U.S. toppling of the Taliban regime; second, in the wake of U.S. “regime change” threats against Iran taking its course with Bush’s “axis of evil” speech, in the effort to reach out to Washington, culminating in Tehran’s secret “grand bargain” offer; third, in Tehran’s decision prompted by Washington’s rejectionism to drop Defensive in favour of Offensive Realism.

The “dual fiasco” resulting from U.S. imperial hubris led to the reformists’ loss of credibility in the crucial field of national security. This significantly helped Offensive Realist arguments to prevail over Defensive Realist ones, with the former ultimately shaping Iran’s post-Iraq War regional strategy. Also, these foreign threats prompted intra-élite consensus

<sup>106</sup> Naji 2009: ch. 2.

<sup>107</sup> Posch 2013b.

focussed on safeguarding the system of the IRI, paving the way for the foreign-policy establishment to embrace Offensive Realism. More generally, those like the Global Rejectionists who had argued that cooperation with the U.S. would not be possible, saw their argument confirmed.

We finally observed that the period from “9/11” to the Iraq War heralded important shifts in the composition of Iran’s power élite and its thinking about international affairs—both of which are relevant for an understanding of the period that followed (to be discussed in Chap. 7). We have thus highlighted the intimate interrelationship between external and internal developments. Particularly, U.S. imperial hubris considerably helped undermine the reformists’ domestic agenda, thus paving the way for a securitized and militarized state–society complex from the mid-2000s on, and led to the moderate camp’s Defensive Realist recipes losing support among the political élite that led to the preference given to an Offensive Realist posture. Regarding Iran’s international outlook, at the end of the first half of the 2000s, we can observe its estrangement from the West that eventually led it to adopt a “Look to the East” policy, all the while the consequences of the U.S. “regime change” operations had turned the IRI into the major power in post-Iraq invasion regional geopolitics.

*Theoretical Observations on “Mutual Constitution”:  
The Issue of Disjointedness*

Following on the theoretical consideration made at the outset about outside–inside interactions, the events that engulfed U.S.–Iran relations have shown the element of “mutual constitution” in a *disjointed* manner when it comes to respective national developments. As Ansari has argued, while post-“9/11” U.S. foreign policy has seen a shift from more traditional Realism-inspired approaches to one with strong ideological elements (neo-conservatism), Iran’s foreign policy has been following the converse tendency to come to terms with the international order: ‘Iranian policy-makers, steeped in American international relations theory, have been seeking to engage the “realist”, and have been disconcerted to discover the revolutionary.’<sup>108</sup>

In fact, this process started a few years further back, when the reformists celebrated their most important successes in the IRI’s history and the

<sup>108</sup> Ansari 2008a: 108.

U.S. saw the political rise of its neo-conservatives. In particular, two events that took place in 1997 cast a cloud over years to come. The spring of 1997 saw not only the landmark election of Iran's first reformist president, but also the creation of the neoconservative Project for a New American Century (PNAC) in the U.S. In its Statement of Principles, released on 3 June, PNAC made the case for a U.S. offensive centred on the Middle East and based on military supremacy. On the Iranian side, President Khatami in January 1998 called for a "dialogue among civilizations". Despite his administration's call for improved ties with the U.S., PNAC and its neoconservative allies continued to argue for a continuation and even deepening of the existing containment policy towards Iran, which finally influenced President Clinton's Iran policy. Regarding the opposite ideological underpinnings of this period, Dabashi explains:

Precisely when Khatami's reform movement and his notion of a "dialogue among civilizations" promised a more cosmopolitan reading of Iranian political culture (between 1997 and 2005), the most reactionary tribalism of global proportions—in the shape of Samuel Huntington's thesis of "the clash of civilizations," and Francis Fukuyama's idea of "the end of history" and a singular victory of Western "liberal democracies"—became the reigning ideology of the neocons.<sup>109</sup>

These opposite political and ideological tendencies finally had a mutually reinforcing effect, which ultimately led to the strengthening of the IRI's Islamist ideological pillar:

While Khatami's reform movement was ultimately defeated by the clerical counterparts of the U.S. neocons in Qom, American neoconservative tribalism went global and began to redraw the moral map of the region in pathetically tribal terms—necessitating an Islamic republic in the neighborhood of a Jewish state and a Hindu fundamentalism, all of them welcoming the advent of a Christian empire.<sup>110</sup>

By the end of this process of opposite political tendencies, the foreign-policy approaches of the IRI and the U.S. were put on similar footing, as in Iran the Defensive Realist approach was abandoned in favour of an orientation that offensively made use of ideology as a key source of power.

<sup>109</sup> Dabashi 2007: 204.

<sup>110</sup> Ibid.: 205.

In other words, the initially disjointed tendencies in Tehran and Washington (plus Israel which very much like the U.S. saw the rise of its most hard-line political tendencies) soon translated into a mutually reinforcing and ultimately constituting “clash of fundamentalisms” between all these capitals.

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# Iran's International Relations in the Face of Imperial Interpolarity: The “Look to the East” Policy and Multifaceted Impact of Sanctions

## INTRODUCTION

After having examined Iran's international relations in the period from “9/11” to the initial phase of the Iraq War (–2004), this chapter deals with the ensuing period until Iran's new president Rouhani takes office in 2013. On the one hand, by the mid-2000s, Iran emerged as the region's indispensable power—as a combined result of the U.S. occupation “quagmires” in Iraq and Afghanistan, and of Iran's successful regional policies relying on Offensive Realist prescripts—boosted by the political successes of its regional allies and the spike in oil prices leading to record revenues. At a time when Iranian hardliners had assumed supremacy domestically, the IRI turned out to be the victor of the U.S. neo-conservatives' “regime change” operations. On the other, the “nuclear crisis” that emerged in 2002 put Iran increasingly at odds with Western powers, keeping the threat of war alive and subjected it to unprecedented international sanctions from the mid-2000s onwards.

In fact, the international Iran conflict, also simplistically known as the Iran nuclear crisis, has assembled all of the established Western and non-Western (re-)emerging great-powers. As such, it has become truly globalized and served to vividly offer a reflection of the changing dynamics of international power. While Iran was pitted against the U.S., other important states got also prominently involved in the course of the conflict,

namely Great Britain, France and Germany (“EU3”), Russia, China, India and, later on, Turkey and Brazil—for all of whom the conflict in Iranian–American relations and its wider implications represented a top foreign-policy concern. The globalized Iran conflict of the 2000s thus inevitably entered the sphere of the changing geography of power, which increasingly informed the actions of all actors involved.

The purpose of this chapter is to critically evaluate the “Look to the East” policy, which Iran embraced with the coming to power of the Ahmadinejad administration, in an emerging new world order that assembled both the U.S. and a number of other established and (re-)emerging great-powers—in a post-unipolar world-order configuration that is described here as Imperial Interpolarity. In so doing, the chapter attempts to add another crucial dimension for explaining the saliency of the decade-long international Iran conflict beyond the accurately diagnosed “institutionalized enmity” reigning in both Washington and Tehran,<sup>1</sup> namely one that is rooted in the specific configuration of the world order. In addition, it aims to examine the ramifications of Iran’s international relations, mostly the sanctions regime, on the state–society complex.

## (A) IRAN’S “LOOK TO THE EAST” POLICY AND IMPERIAL INTERPOLARITY

### *The “Look to the East” Policy*

Since assuming office in August 2005, the Ahmadinejad administration showed an inclination for a new direction in foreign policy, dubbed “Look to the East” (*Negāh beh Sharq*). This can be seen as the third phase in the IRI’s foreign policy, each of them with an accentuated geopolitical orientation: firstly, in the first decade after the revolution, a “neither East nor West” policy leading to geopolitical seclusion; secondly, the policy of détente and rapprochement under the Hashemi-Rafsanjani and Khatami administrations who sought to improve and foster relations with the West, especially Europe; and finally the “Look to the East” policy with a view towards Iran’s Asian neighbours to the east.<sup>2</sup> However, there is a lack of

<sup>1</sup> See Parsi 2012b.

<sup>2</sup> See Saghaei-Ameri 2006b: 3–4.

clarity as to whether the “Look to the East” orientation has merely been tactical or rather strategic.<sup>3</sup>

*Iran's Increasing Alienation from Europe*

The “Look to the East” policy's very timing reveals its initial tactical dimension as, in the words of a former veteran Iranian diplomat, ‘a sign of protest to the arrogant behaviours of some Western powers, especially with regard to Iran's nuclear dossier’.<sup>4</sup> On the one hand, as we discussed, Iran's relations with the U.S. were marked by hostility, reaching a climax after the 2002 “axis of evil” address. On the other, Iran's relations with Western Europe had admittedly deteriorated after the revolution but still remained intact.<sup>5</sup> Crucially, Tehran had traditionally viewed Europe as a counter-balance to U.S. pressures. This view had to be gradually revised during the 2000s, when Iran negotiated with the EU3 over its nuclear programme. *Firstly*, in the wake of the initial diplomatic breakthroughs leading to the Tehran (October 2003) and Paris (November 2004) Declarations, the Europeans did not fulfil Tehran's expectations in return to Iran's 22-month suspension of its nuclear programme (November 2003–August 2005), namely to lobby the U.S. to dismiss its belligerent posture towards Iran and instead to offer Tehran a security guarantee, as well as to end the U.S. blockade over Iran's WTO membership. Instead, once Iran resumed its nuclear programme, accurately pointing out that the agreement was not fulfilled by the other side, the Europeans ratcheted-up the pressure, blaming Iran for having broken the accords, although the latter specified the temporary and confidence-building measure of suspension that should be reciprocated by equally meaningful steps.<sup>6</sup> *Secondly*, this transformed Europe's initial inaction into an “Americanization” of its diplomatic strategy towards Iran by 2006. The Europeans had now adopted the U.S. position by demanding Iran to fully halt its nuclear programme (“zero enrichment”) as a precondition to further talks. If Iran did not give in, it would face the risk of a U.S. attack. Exactly a year into Ahmadinejad's presidency, this warning was communicated by Joschka Fischer, then Germany's Foreign Minister, at a speech delivered at the CSR in Tehran, who thereby stressed ‘not to make the messenger

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.: 3.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid.: 3.

<sup>5</sup> See Mousavian 2008.

<sup>6</sup> See Mousavian 2012b: 267–271.

responsible for the message'.<sup>7</sup> As a result, as Saghafi-Ameri and Ahadi have stated,

given the fact that the negotiations between Iran and the [EU3] and then the [P]5+1 countries on Iran's nuclear programme did not yield the desirable results, the observable tendency in the administration of Mr. Ahmadinejad was reviewing the foreign-policy approach [of the previous two presidencies of seeking détente and a "dialogue among civilizations"—*AFN*] and establishing closer ties with Eastern countries under the title of "Look to the East policy".<sup>8</sup>

The difference between the EU and Iran was embedded in a larger geopolitical conflict. In August 2005, negotiations broke down after the EU3 had offered a package of proposals that Tehran harshly rejected. The Atomic Energy Organization of Iran (AEOI) director had called the proposal a 'humiliation of the Iranian people' and 'cheap and quibbling'. Without any substantial offer in return to having demanded Iran to fully renounce from enrichment (prompting an EU diplomat to label the package as 'a lot of gift wrapping in a pretty empty box'), the package rather reflected the EU's geopolitical will to tie Iran to itself. *First*, the proposal included the longer-term prospect of Iran becoming an important European energy supplier, especially with a view to Iranian gas, in an attempt to diversify European energy supply in the face of an increasingly dominant Russian supplier. *Second*, the EU3 envisaged Iran as a market for its industrial products, holding out the prospect of a trade agreement with Iran and of political support for Tehran's accession to the WTO—both of which would have facilitated European exports to Iran covering a whole range of products. *Third*, while urging Iran to limit its nuclear activities to a minimum, the EU3 pledged to provide Iran with access to fuel rods and nuclear technology, which would have potentially put the Iranian nuclear sector in permanent dependency. Thus, from what can be gathered from the EU3's proposal is that Iran was perceived to fulfil the role of energy supplier, market for European products, and its nuclear programme kept in a dependent state. The Iranian rejection led the Europeans on their part, above all Germany, to react by fully aligning with the U.S. on Iran

<sup>7</sup>Fischer 2007: 39.

<sup>8</sup>Saghafi-Ameri and Ahadi 2008.

policy.<sup>9</sup> Against this background, in mid-2005, Germany's main foreign-policy think-tank took note of 'Iran's new distance towards the West'.<sup>10</sup>

*The "Look to the East" Policy's Underlying Logic: Asia's Rise and U.S. Decline*

Iran has always entertained an interest in its Asian neighbours to the East—towards India due to millennia-old religious, cultural and historical connections (in line with the above-mentioned geopolitical imagination of an Indo–Iranian civilization); towards China with whom it shared the history of a long-standing civilization, where mutual respect and exchange took centre-stage; and towards Japan, fascinated by its modernization since the end of the nineteenth century. These inter-Asian links came to a standstill by the nineteenth century, when all those powers faced politico-economic problems at the hands of colonial powers, but recovered by the second half of the twentieth century, before assuming a permanent place in Iranian diplomacy by the twentieth and into the twenty-first centuries.<sup>11</sup> Saghafi-Ameri and Ahadi from CSR start their discussion of the "Look to the East" policy in the same vein, when they state—thus also echoing Hafeznia's above-noted geopolitical account—that 'Iran as an Asian country with regard to its geopolitical position is predestined to have suitable relations with Asian countries and powers'. Throughout history, those links existed, they write, especially on the economic front in the context of the "silk road".<sup>12</sup> Hence, the "Look to the East" policy has been widely regarded to have its roots in a longer history.

The global discourse on the shifting balance of power at the dawn of the twenty-first century has not escaped Iranians' attention as a perusal over policy-related analyses shows. The entire debate is predicated upon the post-Cold War reality of the economic centre of gravity moving from West to East, with the emergence of economic powerhouses in Asia, namely China, India and a number of other East Asian countries, and gaining momentum ever since.<sup>13</sup> Despite Iran's preference for Western technology and products,<sup>14</sup> proponents of the "Look to the East" policy

<sup>9</sup> Kronauer 2005; Massarrat 2006b.

<sup>10</sup> Reissner 2005.

<sup>11</sup> Djalili and Kellner 2005: 5.

<sup>12</sup> However, as Rezakhani (2010: 420) holds, 'the concept of a continuous, purpose-driven [silk] road or even "routes" [...] has no basis in historical reality or records.'

<sup>13</sup> See, for example, Saghafi-Ameri and Ahadi 2008.

<sup>14</sup> Sariolghalam 2012: 73–74.

could point out that an economic base for such a re-orientation was rapidly growing.

Indeed, the global economy's centre of gravity has quite dramatically moved eastwards. As calculated by Danny Quah, in 1980—i.e. shortly after the Iranian Revolution—the centre of gravity was located somewhere in the middle of the Atlantic Ocean as most of the world's economic activity took place in the U.S. and Western Europe. By 2008, however, it had massively shifted eastwards and became located on the longitude of Minsk, Izmir or Johannesburg; and by 2050 it is projected to further move eastwards and to stand on the Indian–Chinese border.<sup>15</sup>

This shift is generally taken as the main ground on which a U.S. global power decline is diagnosed. But as we shall see, the dominant rise-and-decline discourse needs some important qualifications pertaining to its actual geopolitical implications. On this question, as already alluded to, Iranian schools of thought differ. On the one hand, Offensive Realists adhere to the idea of decline and see it as a rather swift process. Popular among them are accounts such as Fareed Zakaria's *The Post-American World* (2008) that focuses on the economic and political ascendance of emerging powers like China, India and Brazil. The “rise of the rest”—a phrase he coined—is taking place in a world no longer dominated by Washington. According to Zakaria, the (re-)emerging powers claim their place in a newly formed international order in which the U.S. remains the unrivalled military superpower, while in other areas such as industrial, cultural, educational and financial, a shift is happening, thereby putting an end to U.S. global hegemony.<sup>16</sup> Although not repelling U.S. military supremacy, Tehran's Offensive Realists see those capabilities bogged down, especially in Iran's neighbourhood. The implication of this stance is that U.S. decline has paved the way for the emergence of a truly multi-polar order, one in which Iran can effectively balance U.S. pressure, above all through aligning with Russia and China, who themselves share Iran's desire to counter U.S. hegemony. Given the IRI's fixation with the U.S., in the period under investigation, the talk of declining U.S. power has had the effect of emboldening its sense of strength when confronting the U.S. in its immediate neighbourhood. On the other hand, the Defensive Realists are more cautious. While not rejecting the notion of (re-)emerging powers entering the international stage, they nevertheless see the

<sup>15</sup> Quah 2010, 2011.

<sup>16</sup> See Zakaria 2008.

U.S. in particular and Western powers in general in a superior position and strong enough to be of concern to middle powers like Iran.

Iran's desire to forge strategic links with Eurasia's great-powers has not been new. In fact, during Hashemi-Rafsanjani's second presidential term (1993–1997), at a time of remarkable economic growth rates in Asia, there were efforts to foster links with Eurasia's "big three"—China, India and Russia—with the goal of forming a strategic alliance. The strategic conviction that Iran has its place in Asia has been laid out in Hafeznia's *The Theory of Asian Unity*, published in the mid-1990s, where the case for a pan-Asian political and security organization is made. Among Iran's senior political figures of that time, only President Hashemi-Rafsanjani reportedly showed interest in such an idea. Although he held talks with China and India on that regard, the project's realization was finally compromised because Iran instead of relying on diplomatic channels, went too public on this project, thus bringing the latter's foes to the arena.<sup>17</sup> Ever since the prominence of Asia in world politics has even continued to rise.

#### *Iranian Assumptions About Bases for Cooperation in Eurasia*

The dissolution of the Soviet Union has significantly altered the Eurasian geo-political, -economic and -strategic landscape. As Ehteshami has maintained, the

transformation of Eurasia into a large geostrategic web of interlocking sub-regions has generated a number of cultural, economic and security threads that have tended gradually to tie the fortunes of the Middle East more closely with those of the other Asian regions.<sup>18</sup>

The threads bearing a strategic dimension are energy, Islamism as a pan-Asian political force, labour migration, financial flows and military links.<sup>19</sup> Among these strategic areas, Iran's significance concerns the fields of energy and Islamism, where it can act either as a positive or negative power.

Regarding energy, a post-Cold War nexus has emerged between West and East Asia, where the main producers and consumers are respectively located. Given remarkable post-Cold War growth rates, East Asia and India have become by far the most important buyers of Persian Gulf oil.

<sup>17</sup> Author's interview with Hafeznia.

<sup>18</sup> Ehteshami 2007: 82.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.: 82–93.

The fact that by the mid-2000s almost two-thirds of Middle Eastern oil was heading eastwards constitutes a total reversal of energy trade patterns of the previous 100 years when oil had been shipped westwards.<sup>20</sup> This translated, by 2006, into high to complete dependency of East Asian economies towards Persian Gulf oil (40% for China, around 80% for Japan and other Asian-Pacific countries), while the U.S. had a low dependency rate of 17% and Europe a relatively large regional dependency of 24%.<sup>21</sup>

Here also lies the focus for Iran's cooperation with Asian powers, namely its potentialities regarding energy security and transit routes. Iran's vast gas and oil reserves would make it a predestined supplier for Asia's economic development, with China and India—whose rising energy hunger (in the period under investigation) needs to be reliably satisfied—becoming enduring markets for Iran's exports. Notably, as a way to immunize itself against Western sanctions, Iran pre-emptively—well before the imposition of the EU oil boycott in 2012—began to shift its oil trade eastwards. Whereas before the revolution, the top four importers of Iranian oil were all European (in decreasing order, France, West Germany, the UK and Italy), by 2008 they were all Asian (Japan, China, India and South Korea). Moreover, by the mid-2000s, Iran opened up the Persian Gulf to China and Russia, signing multibillion-dollar contracts with China's Sinopec energy giant while granting Russia major concessions and access to its vast Azadegan oil field (the realization of which, however, has been a different matter).<sup>22</sup>

To boost its geopolitical standing, Iran can (1) build the Iran-Pakistan-India IPI gas pipeline that could be extended to China and (2) serve as a “linkage bridge” (*pol-e ertebâti*) for trade transit routes from north to south and from west to east. In fact, the north-south transit corridor agreed upon by Iran and Russia can become one of the shortest and cheapest transit routes connecting trade flows between Western Europe and East Asia.

Regarding the security framework, in order to counter various crises affecting the Eurasian continent, it is believed that Iran as a regional power can play a productive role towards building the much-needed ‘collective Asian security system’, without which Asian unity could not materialize. Meanwhile, given that regionalism has risen in importance with the end of the Cold War, a significant component of the “Look to the East” policy would be strengthening regional cooperation. In order to tackle regional issues, Iran should establish multilateral mechanisms involving India,

<sup>20</sup> Ehteshami 2007: 95.

<sup>21</sup> Own calculation based on BP 2006: 20.

<sup>22</sup> Milani 2009: 54.

China and Russia. Meanwhile, Iran should seek to improve its position as member of Asian organizations such as Economic Cooperation Organization (ECO), the D-8 Organization for Economic Development (also known as the Developing-8), the Indian-Ocean Rim Association (IORA), the CICA (Conference on Interaction and Confidence-Building Measures in Asia) inter-governmental forum and especially the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).<sup>23</sup>

When it comes to Islamism as a transnational phenomenon in Asia, Iran's Islamist political system constitutes a potential destabilizing factor for Asian powers in their dealings with often recalcitrant Muslim populations. The latter are located in, most notably, China's strategically important eastern-most province of Xinjiang, and Russia's equally strategically important Chechnya in its southern flank. As such, Iran's ambition to join the SCO stands at odds with its self-declared commitment towards championing Islamic or Muslim interests worldwide.<sup>24</sup> In the military area, Iran—like Asia's other two big continental powers China and India—purchases weapons from Russia who has thus established itself as Asia's premier weapons exporter.<sup>25</sup>

As a result, Iran entertains solid links with Asia's great-powers in all relevant areas: with India and China firmly establishing themselves as long-term buyers of Iranian hydrocarbons; with Russia providing Iran with nuclear technology and military equipment; and the SCO (where Iran assumed observer-status in July 2005 and applied for full membership in 2008) providing the platform for fostering Eurasian security, military and economic cooperation.

Reminiscent of Iran's (admittedly barely successful) past efforts to counter-balance U.S. pressure through its ties to Europe, the "Look to the East" policy has 'in reality, been designed to create a balance vis-à-vis the West and to extend cooperation with the East. In other words, cooperation with the East has always been conceived in Iranian strategic thinking as a balancing weight towards the West.' However, the CSR authors warn against choosing sides: 'Yet, the Look to the East policy cannot be viewed as replacing the West in terms of serving Iran's interests.' They point out that in the post-Cold War world there is not either competition or cooperation between states but rather both. Rather than abandoning the West whose achievements and strengths should not be ignored, the

<sup>23</sup> Saghafi-Ameri and Ahadi 2008. See also Morady 2011b.

<sup>24</sup> Akbarzadeh 2015.

<sup>25</sup> Ehteshami 2007: 93.

authors advise that relations with it shall be likewise continued, ‘the very same way as Asia’s big countries do not see themselves needless of the West’. In this vein, Iran shall strengthen its bilateral ties with Asian powers, while taking up the task of defining its mid- and long-term interests towards them, since Saghafi-Ameri and Ahadi deplore that conceptually and theoretically the proposed policy has not been precisely defined and is rather in the process of evolving.<sup>26</sup>

However, other scholars have questioned the wisdom of Iran joining the SCO. Relying on the Classical Geopolitical work of Saul Cohen, they argue that Iran, like any other country, when wishing to join an international organization it must pay attention to its “geopolitical affiliation”, which is the Persian Gulf and Middle East regions. In contrast, however, the SCO covers geopolitical realms reflective of the interests of its two chief members Russia and China. As such, they are not the ones central to Iran and thus apt to serve the pursuit of Iran’s national interests. Rather Iran’s bid to join the SCO is a reflection of the limitations it faces in its own region, where it is not integrated in any politico-security architecture.<sup>27</sup>

### *Imperial Interpolarity: Concept for Grasping the Emerging New World Order After Unipolarity*

As invoked earlier, I suggest dividing the world order of the two decades following the Cold War in two phases: (1) The U.S. “unipolar moment” lasting till the Iraq “quagmire” of the mid-2000s. (2) The period thereafter marked by the U.S. as a *primus inter pares* in relation to other (re-) emerging great-powers, a configuration I describe as “Imperial Interpolarity”.

Despite wide disagreement over the structure of the international system that took shape at the outset of the twenty-first century, there are a number of key observations that can be made, leading us to the concept of Imperial Interpolarity I propose here to grasp the emerging organizing factor of international affairs in the wake of outright unipolarity. In doing so, I complement Giovanni Grevi’s concept of “interpolarity” by integrating the imperial dimensions of contemporary international relations, which is not accounted for in the latter’s model.

<sup>26</sup> Saghafi-Ameri and Ahadi 2008.

<sup>27</sup> Azami et al. 2012.

### *Summary*

To describe the emerging new world order of the first decade of the twenty-first century, I build upon the novel theoretical concept of “inter-polarity” coined by Grevi. Interpolarity attempts to conceptualize the emerging world order after the end of both bipolarity (Cold War) and unipolarity (unrivalled U.S. global preponderance). Interpolarity is defined as *multipolarity in an age of interdependence*. Both of its constituent elements—multipolarity and interdependence—are viewed as rising and deepening in the contemporary international system. In a world in which various (re-)emerging and established great-powers are all acting on the global scene, interpolarity suggests that the most decisive interactions take place between these poles—that is, as a mostly *inter*-polar affair.<sup>28</sup>

However, the conception I propose here in order to adequately describe emerging new world order following unipolarity develops Grevi’s useful input further, stressing the extraordinary role that the U.S. state still occupies in global politics. While the economic centre of gravity has undoubtedly shifted eastwards, the U.S. is still pre-eminent in a number of strategically important fields whereby it can exert power unilaterally. In terms of “hard power”, these are primarily the military realm (its own military but also via NATO) and major international financial institutions (like the IMF and the World Bank). Far from having a layer of equally powerful great-powers, we rather witness an international system in which one pole (the U.S.) possesses significantly more power than the other ones—in other words, there is one superior among these presumed equals of an increasingly but not fully developed multipolar order. Importantly, such a lead position occupied by the U.S. is cemented by the absence of unified counter-hegemonic alliances, despite many claims to the contrary. This leads us to conclude with Achin Vanaik, who in 2013 stated: ‘The USA, despite relative decline, will remain indispensable and the key coordinator within the system. There will be no collective hegemon.’<sup>29</sup>

### *Implications of the Uneven Distribution of Global Power: Adding “the Imperial” and Qualifying Interdependence*

Grevi’s interpolarity neglects the complexities inherent to both concepts of multipolarity and interdependence, which he identifies as acting as major drivers of world politics. The key factor impacting upon both is the

<sup>28</sup> Grevi 2009; see also Grevi and Gnesotto 2006.

<sup>29</sup> Vanaik 2013: 195.

uneven distribution of international power,<sup>30</sup> precisely the phenomenon his account leaves unaddressed.

### **The Unrivalled Means of Power at the Hands of a Single State Acting as the Imperial Power**

Retrieving Mills' concepts of the power élite's sources of power (presented in Chap. 2), the U.S. holds the key commanding posts in the most important institutions of world politics through which it can exercise—what I would refer to as—unilateral power. Its decisions or non-decisions have a global impact—on the political, economic, military and societal levels of many states and societies worldwide. Against this backdrop, in the eyes of many nations, including great-powers, what the U.S. does or does not can be of paramount importance.

The dominant position of the U.S. stems from a number of key factors, which will be alluded here in brief: (1) *Military unipolarity*: The U.S. monopolizes the means of military power on a global scale, which it can use as a coercive instrument against both state and non-state actors. Its military pre-dominance is underpinned by the size and sophistication of its military capacities, accounting for half of the globe's military spending and equipped with unrivalled military technology; its own military's global omnipresence in over a hundred countries, with almost 1000 military bases,<sup>31</sup> enabling it to intervene all over the globe within 24 hours; its position of chief actor within the Atlantic Alliance's military arm, NATO, that in the words of Aijaz Ahmad 'goes only where the US tells it to go'<sup>32,33</sup> (2) *Lead currency*: The U.S. dollar is the world's lead currency, which is also majorly reflected in the trade of oil in U.S. dollars.<sup>34</sup> (3) *Decisive actor in international financial institutions* (IFIs), in charge of structuring the global economy along the lines of neoliberal globalization:<sup>35</sup> in the Bretton Woods institutions (IMF and World Bank) where it holds a *de facto* unilateral veto when it comes to important decisions,<sup>36</sup> and in the WTO (where it has, e.g., successfully blocked Iranian membership). (4) A range of "*soft power*" *capabilities* which ultimately can help produce "hard

<sup>30</sup> See Massarrat 2006a; Josifidis and Lošonc 2014.

<sup>31</sup> Johnson 2005.

<sup>32</sup> Ahmad 2003: 46.

<sup>33</sup> See Waltz 2000.

<sup>34</sup> See Massarrat 2003; Abdolvand and Schulz 2003.

<sup>35</sup> Chomsky 2009.

<sup>36</sup> Leech and Leech 2009.

power”: unrivalled dominance in the fields of technology (especially the patents regime), despite some cracks still serving as cultural and ideological model, and educating the bulk of the globe’s power élite.<sup>37</sup>

All these factors are part and parcel of a “grand strategy” of preserving U.S. global hegemony, with its backbone being the oil–military–currency nexus.<sup>38</sup> In fact, the U.S. uses these military and currency tools to secure and control the global flow of energy, and in particular the global trade in oil. This is being done in a two-fold way: Directly through the military presence and control of trade routes and bottlenecks, and through political leverage over many states whose “energy security” depends on this U.S. role. Indirectly, the U.S. is ensuring that the major trade in commodities is taking place in U.S. dollar and thereby it is benefitting from the energy hunger of emerging countries. Within that nexus, its close relationship with global energy companies and the latter’s mixed political and economic interests, as well as its close ties with the GCC have further enabled Washington’s dominant position.<sup>39</sup> As long as the U.S. dollar remains the currency for oil trade and its status as the world’s lead currency is not challenged (e.g. by the euro or the renminbi), the U.S. acts as *de facto* rentier state swallowing the world’s surplus capital and selling state bonds via its central bank, the Federal Reserve System (Fed). This effectively leads to a system of “dollar imperialism” based on the oil–military–currency nexus.<sup>40</sup>

In addition, many authors have deduced Washington’s pre-eminent position from the role it assumes in the global capitalist system, where the “(American) empire” acts as “supervening authority” for the functioning of global capitalism managed by multilateral institutions (which, as said before, are largely controlled by the U.S.), the U.S. state and other states’ ruling élites.<sup>41</sup>

### Multiple Faces of Interdependence

Arguably, the most powerful state in international relations (the U.S.) and the unilateral means of power it has at its disposal heavily infringes upon the very nature and process of interdependence. These means of global

<sup>37</sup> Ahmad 2003: 46; Vanaik 2013.

<sup>38</sup> Massarrat 2014.

<sup>39</sup> Author’s interview with Kuhn.

<sup>40</sup> Massarrat 2014.

<sup>41</sup> See, for example, Ahmad 2003: 45–46.

power projection are setting the U.S. above all the great-powers who may on their own form a kind of multipolar system, highlighting the fact that interdependence takes place within the context of uneven global power relations. Under such circumstances, the proportions and varieties of interdependence, particularly focusing on areas of strategic significance, ought to be examined.

In this vein, the late Kenneth Waltz has contextualized the significance of interdependence in a world according to Realists. While ‘among the forces that shape international politics, interdependence is a weak one’,<sup>42</sup> he still holds that

[i]nterdependence, like integration, depends on other conditions. It is more a dependent than an independent variable. States, if they can afford to, shy away from becoming excessively dependent on goods and resources that may be denied them in crises and wars. States take measures [...] to avoid excessive dependence on others.<sup>43</sup>

Hence, relatively more independent states occupy a better position within the international system than more dependent ones. Importantly, however, Waltz sees interdependence not as a condition that provides equal benefits to the states involved, as stronger states stand to gain more than weaker ones. As such, interdependence cannot suggest that conditions of inequality among states in the international system will disappear.<sup>44</sup> Moreover, Waltz puts forward that ‘[t]he character of international politics changes as national interdependence tightens or loosens. Yet even as relations vary, states have to take care of themselves as best as they can in an anarchic environment.’<sup>45</sup> His conclusion is that overall the effects of interdependence are weak, inconclusive as to its effects and most likely to privilege stronger states over weaker ones.

Furthermore, even if taking place on a global level-playing field, interdependence does not necessarily translate into an unbridled process of cooperation leading to mutual benefit and ultimately furthering peace. In contrast to Liberals, Structural Realists like Waltz see interdependence not necessarily as a source for peace.<sup>46</sup> In fact, deepening interdependencies, as Grevi concurs, have assumed an *existential* dimension as their

<sup>42</sup> Waltz 2000: 14.

<sup>43</sup> Ibid.: 15.

<sup>44</sup> Ibid.: 15–17.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid.: 18.

<sup>46</sup> Ibid.: 14.

'mismanagement can threaten not only the prosperity but also the political stability and ultimately, in extreme cases, the very survival of the actors that belong to the system'.<sup>47</sup>

### *Sketching the Configuration of Imperial Interpolarity*

At the core of my argument on Imperial Interpolarity stand the following assumptions: (1) Corroborating Grevi, the key venue for important global decisions is among great-powers ("inter-polar"). (2) Imperial Interpolarity stresses the importance of the U.S. and the imperial role it assumes. It thus asserts that relations between a major power (e.g. Iran) and a great-power (e.g. Russia or India) are largely a function of the latter's ties with the superpower (the U.S.). (3) In Grevi's inter-polarity, very much like other propositions on the shape of world order, the question of the system's hierarchy and the concomitant one on inclusion and exclusion of countries into specific tiers of states remains unanswered. For instance, this concerns the ways in which established powers may try to thwart the emergence of new ones that could pose a challenge to their prerogatives in domains believed to be their exclusive "area of responsibility" (most starkly witnessed in the case of the UNSC's veto powers and the ambition of many great-powers to join that exclusive club). Therefore, Imperial Interpolarity argues that there exists an implicit hegemonic consent (a kind of *acquis hégémonique*) within each tier of the international system's hierarchy, which pits the superior tier against the inferior one(s).<sup>48</sup> More precisely, such a will to secure one's hegemonic status against contenders can be witnessed in the interactions among the different tiers of states, i.e. the ways in which both established and (re-)emerging great-powers thwart off the emergence of others (to be demonstrated below).

In fact, the hierarchy of states in Imperial Interpolarity can be listed as follows:

1. The U.S., the dominant imperial power and the system's most powerful state, is the only international actor with truly global power-projection capabilities and unrivalled unilateral powers, with its decisions or non-decisions having a truly global impact.
2. The permanent members of the UNSC who are a holding veto power within a body often decisive in bringing about military or

<sup>47</sup> Grevi 2009: 24.

<sup>48</sup> Barkawi and Laffey (2002: 109) use the term "imperial hierarchy".

other interventions (e.g. economic sanctions). Here, there is a tension between Western and non-Western states. The former, i.e. the U.S. together with key EU member-states, can be referred to as the Atlantic Alliance which shares a set of interests aimed at preserving “Western” dominance in a changing world. The latter, in turn, favour a multipolar world that would put an end to Western dominance in international affairs.

3. Great-powers, i.e. those states able to project power beyond their region, comprised of both (re-)emerging (India, Brazil) and established great-powers (besides China, Russia, the UK and France, one can name Germany).
4. Major powers, i.e. those states who can project power within their own region, aspiring to adopt a more prominent international role.

As such, my conceptualization of Imperial Interpolarity displays similarities with Vanaik’s model of a “new quintet” with the U.S. at its unrivalled helm,<sup>49</sup> and in terms of inter-polar arrangements Achcar’s hub-and-spokes model ‘with the US as the hub and Europe, Japan, Russia and China as the spokes of the wheel, all needing the US more than they need each other’.<sup>50</sup>

The following discussion, highlighting U.S. unilateral power and great-power behaviour in the international Iran conflict, shall illustrate the validity of the Imperial Interpolarity model and of the argument that the salience of this conflict can also be ascribed to its embedding in that particular international constellation.

### *The Iran Sanctions Regime: A Prime Example of U.S. Unilateral Power*

In international relations, sanctions—economic and/or political in nature—constitute a preferred instrument of policy, aimed at gaining concessions from the opponent. Preferably, this is done by cutting the income of the sanctioned state, or that of its power élite. In the Iranian case, sanctions have been an integral part of the transatlantic strategy in the period

<sup>49</sup> See Vanaik 2012, 2013.

<sup>50</sup> Achcar 2000: 133. See also Joffe 1995; Achcar 1999.

under investigation, which is referred to as “coercive diplomacy” in Diplomatic Studies.<sup>51</sup>

The sanctions against Iran can be divided into the following phases, with its severity reaching a height by the latter half of the 2000s: (1) Following the Iranian Revolution, the U.S. and Western European countries imposed sanctions that mostly pertained to the delivery of weapons during the Iraq–Iran War; (2) by the mid-1990s, the sanctions regime attained its erstwhile height with U.S. unilateral sanctions (enshrined in the Iran–Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA)) that were applied extra-territorially and mostly targeted Iran’s energy sector; (3) in the 2000s, various sanctions were imposed under the banner of stopping Iran’s nuclear programme, with a climax reached from 2010 onwards with the imposition of the ‘strongest sanctions against Iran in history’ (U.S. President Obama).<sup>52</sup> In the context of the “nuclear crisis”, the UNSC in the second half of the 2000s imposed several rounds of sanctions that are multilaterally binding. By the end of that decade, the sanctions regime was tightened by new unilateral sanctions imposed by the U.S. and its allies. By 2012, it reached a peak with the EU imposing its own set of extensive measures, including a ban on hydrocarbon imports and sanctions on the banking system.

Returning to our discussion on the shape of world order, the Iran sanctions regime is a prime illustration for the amount of power the U.S. state still possesses. Via formal (legal, institutional etc.) as well as informal frameworks, the U.S. has been very successful to force friends and foes alike to commit themselves to the sanctions, even if some of their core interests have been violated by aligning with this U.S. policy. Since 2004, the U.S. Treasury Department has led a worldwide campaign to force states, corporations and financial institutions in Europe, Asia and Iran’s neighbourhood to halt activities with Iran. Although the most important sanctions are U.S. unilateral ones, Washington made sure they are applied extra-territorially, i.e. throughout the world. In case of non-compliance, the U.S. has threatened all these actors with a variety of measures, using its various means of power: exclusion and/or discrimination regarding their access to the international financial system where the U.S. enjoys disproportionate power, and their access to the U.S. banking system or to its vast market; or, at the least, reputational damage. It has also warned countries of the political costs for non-cooperation (e.g. in the South Korean case,

<sup>51</sup> See Sauer 2007; Fathollah-Nejad 2010.

<sup>52</sup> Cited in FNS 2012.

the U.S. warned to change its position on the conflict with North Korea). The U.S. has even been able to pressure countries which are not in its traditional realm of influence, such as Lebanon.<sup>53</sup> In particular, it has devoted special attention to Asian customers of Iranian oil trying to dissuade them from continuing their purchases, thus affecting one of the main pillars of Iran's "Look to the East" policy.

*Imperial Interpolarity in the International Iran Conflict:  
Through the Prism of World Order*

The following case-studies shall illustrate that the behaviour of the great-powers towards Iran has primarily been a function of their ties to the U.S. The following examples are taken from the decade following the mid-2000s, when Iran had adopted its "Look to the East" policy. As such, they will demonstrate Iran's lack of success in gaining the Asian great-powers to act as a balance to U.S. pressure, who instead opportunistically used that same U.S. pressure to advance their own objectives in regard to Iran.

*The Primacy of Relations with the U.S.*

**The Case of Russia**

There is often the claim—especially in Western and Iranian media—that Russia and Iran are strategic partners, that Tehran can rely on support from Moscow to counter pressures from Washington. However, a closer examination reveals the vacuity of such an assertion.

One, Russia's dealings with Iran have been subject to those with the U.S. Enjoying working relationships with both Iran and the U.S., Russia has in the course of the international Iran conflict been able to pursue its own interests by playing one side against the other.<sup>54</sup> As repeatedly emphasized by Russian experts, the state of Russian–American relations has defined the depth of Russian–Iranian relations.<sup>55</sup> In a 2012 interview, Nikolay Kozhanov (who served as an attaché at the Russian Embassy in Tehran from 2006 to 2009, charged with socio-economic, energy and nuclear issues) emphasized:

<sup>53</sup> See *The Daily Star* 2012.

<sup>54</sup> See also Namâyandeh 2014.

<sup>55</sup> See, for example, Kozhanov 2012a, b; Shafaie 2012.

It is necessary to recognize that the swings in Russo–Iranian relations depend on the state of US–Russian dialogue and this is quite an obvious fact. For example, the period between 2006 and 2009 saw rapprochement between Moscow and Tehran in the form of energy cooperation. It could not be a mere coincidence that this dialogue began when US–Russian ties were experiencing serious troubles. Moreover, the sweetheart relations with Iran ended not long after the start of the “reset” in Russo–American relations initiated by the Obama administration.<sup>56</sup>

*Two*, against the backdrop of the talk of Russian–Iranian partnership, Moscow’s repeated support for UNSC resolutions against Iran has widely been met with a degree of surprise. Yet, when evaluating Russian behaviour in the Iran conflict, one of Moscow’s most significant grand-strategic interests, which is unlikely to be reversed easily, has escaped due attention: Russia has been able to safeguard its quasi-monopoly as Europe’s energy supplier (whereby it holds political leverage vis-à-vis the EU) precisely because of the Western energy sanctions on Iran that have effectively sidelined its most likely competitor. Therefore, it can be argued that an end to the West’s Iran energy sanctions could seriously undermine Russia’s at least long-term power position vis-à-vis Europe.

In the triangular relationship between Russia, the U.S. and Iran, Moscow has pursued the strategy of keeping the Iran–U.S. conflict at a low flame and of occasionally supporting Iran through diplomatic and military means, thereby creating headaches for the U.S., e.g. to avoid U.S. hegemony in West Asia, which could potentially lead to sidelining Russian interests there. Another benefit for keeping the conflict alive has been the resulting spike in oil prices, which financially benefitted Russia as a major exporter. At the same time, Russia has been careful to avoid an escalation of the U.S.–Iran conflict, which could enflame its southern flank.<sup>57</sup>

### **The Case of China**

China–Iran relations have likewise been dependent on Beijing’s relations with Washington. In 2013, former Chinese Ambassador to Iran (1991–1995), Liming Hua, alluded to this fact:

<sup>56</sup> Cited in Shafaie 2012 (Pt. 1).

<sup>57</sup> See Mousavian 2012b: 91–93.

The only obstacle to Sino–Iranian relations now is Western sanctions, which have a big influence not only on Western trade with Iran, but also with China’s dealings with Iran. So China wants an early improvement of relations between Iran and the U.S. This is the way Sino–Iranian relations can most quickly develop.<sup>58</sup>

China’s ties with the U.S. remain primordial. (1) China is not interested in a U.S. decline, given its close ties with it. For example, Beijing holds a major part of U.S. treasury bonds in U.S. dollars. (2) Arguably the most two important states in the evolving international system, the U.S. and China in the 2000s have been reluctant to openly intervene in each other’s foreign policies, especially because of the talk to establish a special informal relationship for global governance (“G2”).

China has also effectively supported the UNSC sanctions resolutions against Iran, since it has been a chief profiteer. In the wake of the U.S.-pressured withdrawal of the Europeans from the Iranian market, Iran was virtually handed over to China on a silver plate. China’s economic presence could have been witnessed all across the board: from the construction of the Tehran Metro to the exploration of Persian Gulf oil and gas fields. Moreover, since the start of the “nuclear crisis”, China has been given preferential rates for its imports of Iranian oil.<sup>59</sup> All these concessions were offered by Tehran in the attempt to gain Chinese support in the face of U.S. pressure. Arguably, such Iranian policy has not been successful. In this vein, according to Hossein Mousavian, a political assessment by the SNSC during the “nuclear crisis” concluded that ‘the interest of Chinese officials in expanding their relations with the United States would ultimately trump the various ties between Tehran and Beijing’.<sup>60</sup>

The evolution of Sino–Iranian energy relations is illustrative of the ramifications of U.S. pressure. As indicated, filling the vacuum left by Western companies, China has become Iran’s major investor and thus gained a foothold in its energy sector. However, as a result of U.S. concerns, China has markedly slowed down its efforts of developing the energy projects and has been reluctant to turn Memoranda of Understanding it signed with Iran into final agreements. Coupled with Iranian frustration over the slow pace of activities by the Chinese contractors, by early 2010 a process

<sup>58</sup> Cited in Ribet 2013.

<sup>59</sup> Author’s interview with Kuhn.

<sup>60</sup> Mousavian 2012b: 93.

of replacement started, with Iranian companies (mostly IRGC-affiliated) taking over the projects.<sup>61</sup>

Moreover, Washington's unhappiness over China–Iran energy ties has prompted Chinese efforts to diversify its energy supply, ultimately reducing Iran's role as supplier in favour of Iran's regional rival Saudi Arabia. In 2009, China's top three suppliers were Saudi Arabia (21%), Angola (16%) and Iran (11%).<sup>62</sup>

### The Case of India

The traditionally good relations between India and Iran have experienced cracks during the “nuclear crisis”, when New Delhi showed an inclination to align itself with Washington's Iran policy. This was due to the combination of U.S. pressure to keep India away from Iran and the desire by an important part of the Indian political élite to ensure their country's global ascendancy by aligning with Washington. Two examples stand out here: India's behaviour towards the Iran–Pakistan–India (IPI) pipeline and its voting behaviour at the IAEA's Board of Governors (BoG) on Iran's nuclear file.

As to the IPI pipeline project, which would allow Iranian natural gas to reach India circumventing the difficult and costly process of liquefying gas, Indian and U.S. interests have found themselves largely at odds with each other. For India, Iran's importance lies in its role of important energy supplier and as a geostrategic gateway into Central Asia. Regarding energy, by the mid-2000s India had already been the world's fifth largest energy consumer,<sup>63</sup> and expected to rise over the following decade. More than half of its electricity production is based on coal, but nearly three-quarter of its oil demand must be imported.<sup>64</sup> While Iran modestly accounts for 7.5% of Indian crude oil imports (in 2005), for New Delhi the provision of Iranian gas via the IPI pipeline has been an attractive option despite concerns over rivalling Pakistan serving as transit route. After India and Iran signed a multibillion-dollar gas deal, the project's start was delayed due to rounds of negotiations over the pricing of Iran's gas exports and India's reluctance to finalize the project given U.S. opposition.<sup>65</sup> In fact,

<sup>61</sup> Kuhn 2013. See also Downs and Maloney 2011.

<sup>62</sup> *Xinhua* 2010a; Ghafouri 2009.

<sup>63</sup> By the mid-2000s, the world's leading consumers of primary energy were (in %): the U.S. (22.2), China (14.7), the Russian Federation (6.4), Japan (5.0), India (3.7), Germany (3.1), France (2.5), the United Kingdom (2.2) and South Korea (2.1) (BP 2006: 40).

<sup>64</sup> Fair 2007: 44.

<sup>65</sup> See Shahid 2007; Chaudhary 2001.

to circumvent Iran, Washington proposed New Delhi to replace the IPI pipeline project by the Turkmenistan–Afghanistan–Pakistan–India (TAPI) pipeline, which has been received positively by India.<sup>66</sup>

From a geostrategic point of view, well-established relations with Tehran are central to New Delhi's 'supra-regional power' aspirations, as it Iran would provides the geographical access to West and Central Asia. First, India considers its presence in Afghanistan and Central Asia as crucial in its strategic rivalry with Pakistan. Second, the westernmost frontier of the Indian Ocean basin that India's regards as its strategic realm reaches Iran's southern gateways, namely the Strait of Hormuz and the Persian Gulf.<sup>67</sup> Moreover, India and Iran share the interest to seize the large opportunities Central Asian markets harbour. Therefore, in September 2000, together with Moscow, New Delhi and Tehran initiated the plan to build a North–South Corridor, running from India via Iranian territory and the Caspian Sea to Russia and European doorways. If realized, this would constitute an immensely significant trade route for entire Eurasia as it shortens the one presently used running through the Suez Canal into the Mediterranean, by 10,000 km.

The U.S. on its part put a lot of efforts to discourage India from creating a potentially powerful geopolitical and geo-economic link with Iran, offering it a number of incentives. In March 2006, U.S. President Bush offered a deal to India, promising it wide-ranging military, nuclear and technological assistance, at the core of which stood a nuclear deal that would effectively provide the nuclear weapons power India with nuclear assistance without it joining the NPT. In return, India was asked to shelve the IPI pipeline project and to join the U.S. position on Iran's nuclear programme.<sup>68</sup> The U.S. offer, which was popular with the pro-Atlanticist section of India's political élite, finally led to India reversing its long-standing support of Iran's nuclear stance that it had lent as an important member of the NAM, even vocally defending Iran's rights under the NPT at a time when Tehran was being heavily attacked by Western powers.<sup>69</sup> Hence, in two votes at the IAEA's BoG against Iran (in September 2005 and February 2006) India for the first time voted along with Western states, thus paving the way for Iran's dossier to be "handed over" to the

<sup>66</sup> Purushothaman 2012: 906–907.

<sup>67</sup> Fair 2007: 44.

<sup>68</sup> See Klare 2008: 205.

<sup>69</sup> Noteworthy in this regard was the February 2007 Iran visit by India's Foreign Minister Pranab Mukherjee amidst heightened U.S.–Iranian discord. See Sreenivasan 2007.

UNSC. Nonetheless, India's reluctance to fully align with the U.S. was on display in-between these two votes, when in October 2005 Foreign Minister Natwar Singh declared that his country would not support U.S. efforts to refer Iran to the UNSC, which provoked outrage by key members of the U.S. Congress.<sup>70</sup> However, following the second BoG vote, Prime Minister Manmohan Singh provided the explanation that this decision was made in order to provide diplomatic solutions to the impasse, while encouraging all parties to eschew confrontation and inflexibility.<sup>71</sup>

Stephen Rademaker, a former official of the Bush/Cheney administration, acknowledged in early 2007 that India's anti-Iran votes were indeed "coerced", after which the U.S. Congressional vote on the civilian nuclear proposal went ahead. He further stressed that India 'needs to stop thinking of itself as a Third World country [...] and start aligning itself with the First World countries.'<sup>72</sup> At the end, India's pro-U.S. turn signalled the victory of its Atlanticist camp over others, but sparked a domestic political crisis with critics claiming that India had thereby abandoned its foreign-policy principle of independence.<sup>73</sup>

Nevertheless, India's positions regarding the IPI pipeline and Iran's nuclear dossier cannot be seen solely as a result of U.S. pressures, although these have been tremendous.<sup>74</sup> India did so as it saw an opportunity to gain benefits. In fact, complying with U.S. demands, the Reserve Bank of India's guidelines of December 2010 stopped oil payments to Iran through the Asian Clearing Union (that assembles nine Asian Central Banks). This move paved the way for India to pay for its oil imports by exporting goods to Iran.

To conclude, from India's perspective relations with the U.S. and Iran are almost equally important in economic and strategic terms. But the U.S. containment policy towards Iran has imposed limitations on its interest to deepen ties with Iran.

<sup>70</sup> Fair 2007: 41.

<sup>71</sup> Varadarajan 2005, 2007; Koshy 2005. While President Bush signed the U.S.-Indian civilian nuclear deal into law on 18 December 2006, the U.S. Congress unsuccessfully tried to require India to halt its fissile material production and/or end its military relations with Iran as preconditions for nuclear cooperation.

<sup>72</sup> Cited in Varadarajan 2007.

<sup>73</sup> Bansal 2012; Dadwal 2012; Dietl 2012; Goswami 2013; Hussain 2012; Kumaraswamy 2012; Mishra 2012; Samuel and Rajiv 2012; Ramana 2012; Singh Roy and Lele 2010; Singh Roy 2012; Kronstadt and Katzman 2006.

<sup>74</sup> Purushothaman 2012.

*The Question of Status and Tiers in the World Order:  
Preserving Hierarchy*

The following discussion will demonstrate my above-stated argument that status and the means of power associated with it is an important driver in the behaviour of states in the contemporary world order.

**The 2010 Brazil- and Turkey-Brokered Tehran Declaration:  
The UNSC Repudiating Aspiring Powers**

Amid U.S.-led efforts in 2009 and 2010 to garner international support for a next round of heightened UNSC sanctions against Iran, two non-permanent UNSC members of the time, the aspiring powers of Turkey and Brazil, succeeded in gaining the pledge from Iran to let a sizeable portion of its low-enriched uranium to be enriched to 20% *outside* the country (commonly referred to as “fuel swap”) in order to ease concerns over Iran reaching the threshold of a nuclear-weapons capability. A similar deal had failed under U.S. leadership in the previous autumn in the round of negotiation following the 2009 Iranian presidential elections.<sup>75</sup> Despite the fact that the Obama White House had previously sent letters to the Brazilian President and the Turkish Prime Minister to encourage them to engage in such an effort, the Tehran Declaration presented in May 2010 by Lula, Erdoğan and Ahmadinejad in the Iranian capital was immediately repudiated by the same U.S. administration, who saw its ongoing successful efforts in gaining support for the sharp tightening of the Iran sanctions jeopardized. The sudden U.S. rejection prompted angry reactions in Brasília and Ankara.<sup>76</sup>

Yet more noticeable, the non-Western UNSC permanent members Russia and China also dismissed the diplomatic breakthrough facilitated by Brazil and Turkey, while repeating their usual condemnation of sanctions as an inappropriate foreign-policy tool. Instead, they insisted that the Iran dossier shall be exclusively dealt with within the UNSC and not by anyone else.<sup>77</sup> Kozhanov explains the reasons for Moscow’s dismissal as follows:

<sup>75</sup> See Fathollah-Nejad 2010: 54–59.

<sup>76</sup> See, for example, *Hürriyet Daily News* 2010; Santos Vieira de Jesus 2011.

<sup>77</sup> See AFP 2010; AJE 2010; Bueno 2010a, b; CASMII 2010; Dequan 2010; Dyer and Gorst 2010; Escobar 2010a, b; Friedman 2010; *Hürriyet* 2010; MacAskill 2010; Poor 2010; Porter 2010; Santiago 2010; *The Japan Times* 2010; *Watanabe* 2011.

Tehran's subsequent attempts to replace Russia with Turkey and Brazil as its main nuclear mediators with the West were the last straw: Moscow regarded this step as contrary to its national interests and its role in the region. As a result, Russia could do nothing but support the United States and EU in instituting new UN measures against Iran. On June 9, 2010, the Security Council adopted Resolution 1929; commenting on this development, President Medvedev characterized Iranian behavior as "inappropriate." He recognized that Tehran was getting closer to achieving the ability to produce nuclear weapons, and he considered the adoption of new international sanctions as inevitable. He added, "As a rule, sanctions do not bring expected results, but their implementation has a certain logic: they are a signal sent by the international community."<sup>78</sup>

Of course, Medvedev's use of "international community" basically means the permanent members of the UNSC. Beyond Moscow's nuclear proliferation concerns in Iran, it seized the opportunity presented by a new round of UNSC sanctions by adopting its own unilateral sanctions, especially putting a brake on its military sales to Iran (especially the S-300 surface-to-air missile systems for which Iran had already paid) as sign of accommodating Western concerns, while it did not foreclose the channels for the continuation of Russian–Iranian bilateral dealings.<sup>79</sup>

To conclude, this episode was a firm reminder of the commitment of second-tier great-powers such as Russia and China to keep their status in the international system against aspiring powers (in this case, Brazil and Turkey) even if the latter's actions have been completely in line with their own proclaimed political goals, i.e. seeking a diplomatic solution to the crisis and avoiding a "nuclear Iran".

*Iran's Bid to Join the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: Keeping Iran at Bay*

In the wake of the 2010 UNSC resolution tightening sanctions on Iran, Russia stated that there was an SCO rule not allowing membership to states placed under UNSC resolutions. This stance came as a surprise, since it was Russia itself who had voted in favour of the same resolutions that it now evoked to block the bid for membership by Iran who had enjoyed observer status in the SCO. As the same Russian Iran expert explains:

<sup>78</sup> Kozhanov 2012a: 16.

<sup>79</sup> Ibid.: 16–17. See also Tazmini 2010.

Russia seems to favor Iranian participation in regional and international political and economic organizations such as the Gas Exporting Countries Forum (GECF) and the [SCO], where Moscow's influence is either paramount or substantial. Some experts argue that by including Tehran in this manner, Moscow makes the Iranians more controllable, since they are compelled to act according to the rules of these organizations (which [are] often determined under Russian influence). To attract Iranian interest in such participation, the Russian government often plays on political and economic ambitions in Tehran, which sees itself as a regional leader and important energy hub.<sup>80</sup>

In other words, Russia has again taken advantage of its privileged role in keeping a lower-ranking power such as Iran away from upgrading its status in the international power hierarchy through a full SCO membership.

### *Conclusion on Iran's "Look to the East" Policy: Misjudging International Realities*

Gradually, the Iran conflict had become increasingly globalized. In the face of the Bush/Cheney administration's unwillingness to directly talk to Iran, the EU3 took matters in their hands by negotiating with Iran from 2002 onwards. In a next step, following the referral of Iran's case to the UNSC by 2006, the five veto-holding members ("P5") entered the game. But also among the P5+1, differences of opinion emerged. Despite some reluctance, China and Russia finally agreed to the Western "coercive diplomacy" towards Iran and voted for every single round of U.S.-pushed UNSC sanctions.

Although during all these years Iran's position vis-à-vis the EU3 and then the P5+1 was continuously backed by the absolute majority of states worldwide (the NAM and the OIC), the latter could never influence the direction of the conflict. This situation changed quite dramatically in May 2010 amid ongoing efforts to impose a fourth round of UNSC sanctions. The diplomatic breakthrough in the shape of the Iran–Turkey–Brazil deal shook the months-old U.S.-led efforts to tighten Iran sanctions, but more importantly it questioned the exclusive authority held by the P5 over the Iran agenda. In that sense, the success of the Turko–Brazilian intervention

<sup>80</sup> Kozhanov 2012a: 8.

not only undermined the West's, above all the U.S. position, but also Russia and China's.

While Iran had faced the P5 mirroring the post-World War II global power constellation, Brazil and Turkey intervened on the basis of the commonly shared fear of Iran's case serving as precedent for U.S. hegemonic coercion against mid-level powers. Thereby, the picture of a unified "international community" taking position against Iran further faltered. This incident also undermined a monolithic perception of another powerful grouping, namely the BRIC countries, that are considered to be the new global players pitted against Western domination. The above discussion has shown that in order to understand great-power behaviour in the conflict adopting the world-order lens can be immensely useful, which helps us gain a more complete understanding of the conflict's nature.

Over the first decade of the twenty-first century, Iran's geopolitical seclusion persisted in a different shape. In the face of the West's confrontational posture, Iran sought for alternatives in order to counter-balance Western pressure, turning to Eurasia's great-powers. Therefore, the "Look to the East" policy was not coincidental nor was it a choice in a strategic sense. In reality, Iran was *pushed away* from the West and found itself only left with the East.

It can be argued that part of Iran's political élite, particularly those associated with Offensive Realism, uncritically bought into the "emerging powers" discourse, which was corroborating their views on the decisive decline of U.S. power making way for a truly multipolar world order. In this vein, there was the misleading belief of the existence of an anti-hegemonic bloc that could be used by Iranian diplomacy to ward off U.S. pressure. However, these overtly optimistic scenarios were painted in Tehran without taking into account the specific workings of the emerging world order that we outlined here.

*The Emerging New World Order and Implications for Iran  
as Regional Power: An Iranian Viewpoint Critical  
of Offensive Realism*

In summer 2009, Nabi Sonboli from Institute for Political and International Studies (IPIS) published a two-part article in the daily *Jomhouri-e Eslâmi* entitled 'Challenges to Iran's emergence as regional power', in what may be regarded as a critique of the Offensive Realist's account of the emerging world order and its belief of a rather smooth rise of Iranian power. More

generally, his contribution can be seen as an addition to Farhi and Lotfian's notion of Iran as a "conflicted aspiring power". Sonboli starts by stating that history has shown that the emergence of powers, especially in the wake of revolutions, will propel established powers to pursue containment. 'The Islamic Revolution and Iran's emergence as an ideological power' was met with an eight-year long military challenge by Iraq as well as three decades of U.S. hostility.<sup>81</sup> In fact, he stresses that U.S. post-World War II "grand strategy" has asserted that the emergence of any power in regions deemed vital is unacceptable, as it would pose a challenge to global U.S. dominance. Yet, a sole focus of Iranian foreign policy on the U.S. would be short-sighted, he insists. This is because '[w]hat is being shaped on the international level is a concert of great-powers that tries to manage global affairs'. According to Sonboli, this concert consists of the G8 with India and China gradually joining them. Within this concert, at the top of which stands the U.S., power capabilities are unequally distributed. The next ring consists of a number of countries who interact with those great-powers. Yet, the U.S. has over the decades lost its power, its "hegemonic power" has turned into a "superior power" (*godrat-e bartar*), no longer enabling it to unilaterally push its interests. Within this concert of powers, the U.S. can assume leadership on some issues and in some regions (most notably the Middle East and Africa), while in other ones (such as East Asia and Europe) it is obliged to act within a multilateral framework.

Sonboli warns against seeing U.S. decline as necessarily beneficial to Iran. 'Nevertheless, a world without American hegemony will not necessarily be a better world for the Islamic Republic. The presence and influence of countries such as England, France, Russia [China, etc.] in the Middle East is undeniable.' This development, prompted by declining U.S. power in the region, came about as a result of the region's increasing importance for outside powers. The Asian powers' rising geopolitical clout, coming on the heels of their considerable economic development, harbours a number of security ramifications for Iran. Among them are the 'key question until when India and China will remain peace-seeking' and the fact they will enter the Central Asian geopolitical game where Iran so far only had to confront Western powers. In addition, the Asian powers might continue joining U.S. policy on Afghanistan, Iraq and the Iran nuclear issue. Meanwhile, he conceives the U.S. role as ambivalent: Although in the short to medium term, the U.S. will remain Iran's most

<sup>81</sup> Sonboli 2009: pt. 1.

important regional challenger, both countries will share the goal of regional stability. In conclusion, for Sonboli the challenges to Iran's emergence as a sustainable regional power are the anti-Iran and anti-Shia front; fanaticism across the region jeopardizing stability; the entrance of new players in regional geopolitics; and the volatility of global energy markets.<sup>82</sup>

## (B) MULTIFACETED IMPACT OF SANCTIONS

Retrieving our enquiry into external-internal dynamics, this part will provide a brief and non-exhaustive analysis of the impact of sanctions on Iran, including their foreign policy, geo-economic and societal dimensions.

### *Geo-economic and Geopolitical Costs*

Regarding developmental costs, the only available study is one published in March 2005 by the economist Akbar Torbat for the World Bank, i.e. before the tightening of sanctions that took place in the latter half of the 2000s. Torbat maintains that the Iranian economy—manufacturing, agriculture, bank and financial sectors—has been hurt from almost three decades of sanctions. Relying on various studies conducted for different time periods between 1995 and 2001, he calculates that trade and financial sanctions have produced an economic damage ranging from \$750mn to \$2.6bn (i.e. respectively 1% or 3.6% of Iran's GDP in 2000).<sup>83</sup> He thus concludes that the sanctions had some impeding effects on Iran's post-war reconstruction efforts and economic development. However, the entire costs of the Iran sanctions regime during this period ought to be higher than calculated by Torbat. For instance, within the time-period of his study, the economic losses resulting from U.S. pressure leading to the abandoning of (geo-)economic projects involving Iran in the initial years after the imposition of ILSA have not been accounted for. Importantly, major geo-economic projects had to be either postponed (the IPI pipeline) or shelved (the Nabucco pipeline through which Iranian gas should be delivered to Central Europe). Also, Iran's economic relations with East Asian countries have been damaged due to sanctions.<sup>84</sup>

<sup>82</sup> Sonboli 2009: pt. 2.

<sup>83</sup> Torbat 2005: 426 [Table 3].

<sup>84</sup> See Kozhanov 2013.

Militarily, Iran's capability to purchase weapons has been heavily restricted ever since the advent of sanctions. This turned out to be particularly painful in the war against strongly armed Iraq when Iran struggled to purchase weaponry and was forced to find alternative ways. The Western arms embargo limited Iran's options for purchasing weapons to the Soviet Union (later Russia) and China. On the longer term, despite such purchases from U.S. challengers in Eurasia and the development of an indigenous military industry in Iran, the still existing Western arms embargo has contributed to the fact that Iran still today is far from enjoying the conventional military prowess corresponding to its geopolitical clout. While substantial parts of its military remain artefacts from the Shah era, especially its air force, Iran's neighbours—especially the GCC countries, Israel and NATO member Turkey—enjoy full access to high-tech Western weaponry. Iran is hence pushed back to a second-tier military power only to be remedied by its means of asymmetric warfare and potentially its ballistic missile capabilities.

Moreover, Iran's energy infrastructure that was significantly destroyed during the war against Iraq was deprived of the possibility to attract FDI, the need of which is estimated at several hundreds of billions of U.S. dollars. This led to the situation that Iran has ever since not been able to increase oil production beyond the levels at the time of the last Shah.

To a much lesser degree but still noteworthy, Turkey—which has turned into the sole land trade corridor reaching Iran from the West—has seen its profits in its dealings with Iran rise sharply. Not surprisingly, its business press has viewed the Iran sanctions as providing Ankara with a competitive trade advantage. Also off the radar, Qatar which in the Persian Gulf is sharing the world's by far largest gas field with Iran, has been able to exploit South Pars much more rapidly than Iran given the latter's lack of access to advanced technologies that are largely provided by Western oil giants. This has resulted in a tremendous gap of revenues between the two countries amounting to many several billion U.S. dollars.<sup>85</sup>

As a result, as this incomplete glance shows, the costs of sanctions for Iran have been gigantic, to be estimated in tens if not hundreds of billions of U.S. dollars.

<sup>85</sup> See Kuhn 2013: 323ff.

*Conflict Resolution and Foreign Policy: Continuity and Change*

While the academic literature on sanctions is quite clear that they barely achieve their stated objectives, given the complexity of the issue—not least the nature of the conflict at hand and that of the sanctioned country as well as the severity of sanctions—instead of merely deducing this general finding onto specific cases, engaging in a case-to-case study is advisable. In the case of Iran, which has felt the brunt of U.S. extra-territorial sanctions, assessments on their effectiveness have starkly varied. In fact, the Iranian example offers grounds to argue in contrasting ways: Either sanctions are counterproductive for conflict resolution, as they harden the opposing fronts, thus prolonging the conflict and ultimately making a diplomatic settlement less likely. Or sanctions are ultimately successful when their imposition decisively undermines the sanctioned state's revenues (especially that of its élite), forcing decision-makers to alter their cost-benefit calculation and as a result to provide concessions in exchange for sanctions relief. In the case under discussion, we could observe that Iran during U.S. President Barack Obama's "crippling sanctions" ultimately agreed to severely limit its nuclear programme. In other words, it seemed the Islamic Republic could for years commit to its revolutionary rhetoric of resisting illegitimate sanctions pressure, but when state survival may be at stake "the cup of poison" to engage with the "Great Satan" will be drunk—i.e. there seems to be a threshold after which sanctions yield results. Meanwhile, sanctions remain largely detrimental to state-society relations, with the authoritarian state having the means to externalize, materially and discursively, the costs of sanctions onto the civilian population, thereby enlarging the power gap between the authoritarian state and civil society.

In fact, there are a number of key claims and expectations on the part of the sanctions' imposers as to the effects sanctions would produce, which shall now be tested by reviewing the relevant literature on economic sanctions. While in the 1980s, the potent political rhetoric that Iran supported terrorism against the U.S. and its allies ("international terrorism") has been prevalent, since the 1990s another powerful claim was added to that, namely the alleged threat posed by Iran's nuclear programme to "international peace and security". Sanctions are usually presented as a quasi-peaceful means and as such inherently part of a purely diplomatic approach geared towards avoiding a military confrontation. However, as the Iraqi case with the 1990s sanctions regime and the ensuing U.S.-led 2003 military invasion has shown, sanctions may also be accompanied by military

strikes and even preceding military invasion. As Robert A. Pape noted, sanctions are often a prelude to war, not an alternative to it.<sup>86</sup> To put it differently, “smart bombs” could follow on the heels of “smart sanctions”. Even short of this worst-case scenario, in the case of the Iran nuclear crisis in the period under investigation, it has often been argued that sanctions did not prove to facilitate the resolution of conflicts; on the contrary, it is claimed, they have contributed to extend the conflict through the hardening of opposing fronts that see the sanctions from fundamentally different prisms.<sup>87</sup> While the West conceives sanctions in a cost–benefit framework, i.e. the heavier the costs imposed on the targeted country by way of sanctions, the more willing the sanctioned state will be to offer concessions, Iran sees them as an illegitimate pressure that must be resisted. Following this argument, for almost a decade, Western policymakers have, in abiding with their specific prism, devoted much more time and energy to identifying which sanctions to impose in order to finally wrest the desired concessions from Iran, than to making a committed and creative engagement to finding a diplomatic solution to the stalemate. This effectively helped to sustain and extend the conflict.

A contrarian claim put forward is that the heightened costs and increasing international isolation resulting from sanctions would create intra-élite discord to the point of forcing a change in the strategic calculus underpinning Iranian nuclear and foreign policies. In this regard, a 2013 study by the pro-rapprochement National Iranian American Council (NIAC), tellingly titled “*Never Give In and Never Give Up*”: *The Impact of Sanctions on Tehran’s Nuclear Calculations*, argues that sanctions have fomented intra-élite consensus, not dissent. Relying on 30 interviews with members of Iran’s politically relevant élite (senior political officials, analysts and members of the business community), the study further maintains that the interviews showed that even the private sector, whose interests have been suffering from both sanctions and the privileging of entities close to the state, have opted to lobby for concessions from the state and the Supreme Leader instead of pushing for a different nuclear policy.<sup>88</sup> Also, the study suggests that the political élite lacked an alternative strategic view, thus contributing to the absence of change in Iran’s nuclear calculus. For

<sup>86</sup> Pape 1998; see also Pape 1997.

<sup>87</sup> International Crisis Group 2013.

<sup>88</sup> Ibid.: 15–19.

instance, a 'well-positioned businessman with links to the security apparatus' and 'regime insider' explained when interviewed by the authors:

Even though regime members outside the core can have a voice and influence, it is sad to say that none of them actually has a strategy on how to amend the national security policy. [...] Therefore, the core around Ayatollah Khamenei is not only the most powerful, but also the only group that has a strategy, i.e. the "strategic distance and antagonism" to the U.S.<sup>89</sup>

The contention here is that the protracted struggle between the West and Iran has reinforced rather than weakened intra-élite consensus. Although such a claim appears plausible, there are a number of problems with the accounts and argument presented in the study.<sup>90</sup> First, the views quoted need to be taken with a grain of salt as they may be a combined result of (a) pervasive nationalism, thus avoiding criticism towards the state's foreign policy in the face of mounting outside pressures, and (b), given the authoritarian and repressive context in the IRI, one can question whether the interviewees would at all openly criticize official foreign policy, especially when sanctioned by the Supreme Leader.

In fact, the views reproduced in the NIAC study reflect the main prism through which sanctions have been portrayed in the official discourse of the Islamic Republic. It is primarily predicated upon Third-Worldist views towards Western powers as brutal, immoral and as aiming to keep Iran underdeveloped and dependent. Embedded in such a narrative while injecting his particular Islamist narrational elements, Khamenei's take calls for Iranian resistance to sanctions:

All global powers and arrogant governments have joined hands to impose sanctions on the Iranian people and exhaust them with these sanctions. They themselves say that they wanted to make the Iranian people stand up against the Islamic Republic, thereby forcing the officials of the Islamic Republic to revise their calculations. Now they openly say this. In the beginning—we were analyzing their moves—they did not use to say this openly, but now they do. But the result is that the God-given dignity and the orientation of the Iranian people towards the principles of Islam and the

<sup>89</sup> Ibid.: 17.

<sup>90</sup> See also Lucas 2013.

Revolution and towards resistance are developing on a daily basis. This is exactly the opposite of what the enemies want.<sup>91</sup>

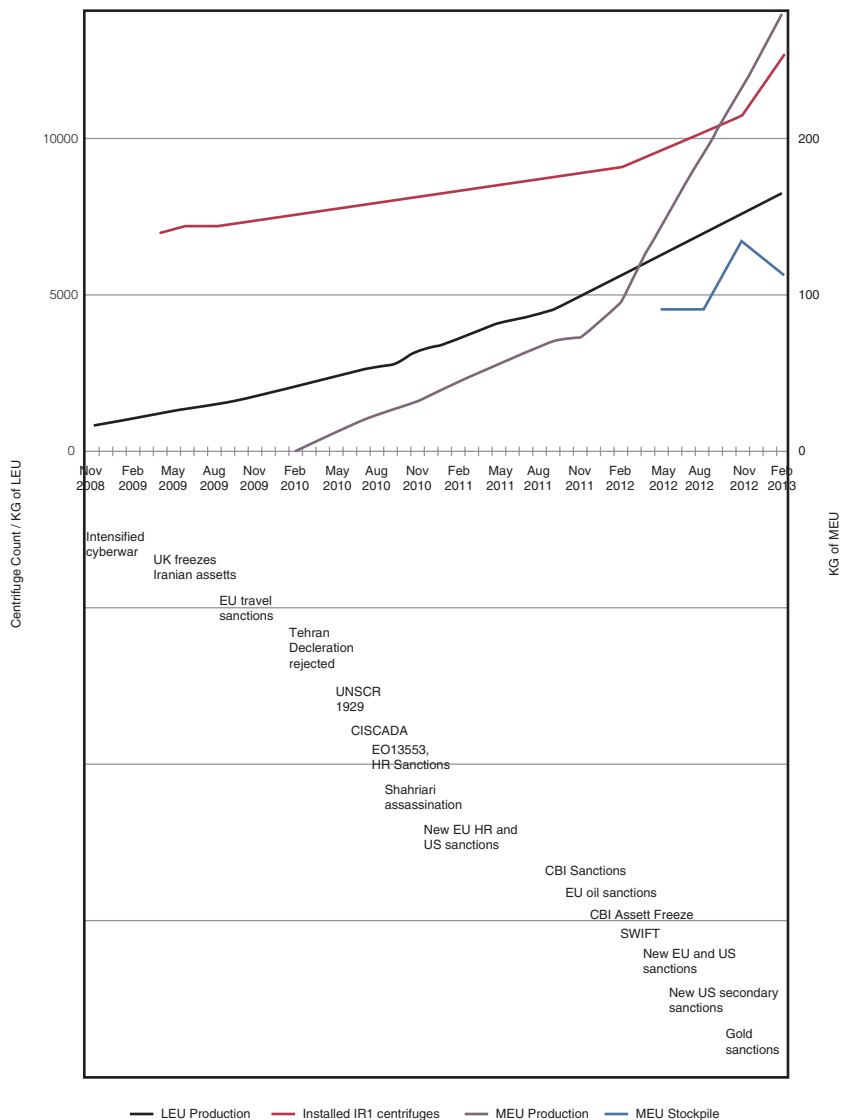
Such portrayal of a merciless enemy may also be directed at “domestic consumption”, aiming to maintain unity within a possibly fragmented power élite, justifying an emboldened military-security apparatus as a means to counter that enemy, while mobilizing popular support, especially among the regime’s social base. Yet, another important aspect for the centrality of the adopted prism that helped sustain the nuclear conflict over a decade has been observed by Hassan Hakimian: ‘the cost–benefit rationale overlooks the fact that ideologue regimes like Iran tend to have a high pain threshold and may be willing to take a big hit against their population without yielding in their international stance’.<sup>92</sup>

*On the policy level*, not only those opposing prisms but also Iran’s specific “counter-pressure” nuclear policy explain why the escalation of sanctions after 2006 was accompanied by that of the nuclear programme (see Fig. 7.1). In fact, in 2006—before the above-mentioned India’s crucial February anti-Iran resolution vote at the IAEA’s Board of Governors, paving the way for the Iran nuclear dossier to be transferred to the UN Security Council which with its Resolution 1696, adopted on 31 July 2006, demanded from Iran to suspend all enrichment and threatened the imposition of sanctions in case of non-compliance—Iran only had a thousand centrifuges spinning. Then, that number increased along with the imposition of a series of multilateral UN sanctions against Iran (the December 2006 UN Security Council Resolution 1737 sanctioning Iran’s nuclear programme; the March 2007 Resolution 1747, imposing an arms embargo; the March 2008 Resolution 1803, tightening financial and trade sanctions, including inspection of cargo planes and ships; the June 2010 Resolution 1929, tightening the previous set of sanctions). By the turn of the year 2011/2012, we witnessed Iran dramatically stepping up its nuclear programme while particularly onerous sanctions were imposed that were torpedoing Tehran’s banking and financial transactions as well as its oil exports, e.g. with the EU in January agreeing to join the oil embargo against Iran (being the latter’s second-largest customer after China) and SWIFT’s suspension of Iran in March following an EU Council decision.<sup>93</sup> Finally, by 2013, the number of Iranian centrifuges spinning had

<sup>91</sup> Khamenei 2013a.

<sup>92</sup> Hakimian 2012.

<sup>93</sup> See Borger 2012.



**Fig. 7.1** Sanctions escalation vs. nuclear escalation. (Source: Khajepour et al. 2013: 27)

skyrocketed to reach 19,000. In other words, Iran boosting its nuclear programme was not only a result of ideological defiance in the face of “illegitimate pressure” from outside powers demanding to stop its nuclear programme in contravention of what it saw as its “inalienable right” under the NPT, but above all it did so to accumulate leverage for eventual negotiations with Washington towards the removal of increasingly crippling economic sanctions.<sup>94</sup>

Nevertheless, despite sanctions *de facto* leading Iran to do the opposite of what they were supposed to reach, i.e. curbing its nuclear programme instead of boosting it, it would be questionable to negate the foreign-policy impact of the rising pressure on Tehran through sanctions. In contrast to the previously presented account of sanctions policy inevitably entrenching the opposing fronts and thus Iran’s foreign-policy stance, especially regarding its nuclear policy, a sober evaluation of the situation around the turn of the decade may offer a different and indeed more adequate conclusion. In fact, as Hadian and Hormozi explain in a 2011 article, an ‘important segment of the Iranian elite’, because of a changing cost–benefit calculation, demanded a change of policy:

It should be cautioned, however, that Counter Containment, as a reactive strategy, has proved quite costly. Its pursuit has involved increasing political, diplomatic, economic, and social costs for the country, and has, as a result, proved contentious for the ruling elite. An important segment of the Iranian elite contend that the costs involved far outweigh the presumed benefits, and call for its discontinuation and change of track. The government, supported by another segment of the elite, continue to insist that the price paid and being paid – and being paid – is necessary for safeguarding Iran’s independence, dignity, and the new-found posture and stature.<sup>95</sup>

One could therefore suggest that a breaking point was possibly reached in the wake of the reciprocal escalation between, on one hand, increasingly onerous Western sanctions and, on the other, Iran’s quite costly multifaceted “counter-containment” strategy, much of it designed to counter the effect of rampant sanctions. In other words, the elevated antagonism between Washington and Tehran around the turn of the decade, when

<sup>94</sup> See Porter 2012a.

<sup>95</sup> Hadian and Hormozi 2011: 48.

sanctions were becoming increasingly crippling (particularly with their targeting of Iran's oil exports), especially witnessed in the dispute over Iran's nuclear programme (defined by the authors as the most contentious issue pitting Iran against the West), did not allow for the continuation of that situation where a U.S. strategy of containment was pitted against Iran's counter-containment strategy. The resulting untenable impasse only provided for either 'full-scale confrontation' or 'major reconciliation', the authors contend. The authors conclude, against the backdrop of the military option even rejected by the U.S. military and intelligence establishment, that only 'comprehensive engagement'—a win-win scenario for both parties—would present a way out.<sup>96</sup> In other words, it seems the élite at some point opted to dismiss the Offensive Realist "counter-containment" policy in favour of a Defensive Realist "comprehensive engagement" policy, even ahead of the Rouhani administration coming to power.

In fact, by 2012—that is by the end of Ahmadinejad's two-term presidency (3 August 2005 – 3 August 2013)—the decade-long Iran nuclear crisis experienced a decisive turn, as a combined result of Iran's advancing nuclear programme (as a central part of its "counter-pressure" nuclear strategy) creating alarmism in the international community and offering it the choice between a rock and a hard place (namely, accepting an Iranian nuclear bomb or bombing Iran's nuclear infrastructure), of sanctions pressure becoming crippling (see above) as well as of the Obama administration dropping its maximalist "zero enrichment" demand on Iran's nuclear activities.<sup>97</sup> All of this paved the ground for the 2012 breakthrough through the so-called Oman Channel, which had offered Tehran and Washington the possibility of secret, back-channel negotiations in Muscat that was opened in 2009 but turned serious by 2012.<sup>98</sup> These secret talks, as a former Iranian official reportedly suggested, took place with the 'wary approval' of Supreme Leader Khamenei, 'who was sceptical of the outcome but agreed to all the meetings to take place'.<sup>99</sup> They finally led to the 23 November 2013 Geneva interim agreement between the P5+1 and Iran, consisting of a short-term freeze of part of the latter's nuclear programme in exchange for the easing of economic sanctions. Through

<sup>96</sup> Hadian and Hormozi 2011.

<sup>97</sup> See e.g. Richter, Paul (2012) 'U.S. signals major shift on Iran nuclear program', *Los Angeles Times*, 27 April.

<sup>98</sup> See also interview with Oman researcher Cinzia Bianco, October 2014.

<sup>99</sup> Arshad Mohammad & Parisa Hafezi (2013) 'U.S., Iran held secret talks on march to nuclear deal', *Associated Press*, 24 November.

further negotiations, this so-called Joint Plan of Action should then be extended towards a long-term agreement.

Against this backdrop, both the West and Iran could see their respective prisms validated: For the West, the mounting weight of sanctions finally forced Iran to accept wide-ranging limitations of its nuclear programme in exchange for sanctions relief, while for Tehran it was its nuclear strategy resisting sanctions pressure via stepping-up its nuclear activities that forced the other side to drop the “zero enrichment” demand and instead to embrace a pragmatic approach.

Although sanctions had exacerbated the politico-economic imbalances to the favour of regime entities (to be demonstrated below), as they become crippling by 2012 they started to exert significant pressure upon the entire Iranian economy and arguably the revenues of the Iranian élite. It could thus be argued that for the regime the heavy costs of sanctions could not be borne indefinitely, as their intensification with financial and oil sanctions could have posed a risk to regime stability too high to bear. Or in other words, Iran had for many years resisted heavy sanctions pressure, but succumbed to it once it had become too extreme, thus leading to a change of Tehran’s cost–benefit calculation, which helped open the way for the breakthrough around 2012. Finally, the administration of President Rouhani (assuming office in August 2013) was passed on the baton from the secret Oman channel with Washington, which could thus translate its core campaign message that “centrifuges should spin, but so should industries and people’s livelihoods” onto a “constructive engagement” policy with the West. The ensuing negotiations with the P5+1, which were then held in the public realm, led to the Joint Plan of Action in November 2013, a framework agreement in April 2015 and ultimately a final deal, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action in July 2015, agreeing on a substantial limitation of the nuclear programme in exchange for the relief of nuclear-related sanctions.<sup>100</sup>

### *Ramifications on the State–Society Complex*

In this section, I address the ramifications of coercive economic measures on the state–society complex and its trajectory. I show that economic sanctions affect mostly the civilian population from which civil society originates, while cementing the position of the powers that be in the targeted state. In fact, there is scant evidence for a positive relationship

<sup>100</sup> See Bozorgmehr 2013.

between economic sanctions and the weakening of authoritarian structures. On the contrary, both the empirical evidence in the specific case of Iran and the scholarly literature on the effects of economic sanctions suggest that sanctions widen the power gap between society and the state, with the former overwhelmingly paying the price of sanctions while the latter's hold on power remains firm or becomes even tighter. This can occur in a number of ways.

*A Magic Wand to Decapitate Evil? The Political Narrative of Empowering Sanctions*

In the public and political arenas, confusion has loomed large when it comes to the effects of economic sanctions on democratization and authoritarianism. Importantly, the terminology embedded in the debate has cast a long shadow on common assessments of the effects of sanctions on these issues. The sanctions imposed are alternately adorned with the attributes “smart”, “intelligent” and “targeted”. Such sanctions, it is claimed, are designed to weaken the repressive regime while sparing the civilian population, thus having an empowering effect on civil society. They are presented as a quasi-peaceful tool, which is deployed with surgical precision, targeting the designated entity portrayed as evil. Much like smart bombs, however, the sanctions variant produces collateral damage, whose wider ramifications remain largely unnoticed. Moreover, this dominant political discourse presents the sanctioning countries as benevolent actors engaged in weakening authoritarianism while opening the way for a democratic transition.<sup>101</sup>

However, the claims that sanctions can or do help the cause of democracy in Iran have not been based on empirical evidence that would, for instance, point to domestic developments in the wake of sanctions that produce a higher probability for democratic change. Rather, such assumptions have mostly been a sign of wishful thinking, be it as a result of political desperation and a perceived lack of viable alternatives to war and/or state repression, or a disregard for the social repercussions of sanctions. However, with the round of U.S. and EU unilateral sanctions imposed by 2012, politicians from the sanctioning countries began to abandon the rhetoric that the coercive economic measures imposed were “targeted” and “intelligently” aimed at the leadership of the sanctioned country. In fact, U.S. and some European politicians openly started highlighting the

<sup>101</sup> For an exposition of such a view, see Torfeh 2010.

“crippling” nature of the Iran sanctions. U.S. President Obama, for instance, admitted in early March 2012 that Iran would face ‘unprecedented, crippling sanctions’.<sup>102</sup> In the same breath, however, politicians have been quick to add that sanctions are not meant to target the civilian population. In a press release accompanying the announcement of its boycott of Iranian oil, the EU echoed the distinction well-known from other U.S. policy declarations on Iran: ‘The Council [of the EU] stresses that the restrictive measures agreed today are aimed at affecting the funding of Iran’s nuclear programme by the Iranian regime and are not aimed at the Iranian people.’<sup>103</sup>

The partial shift in the political discourse—i.e. the increasing acknowledgment that the sanctions were indeed crippling—was a reflection both of a unilateral drive by the U.S. and the EU to ostensibly increase the economic pressure on Iran and, by so doing, also of an effort to comply with long-standing Israeli demands for crippling sanctions in order to dissuade Tel Aviv from taking unilateral military action against Iran. Yet, an analysis of the “smart sanctions” reveals that they have already had crippling effects on Iran’s entire economy.

*The Political Economy of Sanctions: Crippling the Economy and Cementing the Authoritarian State*

The sanctions have negatively affected Iran’s entire economy, but due to stark imbalances in the domestic power structure their effects vary from one societal segment to another. As noted before, state and semi-state actors—or in other words, regime entities—control about two-thirds of the economy. In general, economic entities close to the state have the means to access state resources, with which they can to some extent cover the higher operational costs resulting from sanctions. Alternatively, such actors can circumvent the sanctions by using “black channels” mainly for importing goods, as in the case of the IRGC. Yet, sanctioning countries proclaimed that “smart sanctions” would target the IRGC’s grip on the power structure, but an analysis of the effects of sanctions in the period under investigation reveals that its economic power position in fact expanded.<sup>104</sup> With much of the international trade involving Iran rendered illegal through sanctions and economic actors largely cut off from

<sup>102</sup> VOA 2012.

<sup>103</sup> Council of the European Union 2012: 2.

<sup>104</sup> See Daragahi and Mostaghim 2010.

importing goods, the IRGC and its economic empire have been able to benefit. Control over at least 60 harbours in the Persian Gulf and a number of unofficial airports, as well as its presence on Iran's land and sea borders, have allowed the IRGC to monopolize the bulk of imports and increase its profits from rising cross-border smuggling. As a consequence, the IRGC and its affiliated businesses, as a semi-state entity, have been able to expand their economic dominance vis-à-vis the civilian economy that does not enjoy the same privileges. In other words, sanctions have permitted the IRGC to gain ground vis-à-vis other domestic economic actors, strengthening it as a linchpin actor of the authoritarian state.

The impact of sanctions on the political élite, as already alluded to, varied. If one were to interpret the domestic crisis in the wake of the 2009 presidential election primarily as an economic war of allocation between the old political élite, particularly centred around the figure of Hashemi-Rafsanjani, and a new one composed of the Khamenei–IRGC–Ahmadinejad alliance,<sup>105</sup> we can see that the latter camp—beyond the comparative advantage for the IRGC—has also benefitted from rising bilateral trade between Iran and China. This trade has grown proportionate to the tightening of the sanctions that cut Iran off from trade with the West. Sino–Iranian bilateral trade volumes amounted to \$30bn in 2010<sup>106</sup> and \$40bn in 2013.<sup>107</sup> In fact, by around 2010, China had effectively overtaken the EU (with its 27 member-states) as Iran's main trading partner.<sup>108</sup> The ever-expanding Chinese presence in Iran has been to the detriment of producers (thanks to cheap Chinese products flooding the Iranian market) and jobs (due to the focus on imports, above all from China, instead of domestic production).

The key Iranian organization facilitating Iranian–Chinese trade is the Iran–China Chamber of Commerce and Industries (ICCCI). Arguably, the ICCCI is closely associated with the traditional conservatives as the political affiliation of its founder and President of the Board of Directors, Assadollah Asgaroladi, suggests (who died on 13 September 2019). By the early 2000s, i.e. before the sanctions regime reached new heights, his estimated wealth stood at over \$9bn.<sup>109</sup> His older brother Habibollah (who

<sup>105</sup> Abdolvand and Schulz 2010.

<sup>106</sup> *Xinhua* 2010b.

<sup>107</sup> See Keck 2013.

<sup>108</sup> Bozorgmehr and Dyer 2010.

<sup>109</sup> Klebnikov 2003.

died on 5 November 2013), a senior politician, was Secretary-General of the Islamic Coalition Party and a senior member of the Expediency Council. Since the revolution, he has been the President of the Imam Khomeini Relief Foundation (*Comité-e Emdâd-e Imam Khomeini*), the largest social welfare branch of the government. Like his brother Assadollah, he was counted among the wealthiest individuals in Iran, with his fortune estimated at several billion dollars.

Conversely, Iran's technocrats—leaning towards the first-mentioned political élite affiliated with Hashemi-Rafsanjani—have been viewing sanctions with great concern. Among other things, they have seen that a healthy competition between different foreign competitors has been missing and that the lack of high-tech (that used to be delivered by the West) has markedly reduced the quality of domestic production. All of this has undoubtedly a negative impact (mid- and long-term) on Iran's economic and technological development. Another of their concern has been that the sale of Iranian oil to large customers such as China and India has turned into barter—a *de facto* “junk for oil” programme has emerged—<sup>110</sup> which has benefitted the rival political élite faction.

Another observable effect of sanctions has been the enhanced socio-economic role of the state. As the economist Djavad Salehi-Isfahani explains,

sanctions are likely to cement the authoritarian pact between the conservatives and the economic underclass and at the same time weaken the voices calling for greater social, political and economic freedom. Heavy sanctions are likely to strengthen the hands of the Iranian leaders who have opposed the liberal economic reforms of the Rafsanjani and Khatami era and favor a return to the controlled economy of the 1980s, when the government rather than markets decided on the allocation of foreign exchange, credit, and even basic necessities.<sup>111</sup>

Hence, sanctions boosted the role of the state for the provision of public services and even basic goods, and as such contributed to a more centralized state.<sup>112</sup>

In general, the gap has widened between, on the one hand, economic entities with access to state resources (e.g. those economic actors connected to the IRGC's economic empire and those engaged in business

<sup>110</sup> Lakshmanan and Pratish Narayanan 2012.

<sup>111</sup> Salehi-Isfahani 2009b.

<sup>112</sup> For Iraq, see Gordon 2010.

with China) and those whose activities have been crippled by sanctions and the increasing economic role of state-affiliated actors. It is the latter non-state-affiliated entities that would want to see equal treatment by the state (e.g. getting access to government foreign-exchange rates) and a re-opening of trade with the outside world.

Reflective of the divide between Defensive and Offensive Realist schools of thought in foreign policy, the same schism can be found regarding economic policy where, according to Sonboli, ‘developmentalists, those more interested in the economic development of the country’ are pitted against ‘those who are more concerned about the security’.<sup>113</sup> The latter camp may be identified with the above-mentioned Khamenei–IRGC–Ahmadinejad alliance who by being “security-firsters” can thus secure their privileges from the lack of a more open economy as advocated by Iran’s “developmentalists”.

In conclusion, we have witnessed that during the period under investigation a new political élite alliance saw a comparative advantage and relative gains from sanctions to the detriment of the previous one. Yet, we can assume that at some point, around 2012 when the IRI—green-lighted by its most decisive ruling alliance of Khamenei–IRGC—entered into secret talks with Washington to see sanctions removed, the overall cost on the élite had exceeded their aforementioned benefits. Moreover, the further economic isolation of the country has affected Iran’s civilian economy—whose firms and factories do not from privileges derived from regime proximity—and thereby the middle class (usually seen as the backbone for processes of democratization).

### *Sanctions and the Weakening of Civil-Society Actors*

The weakening of the entire economy adds to the distress experienced by civil society. Hence, in addition to political repression, civil society has also suffered from economic pressures, since the population at large has effectively been paying the price of sanctions.<sup>114</sup> Iranian civil society’s key social movements—women, students and workers—have all suffered from heightened economic hardship exacerbated by sanctions, which has in turn helped restrict the space for activism. As women’s rights advocate

<sup>113</sup> Sonboli interviewed by Miriam Shabafrouz, 1 June 2012, Berlin; cited in Shabafrouz 2014: 257.

<sup>114</sup> See, for example, Salehi-Isfahani 2009b, 2012; Mehrabi 2012; Kamali Dehghan 2012.

Sussan Tahmasebi, activists in Iran became increasingly isolated from the outside world:

Those who carry on despite hardships inside the country are also feeling more and more isolated. Activists, like regular Iranians, cannot use banks to transfer funds for conference participation, hotel reservations and to attend training workshops abroad.<sup>115</sup>

### Women

The impact of sanctions on women and gender relations has been studied in the context of the 1990–2003 Iraq sanctions regime.<sup>116</sup> Although research into the effect of sanctions on Iranian women is mainly in its initial stages, we can already identify socio-economic patterns similar to the Iraqi case. In fact, women in general and the women's movement in particular have historically been sensitive to the issue of sanctions. In this vein, the majority of accounts about the consequences of sanctions has come from Iranian women.<sup>117</sup>

There is evidence that women have disproportionately been affected by economic sanctions. As scholar-activists have pointed out, the rise in unemployment (exacerbated by sanctions) is likely to fuel regressive social policies that aim at preserving the traditional social status reserved to the male population by externalizing these costs onto the female population. These include measures that push women out of jobs, relegate them to the domestic sphere and curtail their access to higher education. Even the breeding ground for next generations of women's rights activists might be drained when 'school age girls are at risk as economic pressures may force families to make choices and opt for boys' schooling [which] may lead to diminished literacy rates among girls in the near future'.<sup>118</sup> Hence, sanctions can serve as the political platform on which conservative politics can go on the offensive in order to marginalize women from education and employment, consequently also helping to limit the prospects for women's rights activism. Moreover, widespread unemployment affects the entire family, but mainly women, exacerbating dominant gender relations.

<sup>115</sup> Cited in Kamali Dehghan 2012.

<sup>116</sup> See Al-Ali 2003, 2005, 2011.

<sup>117</sup> See Tahmasebi 2012.

<sup>118</sup> ICAN 2012: 5.

[W]omen will bear the brunt of dealing with their unemployed spouses and the men of the family within the home. These new dynamics are likely to lead to increased incidences of domestic violence and family conflicts, as men's ability to social expectations can lead to depression and attacks on women. Reduction in family income is inevitable forcing women to find new sources of income. Their coping strategies will likely include cutting back on their own health, wellbeing and dietary needs to provide for their dependents. As in other countries, for the most vulnerable, poverty will lead to risky survival strategies including child labor and sex work—in informal sectors which have expanded in Iran in recent years.<sup>119</sup>

Both economic sanctions and the heightened securitization of state and society as a by-product of the external threat of war tend to foster patriarchal structures and complicate, if not undermine, the women's rights struggle: 'Under these circumstances, with economic hardships and prospects of yet another devastating war, long-term planning and the development of sustainable programs to maintain the gains already made and push for basic rights are increasingly difficult, if not impossible.'<sup>120</sup>

### Students

The youth (15–19 years of age), making up 35% of the population, have likewise disproportionately suffered from sanctions as they account for 70% of general unemployment.<sup>121</sup> Facing deteriorating job prospects, exacerbated by the sanctions' impact on the economy, students also face additional hurdles. Sanctions have affected the ability of Iranian students to start graduate studies in the West even when they are accepted by the universities themselves, since the sanctions have severed their access to visas and made it almost impossible to use bank channels to pay their tuition fees. Also, Iranian students, like academics generally, have been prohibited from accessing U.S.-affiliated academic journals online. Furthermore, due to sanctions many Iranians, and even those of Iranian descent, have been banned from many academic science programmes at U.S. and European universities. These sanctions-driven

<sup>119</sup> Ibid.

<sup>120</sup> ICAN 2012: 7. See also Khanlarzadeh 2009; ICHRI 2011.

<sup>121</sup> Salehi-Isfahani 2010.

discriminations, as well as limits imposed on the mobility of Iranian students, have also negatively affected solidarity work with the outside world when it comes to civil activism.<sup>122</sup>

## Labour

Workers have been hit hard by the economic crisis affecting Iran, which has been significantly exacerbated by the sanctions. Despite the lack of studies on the impact of sanctions on Iranian labour, one can think of a number of ways in which sanctions have negatively affected workers. First, businesses and factories that have been dependent on importing items to sustain their operations, but can no longer do so due to the sanctions, have had to reduce their costs by cutting wages, laying-off workers, or even completely closing down. Furthermore, sanctions and the crisis in domestic production have negatively affected workers' rights and benefits. Such measures would concern the right to strike, the level of the wages paid and large-scale layoffs. As such, sanctions can also serve as an excuse for economic problems whose roots may primarily lie in structural problems, mismanagement and other shortcomings or profit-driven motivations on the part of the employers themselves.<sup>123</sup> Hence, sanctions add to the hardship experienced by Iranian workers who are suffering from both neoliberal economic policies *à l'Irannienne* and harsh state repression.<sup>124</sup>

Throughout the rise in labour activism in the 2000s, Iranian workers were sensitive both to their struggle against neoliberal economics at home and to the threat of war from abroad that served as a justification for the state's repression against them in the name of national security.<sup>125</sup> Their U.S. counterparts have recognized these negative effect of sanctions on Iranian labour. In a March 2012 solidarity resolution, U.S. Labor Against War voiced its opposition to war, but also to sanctions against Iran 'that primarily victimize civilians and strengthen the Iranian regime, which portrays itself as the defender of the Iranian people'.<sup>126</sup>

In conclusion, it is clear that all three social movements have experienced indirect fallouts from the severe sanctions, which have in turn helped weakened their struggle in various ways within an anyway existing authoritarian context.

<sup>122</sup> Author's conversations with several Iranian student activists (all wishing to remain anonymous), London, 2008–2013.

<sup>123</sup> See *Iran Labor Report* 2011; ICAN 2012: 5.

<sup>124</sup> See *Iran Labor Report* 2012.

<sup>125</sup> See Malm and Esmailian 2007.

<sup>126</sup> See USLAW 2012.

*Malign Effects of Sanctions: The General Academic Literature and the Need for an Iranian Case-Study*

The Iranian case can indeed serve as an ample illustration of the effects of sanctions as described by the academic literature. As the more perceptive studies suggest, sanctions prolong authoritarian rule and result in an increase in state-sponsored repression. However, as stated at the outset, despite the tendencies laid out here on how sanctions have negatively affected the external and internal realms, a more thorough case study is necessary to identify which of the effects specified by the general academic literature have been direct or indirect consequences of sanctions and, in this vein, how the role and responsibility of the authoritarian state must be accounted for when either exacerbating or warding off those malign effects of sanctions on the population. In other words, due attention would need to be paid to explore processes of the authoritarian state externalizing the costs of sanctions onto the population.

**Prolonging Authoritarian Rule**

In an article from spring 2010, Emanuele Ottolenghi formulates the goals of crippling sanctions: 'strategic sectors of the economy' must be targeted, including the operation and development of refineries as well as the energy, petrochemical and metallurgical industries, so as to undermine the regime's stability.<sup>127</sup>

Iran must know that the West is prepared to exact a steep price and that sanctions are designed to cause economic damage that will undermine the legitimacy and credibility of the regime. Not least, Tehran should be told that the international community will support regime-change from within. It must know that the West will work tirelessly to make Iran poor and internationally isolated unless and until dramatic changes occur within the Islamic Republic.<sup>128</sup>

When imposing such sanctions, he adds, one would 'cite human rights violations as a justification for any restriction'.<sup>129</sup> Despite such claims that crippling sanctions undermine regime stability, in the period under investigation, there is evidence that sanctions rather contributed to regime resilience. As noted, sanctions undermine the well-being of the civilian

<sup>127</sup> Ottolenghi 2010: 25.

<sup>128</sup> Ibid.: 21, emphasis added.

<sup>129</sup> Ibid.: 26.

population while actors who are part of or close to the ruling system find ways to accommodate themselves to the sanctions regime, ultimately cementing their own position of power, even if in relative terms. Arguably, as a result, the power gap between the state and society widened. This, in fact, would be in line with findings from the general academic literature on sanctions that coercive economic measures prolong rather than shorten authoritarian rule, with sanctions often having a stabilizing effect on it.<sup>130</sup>

### Furthering State-Sponsored Repression

The academic literature offers a number of findings about the impact of economic sanctions on authoritarian structures that can be relevant for the Iranian sanctions context discussed here. It has shown that economic coercion through sanctions (even targeted ones) is counter-productive as it stimulates the sanctioned state's political repression.<sup>131</sup> Economic sanctions, particularly multilateral ones, worsen the targeted country's human-rights situation by reducing the government's respect for physical integrity rights, including freedom from disappearances, extra-judicial killings, torture and political imprisonment.<sup>132</sup> More broadly, the literature examines the effects of economic sanctions on democracy as a whole. It has argued that sanctions decrease the level of democracy because the targeted regime can use the economic hardship caused by sanctions as a strategic tool to consolidate authoritarian rule and weaken the opposition—or as we put it, discursively and materially externalize the costs. Also, it is suggested there that both the immediate and longer-term effects of economic sanctions significantly reduce the level of democratic freedoms in the targeted state, with comprehensive economic sanctions having greater negative impact than limited ones. Moreover, it has claimed that economic sanctions enhance government control over the free flow of information, while independent media outlets suffer from economic damage inflicted by sanctions. As such, economic sanctions also negatively affected media openness.<sup>133</sup> Finally, various authors concur that the more comprehensive and multilateral (as opposed to unilateral) the sanctions regime is, the more harmful it is to various pillars of democracy.<sup>134</sup>

<sup>130</sup> Licht 2011.

<sup>131</sup> Peksen and Drury 2009.

<sup>132</sup> Peksen 2009.

<sup>133</sup> Peksen 2010.

<sup>134</sup> Also see Morgen and Bapat 2009; Parsi and Bahrami 2012.

### *Conclusions*

When it comes to the domestic repercussions of the sanctions, their proponents advance two interconnected claims: (1) because sanctions weaken the regime, by implication they empower civil society; (2) the economic malaise exacerbated by the sanctions would trigger popular unrest directed against the state that would be primarily blamed for the hardship caused by the sanctions, eventually triggering its downfall. However, in the period under investigation, economic sanctions have actually weakened the lower and middle classes,<sup>135</sup> particularly affecting the most vulnerable in society—Iranian workers, women and the youth. It has been suggested that, as a result, economic sanctions have widened the power gap between the authoritarian state and civil society, cementing and even boosting existing power configurations while hollowing out social forces indispensable to a process of democratization. All this demonstrates that the expectation that sanctions are predestined to trigger a system-destabilizing popular uprising can by no means be taken for granted.

Regarding our investigation into the foreign-policy impact of sanctions, the following observations can be made. Given the nature of Iranian foreign policy largely being a result of a form of élite consensus, either encouraged by the Supreme Leader's guidance or at least enjoying his blessing, there is ground to argue that the élite's changing cost-benefit calculations due to sanctions turning crippling, the decision was made to pursue the Defensive Realist approach of "comprehensive engagement". As a result, regarding the impact of sanctions on foreign policy decisions in the specific case of the Iran nuclear conflict, our brief discussion suggests the relevance of both ideational and material drivers in the effort to explain continuity or change of foreign policy stances. More precisely, on one hand, it could be argued that the *ideationally* inspired account of the primacy of differing prisms could be advanced to explain the hardening of fronts and thus the prolongation of conflict, with the Iranian side continuing its policies resisting sanctions. On the other, however, only when tracking *material* interests and their evolution, we can identify both continuity and change in foreign policy stances. In particular, it could be argued that for many years over the 2000s, sanctions did not lead to change in foreign policy as the politico-economic power élite dominant during the Ahmadinejad era (basically the IRGC) was relatively benefitting from sanctions. Yet, when these sanctions became crippling by the

<sup>135</sup> ICHRI 2013: 129–141.

turn of the decade, the cost–benefit calculation of the entire *élite* was beginning to change, as crucial oil revenues were massively targeted. As a result, we can suggest that at the end of the day, sanctions *did* lead to a changing cost–benefit calculation as their material costs had begun to outweigh the benefits from a policy of “resisting” them. The latter, although primarily explained in ideational terms, had therefore also had a material underpinning as it was to the relative benefit of a particular segment of the *élite*.

### CONCLUSION AND SOME OBSERVATIONS ON IRAN’S DEVELOPMENT

This chapter’s focus was on the developments in Iran’s international relations in the decade following the mid-2000s. While Iran adopted a “Look to the East” policy, the international sanctions regime against Iran was significantly tightened over the course of those years. In *Part A*, after identifying the “Look to the East” policy mainly as a consequence of Iran’s increasing alienation from Western powers that was significantly deepened by the initial phase of the “nuclear crisis”, we went on to describe the emerging, post-unipolar new world order. Conceptualized as Imperial Interpolarity, we showed that despite the popular talk of a multipolar world order, what we have rather witnessed is a constellation of an international pecking order in which the U.S. is undoubtedly the most potent actor followed by a second tier constituted of established and (re-)emerging great-powers. We have then noted that U.S. unilateral power has been forcefully put into practice by the implementation of a comprehensive sanctions regime on Iran. Our ensuing discussion of great-power behaviour towards Iran revealed the primacy of the U.S. role, with Russia, China and India’s ties with Iran being to a decisive degree a function of their respective relationship with the U.S., as these great-powers sought to accommodate their own interests in that particular context. Against this backdrop, we concluded that the “Look to the East” policy turned out to be largely futile as Asian great-powers failed to satisfy Iran’s expectations and interests. We also maintained that great-power interests (especially Russia’s) have prolonged the Iran “nuclear crisis” given the political and economic benefits that could be reaped therefrom. This was also demonstrated by Russia and China’s rejection of a nuclear fuel swap deal brokered by Turkey and Brazil in May 2010 that was tantamount to a diplomatic breakthrough that could have ended the decade-old stalemate,

driven by their fear of seeing their commanding position (as UNSC veto members) on the Iran nuclear file challenged by thus potentially empowered lower-tier powers.

In *Part B* we turned to the various impacts of Iran sanctions. While we referred to the general academic literature on sanctions' effects when viewing the Iranian case in the period under investigation, we highlighted the need to further explore processes of externalizing the costs of sanctions—discursively and materially—by the state onto society in order to gain a more complete understanding of the exact fallouts from sanctions. First, we highlighted the largely unnoticed geo-economic and geo-political costs. Second, in terms of conflict resolution, we have held that sanctions have helped harden the fronts due to the different prisms through which their imposers and Iran viewed them. While the former perceived them within a cost-benefit logic according to which at some point Iran will be prompted to bow down, the latter saw sanctions as another sign of illegitimate Western bullying against which it ought to resist. As such, the sanctions policy has effectively helped sustain the conflict. Yet, we observed that by 2012 a turning point was reached with secret Iranian-American talks in Oman taking place, arguing that this has been a product of both sides' willingness to concede (the U.S. dropping its "zero enrichment" demand and Iran ready to limit its "inalienable rights" regarding its nuclear programme), while they each regarded their own prisms vindicated (for the West that ultimately sanctions pressure had forced Iranian concessions and for Iran that its resistance strategy of stepping-up nuclear activities had ultimately obliged the opposing side to come to terms with reality). For the Iranian side, the mounting weight of U.S. "crippling sanctions" finally pushed the top leadership to reassess its cost-benefit calculations and enter into talks to see sanctions potentially threatening regime stability eased. Third, the domestic fallout of sanctions has been a widening of the power gap between the state and (civil) society, corroborating the findings of the academic literature on sanctions. This has in various ways resulted in the cementing of the domestic power configuration dominant in that period.

Moreover, sanctions can be seen in the context of the U.S.-led containment policy towards Iran. Widely ignored, there is a geopolitical rationale behind their imposition: If you cannot control or influence a country, you will resort to weakening it; and the most effective means to do so is via economic and military sanctions. It could be argued that this more general

reasoning has also constituted the common denominator for the support of sanctions, ranging from the U.S. to Russia.

Combining the themes of sanctions and the “Look to the East” policy, we can observe that new patterns of dependency have emerged: (1) With Iran being forced to turn solely eastwards, the role of South and East Asia’s growing economies gets highlighted, as this enables them to obtain a discount on Iranian oil and to export their (surplus) products as a way to pay for their oil imports. (2) With Iran being forced to find replacements to Western supplies in the areas of banking, logistics, insurances and so on in the rest of Asia (from Turkey to Malaysia).

Finally, the removal of the extraordinary dense web of sanctions requires foremost political will on the side of the sanctions’ imposers. However, even if this condition is met, there still remain legal and institutional barriers to overcome. As one Iranian businessman put it to this author, ‘sanctions are imposed in metres but removed in centimetres.’

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## Conclusions

### SUMMARY

The study envisaged to examine Iran's international relations from the 2000s to the early 2010s. We predicated the investigation upon the lessons drawn from studies on Iranian foreign policy, namely to account for the complex interplay between structure and culture on the one hand, and on the other, the internal and external realms. With this in mind, Chap. 2 critically engaged with the “Constructivist turn” in theories of IR and geopolitics, before sketching out our model of a Critical Geopolitics of International Relations (CGIR) where we integrated the above-mentioned interplays into the agent–system arrangement. For the agent, we therefore asserted that foreign-policy behaviour rests on both constructed identity, a product of ideational and/or material factors, from the inside (geopolitical culture) and systemic exigencies from the outside (geopolitical structure). For the system level, we posited an international system under constant flux, shaped by both geopolitics and globalization, ultimately constituting the geopolitical structure.

Starting with a discussion of Iran's geopolitical imaginations (or cultures), Chap. 3 first reviewed the roots of modern Iranian political culture. Being a weaker power in the face of great-power interference, Iran's national sovereignty was time and again significantly violated, out of which grew the

strong desire for independence. On the foreign-policy front, this independence *Leitmotiv* resulted in embracing different variations of non-alignment.

It is this very historical context of “anti-colonial modernity” (Hamid Dabashi) that gave birth to Iran’s three most important politico-ideological formations (or political cultures)—namely nationalism, socialism and Islamism. They were all nurtured by the dual struggle against domestic despotism and foreign interference, which were often interlinked. This triad of political cultures was, in a next step, examined in terms of its respective geopolitical imaginations: namely nationalism, Third-Worldism and Islamism. In doing so, we highlighted the geopolitical significance of an identity marker, exploring the overlaps and contradictions between each of these geopolitical imaginations regarding Iran’s worldviews and their respective implications for foreign policy. We concluded that the most salient common denominator among these rivalling geopolitical imaginations was independence, which as *Leitmotiv* was to be later injected into the Islamic Republic’s foreign policy.

Chapter 4, upon the recognition of foreign policy also being rooted in the domestic context, turned to an investigation of the state–society complex and the political élite in the IRI. First, we reviewed the domestic power structure that consists of a military–clerical–commercial complex. In discussing each of the state–society complex’s constituent components, we paid special attention to the key position assumed by the Supreme Leader who is equipped with extraordinary means to exert power and influence across the state–society complex. After doing so, we concluded with the proposition that the IRI’s longevity can be seen as a result of populism as a means of class politics, which has diverted attention away from questioning the politico-economic foundations of the state, reflected in the continuity of class rule between the monarchy and the Islamic Republic as also suggested by a number of relevant politico-economic studies. Second, we turned to the exploration of the political élite in the IRI and its dominant political as well as geopolitical culture. We described the élite as consisting of various Islamist factions who cater to different social bases and project a variety of political agendas. Despite such differences, we argued that the Islamist political élite shares a strong common bondage—the equivalent of a “class consciousness”—which is reflected in the definition of their identity as “Islamic–Iranian” (thus stressing their common attachment to Islamism, which also denotes the nature of the political system, as well as to nationalism whose primary purpose concerns the mobilization of support among non-Islamist

constituencies) as well as in the notion of “regime survival” as a way to secure its political and economic interests predicated upon the IRI state. It is this “class consciousness” that in times of crises affecting “regime survival” could be upheld in the principle of *Maslahat-e Nezâm* (the expediency of the system). In order to identify the élite and the state’s dominant political and geopolitical culture, we delved into the worldview of the IRI’s top ideologue, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei. Regarding the state-sanctioned political culture, we found in Khamenei’s speeches over the 2000s an acute engagement with the rivalling politico-ideological formations of socialism and liberalism, which he disqualifies in a number of ways so as to present Islam(ism) as the only adequate, thus permissible, political culture. Particularly opposed to socialism, Islam(ism) is being privileged because of its favouring of capital over labour. When it comes to the dominant geopolitical culture, we found an eclecticism dominated by Islamist universalism and elements of Third-Worldist ideas as they fitted in an overall anti-imperial posture.

Chapter 5 then started with a discussion of the main foreign-policy schools of thought in the IRI by developing the account offered by Farhi and Lotfian, whose categorization we followed: Islamic Idealists; in the regional geopolitical arena, Offensive and Defensive Realists; and regarding the positions held towards the U.S., Accommodationists and Confrontationists. Delving into some important foreign-policy controversies during the period of investigation (from the 2000s until the early 2010s), we mapped the convergences and divergences between each school’s prescripts displayed in their preferences and priorities in foreign policy, both in terms of preferred alliances and in terms of tactics. While they all claim to share the desire to safeguard Iranian sovereignty and independence while improving its regional and global standing, the analysis showed important differences as to how to achieve those objectives. Here, we have seen a vast range of opinions, with varying mixtures of Idealism and Realism. While the more ideological schools (Islamic Idealists, Offensive Realist Regional Balancers and Global Rejectionists) have a power-projection rationale that is predicated upon various Islamism-rooted geopolitical imaginations locating Iran’s geopolitical power-base in the Muslim-majority world, Defensive Realists regard such an outlook inapt to generate sufficient geopolitical leverage in an international system that is still largely dominated by the West. As the ensuing analysis revealed, the latter school’s view was more reflective of the realities of world order at the outset of the twenty-first century.

Chapter 6 analysed Iran's international relations of the first half of the 2000s in the face of U.S. imperial hubris, where we examined its reactions to the dual threat posed to national security and regime survival. In this context, we suggested that the issue of which foreign-policy school prevails is a result of deliberations among the political élite, contingent on geopolitical circumstances and the nature of perceived threats. While the U.S. post-"9/11" drive for "regime change" in Afghanistan forged élite consensus to rely on Defensive Realism to provide assistance to Washington in toppling the equally inimical Taliban regime, also to pave the way for a strategic opening with the U.S., President George W. Bush's January 2002 "axis of evil" speech buried such expectations, which had effectively identified Iran as a potential target for another military "regime change". As such, Tehran's "axis of evil" "reward" for its crucial if not indispensable role towards the removal of the Taliban regime and the establishment of a post-Taliban order in Afghanistan was blamed on the Defensive Realists' shortcoming of not having demanded reciprocity from Washington. In this vein, and despite the élite-consensus nature of which foreign-policy school to follow, the conservatives used this opportunity for factional competition against the reformist Khatami administration that was accused to have lost all credibility in the critical fields of national security and foreign policy. Thus, conservative factions were provided with a golden opportunity to kill two birds with one stone: On foreign policy, they pointed to the alleged vacuity of a win-win rationale of this Defensive Realist approach, which was very much in line with the Khatami administration's overall foreign-policy preference (e.g. President Khatami's 1999 "dialogue of civilizations"), in the face of U.S. imperialism, hence concluding that a zero-sum game was the only viable means to effectively counter U.S. power; domestically, the conservatives were able to more easily push back against the reformists' political agenda. As a consequence of the Defensive Realists' fiasco, élite consensus opted to favour Offensive Realist arguments that ultimately came to shape Iran's post-Iraq invasion regional strategy. Highlighting outside-inside dynamics, the fallout from the "axis of evil" speech paved the way for the supremacy of more hardline factions over domestic and foreign policy for years to come. Hence, domestically, this episode consisting of the danger posed to the security of the nation and that of the system by U.S. neo-conservative belligerence and intense hardline opposition against the reformists, democratic aspirations took a back seat while a process of securitization was boosted.

Chapter 7 continued the discussion of Iran's international relations from the mid-2000s onwards, when regional geopolitics had turned to Iran's favour. On the one hand, the U.S. military "regime change" invasions had toppled anti-Iranian governments in Baghdad and Kabul, which were replaced by governments friendly to Tehran and the U.S. occupation force alike. On the other, Iran's new Offensive Realist strategy, mainly relying on asymmetrical and proxy warfare, gave support to groups in both countries resisting the U.S.-led occupations, yet making sure the Iranian-friendly governments in post-invasion Iraq and Afghanistan remained in place. Thus, it succeeded in its aim to deter the U.S. from attacking Iran, as the U.S. neo-conservatives as well as Israel were hoping to do.

Against the background of an aggressive U.S. posture towards Iran and the nuclear crisis (both phenomena emerging in 2002) where Western powers adopted a strategy of "coercive diplomacy" (consisting of U.S. and Israeli threats of war, an intransigent posture in the nuclear negotiations and an increasingly crippling sanctions regime), by the mid-2000s Iran's alienation towards the West became so deep-seated so that it opened the way for the adoption of a "Look to the East" policy with the Ahmadinejad administration taking office. Pushed away geopolitically by the West with the EU joining U.S. policy in the nuclear dispute, Iran's new foreign-policy orientation was geared towards establishing strategic links with Asia's great-powers, whereby Tehran hoped to counterbalance Western pressure. However, the "Look to the East" policy turned out to be a futile endeavour, since the very configuration of the world order did not permit the realization of Iran's expectations. Here, assessing the extent of U.S. power amid the omnipresent discourse of a new full-fledged multipolar world order was central, with the then-dominating foreign-policy schools of thought (Offensive Realists and Global Rejectionists), arguably blinded by their regional successes, mistakenly adopted the view of a decisive if not ultimate U.S. decline. However, the geography of power within that emerging post-unipolar world order was of a different sort. Despite the undeniable shift of the globe's economic centre of gravity towards Asia's great-powers, the U.S. still assumed an unrivalled (geo-)political pole position, commanding over the decisive means of global power. The unilateral power at Washington's disposal was soon forcefully demonstrated when by the latter half of the 2000s it succeeded in weaving an unprecedented international sanctions regime against Iran. Assuming the second tier in the international pecking order, Russia, China and India's relations with Iran turned out to be effectively a function of their more vital

relations with Washington. This constellation of what we proposed to call Imperial Interpolarity left Iran with little leverage to either confront Western pressures and/or Asian great-powers' exploitation of that situation. As a case in point, in exchange for a close nuclear and military partnership with the U.S., India with its two unprecedented anti-Iran votes at the IAEA's Board of Governors (in 2005 and 2006) opened the way for Iran's nuclear file to be "handed over" to the UN Security Council. There, U.S.-driven sanctions resolutions were imposed on Iran while the other two Asian great-powers Russia and China became increasingly explicit—despite their rhetoric to the contrary—in granting support to the transatlantic "coercive diplomacy" wherein they sought to promote their own benefit, particularly in the context of sanctions. For instance, Russia—after having voted itself in favour of these Security Council sanctions—announced that a country placed under precisely those sanctions could not become a full-member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

The analytical focus then shifted onto the Iran sanctions regime and its multifaceted domestic as well as international effects. While we mainly made reference to the effects of sanctions as identified by the general sanctions literature, we stressed the need for further research into the specificities of the Iranian case. Domestically, we argued that the sanctions widened the power gap between the state and society, with the former tending to externalize their costs, discursively and materially, onto the latter. Regarding sanctions' impact on Iranian foreign policy during the nuclear crisis, our analysis showed that it provided for continuity but also change, the latter occurring as a result of sanctions becoming crippling, leading to a change in Tehran's cost-benefit calculations that ultimately opened the way for diplomatic engagement. Internationally, they translated into significant geo-economic and consequently geopolitical costs, as Iran was increasingly blocked from a variety of avenues indispensable to realize its own (geo-)economic interests. In fact, this dire situation in which Iran had found itself by the end of the 2000s was not least the result of the successful implementation of U.S. unilateral power globally.

### EMPIRICAL AND THEORETICAL FINDINGS

Throughout the study, attempts were made to heed the analytical requests formulated, to varying degrees, by Critical Iranian Studies (i.e. diversifying our understanding of Iran and its international relations), Critical Geopolitics (i.e. critically scrutinizing geopolitical worldviews, especially

when sanctioned by the state, as well as pluralizing them) and Iranian foreign-policy studies (i.e. exploring both external–internal and structure–culture interplays) and a concern derived from our discussion of theories of IR and geopolitics, namely the role of ideational and/or material factors in the agent’s behaviour in foreign affairs.

*On the Role of World-Order Constellations and Its Perception  
in Shaping Iran’s International Relations*

The study has shown that Iran’s international relations have been marked by the constant interplay between Iranian geopolitical culture on one side and international geopolitical structure (i.e. the characteristics of the international system) on the other. In fact, every Iranian encounter with the outside world has (re-)shaped its evolving worldview. And the way in which Iran comprehended the world order also (re-)shaped its own foreign-policy approach—a process which in the latter half of the 2000s was increasingly accompanied by miscalculations and structural limits posed to Iranian foreign policy.

It has been demonstrated that the international Iran conflict and the West’s “coercive diplomacy” has gone through different phases, affecting the nature of the conflict itself by making an exclusive focus on the U.S.–Iran stand-off insufficient for a comprehensive analysis of its stakes and prospects. We argued that the configuration of the world order, especially great-power behaviour, has contributed to the resilience of the decade-long conflict, beyond the already established observation of an Iranian–American institutionalized enmity with hardline elements on both sides having a stake in sustaining the conflict rather than resolving it.

In this vein, the *first half* of the 2000s was marked by a belligerent U.S. posture towards Iran, driven by the neo-conservative Bush/Cheney administration and maintained by powerful vested interests in the U.S., the EU and Israel. Iran for its part fell victim to a significant strategic miscalculation when placing its bets on an alleged “inter-imperial” rivalry between the U.S. and the EU, thus failing to recognize the cohesiveness of the “Atlantic Alliance” at a time when the latter viewed itself pitted against rising Asian challengers to Western global hegemony. Disappointed over the EU’s increasing adoption of the hardline U.S. stance on the nuclear issue and the consequent failure of the negotiations with the EU-3, by the mid-2000s Iran decided to turn towards Asian countries to its east in an effort to counterbalance Western pressures and attempts at

isolating it economically. The *latter half* of the decade brought to the fore basic tenets of the emerging new world order. Iran's "Look to the East" policy turned out to be a largely futile strategy as a way to guard against international pressures because Tehran both underestimated the global leverage the U.S. still possessed and mistook the central role Washington still assumed for Asia's great-powers, which turned out to be a decisive element for the latter's stances on Iran. Finally, the study maintained that a decade into the "nuclear crisis", the continuation of the "coercive diplomacy" had become a product of a quasi-consensus between Western and Eastern great-powers, which helped avoid the emergence of Iran as the internationally recognized pivotal power in West Asia, potentially representing a challenge to the interests of all the great-powers in that crucial area of the world. As a result, by the end of the 2000s, the Iran conflict had become more stabilized, before it entered a new phase with the 2012 secret U.S.–Iran talks in Oman and subsequently under the Rouhani administration (2013–).

Therefore, from the mid-2000s to the early 2010s the international Iran conflict had essentially become a conflict *par excellence* of the Imperial Interpolar constellation of world order. While trying to capitalize on what it misleadingly saw as the multipolarity of the global order, Iran has ignored the other side of the coin of that emerging new world order, i.e. deepening interdependence between the globe's established and (re-) emerging great-powers as well as the power inequalities inhibiting the international system where the U.S. had still been its prime power. As such, the study provided an additional explanation of the salience of the international Iran conflict beyond the thus-far diagnosed Iranian–American institutionalized enmity.

### *Ideational and/or Material? On the Material and Geopolitical Significance of Identity Constructions*

At the beginning of our study, we laid out the Constructivist argument which we followed only to a certain extent, as we added the possibility of *material* factors driving agents' *ideational* preferences. Throughout our study, we have found many instances that display the material significance of identity markers and constructions, be it for domestic-power considerations (including politico-economic interests) or for geopolitical power projection. These have been reflected in our discussions on the Islamization of Iran's post-revolutionary political and foreign-policy culture, with the

Khomeinists' fervent claim to state power as most forcefully illustrated in the position taken on the U.S. embassy seizure (Chap. 3-A); the geopolitical imaginations of Iran's various political cultures and their corresponding realms (Chap. 3-B); the ideological grounding of IRI's political economy, separating regime insiders from outsiders (Chap. 4-A); the IRI's dominant political and geopolitical culture as constructed by the political élite around the notion of "Islamic-Iranian", intimately connected to the disqualification and "othering" of the other politico-ideological formation of socialism primarily due to the danger posed by the latter's politico-economic ideas (Chap. 4-B); the foreign-policy schools of thought in the IRI and their respective preferred realms for power projection (Chap. 5-B and C); and, to an approximate degree, the sky-rocketing Irano-Chinese trade volumes in the wake of Western sanctions and its benefits for groups associated with the dominant ruling alliance, thus reducing the probability of their political advocacy towards the end of the sanctions regime (Chap. 7-B).

These examples do not necessarily translate into the case of material motivations assuming primacy over ideational ones in agents' behaviour towards foreign affairs. Rather our listing can be regarded as tentative towards such an explanation, for conclusive statements can only be made after a systematic exploration of all the cases in question—an endeavour that was beyond the scope of this study, but worth being examined in any future research (see the section below on "Ideas on Future Research"). In conclusion, we can state that the question of the most decisive factor in driving agent's behaviour is also contingent on one's view of whether the geopolitics of structure or the geopolitics of culture assumes primacy in structuring our world.

Regarding the query on the role of culture versus structure, we showed that, on the one hand, Iran's foreign policy is strongly embedded in its geopolitical culture that has crucially been shaped by its historical encounters with (semi-)colonialism. It is this historically nurtured spirit that has routinely accompanied the Islamic Republic's dealings with the international system's most powerful actors, albeit to varying degrees. On the other hand, the international system's geopolitical structure can decisively impact upon Iran's foreign-policy behaviours (as seen in Iran's accommodationist reactions to U.S. "regime change" invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq) as well as pose significant limits to Iranian geo-political and -economic options (as can be witnessed in its entanglement within Imperial Interpolarity).

*External–Internal and Internal–External Dynamics: Impacting  
the Trajectory of Iran’s International Relations and Its State–  
Society Complex*

The study also highlighted external–internal dynamics on Iran’s international relations and its state–society complex, yet without deifying their prowess given important domestic power considerations as part of the equation (or internal–external dynamics). Here, we have detected a number of important cases regarding the interplay between the outside and inside realms: The positions taken by various foreign-policy schools of thought can vary upon evolutions in strategic thinking caused by experiences made in foreign affairs or by changes in regional and international geopolitical arenas (Chap. 5–B and C); Iran’s international relations post-“9/11” with the unprecedented levels of foreign pressure—permanent threats of war and severe sanctions—have impacted the rise and fall of specific foreign-policy schools of thought, ultimately hardening Iran’s foreign-policy posture, as well as the trajectory of the state–society complex in widening the power gap between the state and society (Chap. 6); and the experiences in foreign affairs during the first half of the 2000s paved the way for the “Look to the East” policy, shaping Iran’s international relations, its development trajectory and its state–society complex (Chap. 7). Although our attention mainly lied on how external developments have shaped Iran, we have conversely indicated the prowess of domestic élite interests and how external actors and eventually policies were also affected by Iranian behaviour, most notably in the context of Iran’s Offensive Realist posture in occupied Iraq and Afghanistan that was perceived as aggressive and threatening to the status-quo.<sup>1</sup>

These examples provide the ground for arguing that there is indeed a strong element of outside–inside and inside–outside dynamics that cannot

<sup>1</sup>For more on that side of the coin, see Ansari (2006) who has evoked the centrality of reciprocity in the context of Iranian–Western relations, where he has demonstrated that Iran’s culturally inspired rhetoric, while in many cases barely taken seriously by its own policy-makers for its effects on foreign relations (as for them its purpose that it is often geared towards domestic consumption is all the more obvious), has been readily consumed in the West, e.g. in the cases of the U.S. embassy seizure, Khomeini’s *fatwa* against author Salman Rushdie and the Mykonos trials, which all in turn fostered Iran’s image as an irrational and extremist state. This in turn led Western political élites to perceive Iran’s behaviour as detached from any Realist conceptions and concomitantly to evade cooperation (as first proposed by the Hashemi-Rafsanjani administration)—a view exacerbated by public sentiments in the West.

be ignored in any discussions involving one of the above subjects. However, it would be misleading to conclude that they necessarily amount to cases of “mutual constitution”, as, for example, Iranian actors can instrumentalize foreign pressure in order to pursue strategies driven by their own ideological or material considerations, i.e. without objectively verifiable structural constraints to do so.

### REFLECTIONS ON THE STUDY’S FINDINGS: PROSPECTS FOR IRAN’S DEVELOPMENT AND INDEPENDENCE

Given the difficulties faced in Iran’s international relations after the mid-2000s in the face of Imperial Interpolarity and the sanctions regime, we observed that the revival of Defensive Realist thinking in 2013 with the coming to power of an administration led by President Hassan Rouhani (a centrist in domestic politics) with Mohammad-Javad Zarif as Foreign Minister, both considered Defensive Realists in foreign affairs. The following reflections do not intend to discuss the new administration’s foreign policy in detail. Rather, the study’s findings shall be revisited here, in terms of the themes of independence and development, whose prospects were heavily affected by the stalemate in which Iran’s international relations were entrapped by the end of the 2000s. To do so, we make recourse to a template for an Iranian “grand strategy” that was initiated in 1999 by the Expediency Council and published in the mid-2000s, the realization of which has so far failed to materialize—the reason why we have not considered it in the study’s chapters.<sup>2</sup>

#### *The 2025 Outlook: Template for a Twenty-First-Century Grand Strategy*

In March 2005, Supreme Leader Khamenei issued a widely publicized and binding document titled “Outlook of the Islamic Republic of Iran by 2025” (*Cheshm’andâz-e Jomhouri-e Eslâmi-e Irân dar ofoq-e 1404*, henceforth referred to as the Outlook).<sup>3</sup> Combining Iran’s post-war goal of economic reconstruction with new-found international ambitions,

<sup>2</sup> A version of the following discussion has been published as: Fathollah-Nejad, Ali 2020 ‘Revisiting Rouhani’s School of Thought: A Critical Discussion of its Developmental and Foreign Policy Doctrines’, in: Zaccara, Luciano (ed.) *Foreign Policy of Iran under President Hassan Rouhani’s First Term (2013–2017)*, Singapore: Palgrave Macmillan, pp. 43–56.

<sup>3</sup> See Mirza-Amini 2005; and the Outlook’s predecessor: Islamic Republic of Iran Expediency Council 2002.

its preamble posits that by 2025, i.e. after the completion of four five-year development plans, Iran would be a fully advanced country, assuming the pole position among 28 countries in West Asia and North Africa in terms of economic, scientific and technological indicators. At the same time, Iran would be a country with an Islamic and revolutionary identity that provides an inspiration for the Islamic world, while it would engage in constructive interaction in its international relations. In other words, what we have here is a peculiar combination between Islamic Idealism and Defensive Realism, where we can assume that the former has been reaffirmed because of its presumed power-projection prowess as well as its central domestic function, while the operational focus clearly lies on the latter. Thus, despite the reaffirmation of the IRI's revolutionary Islamic credentials, the Outlook conceives a development pattern predicated upon economic indicators and not necessarily ideological tenets. The link between the goals of economic development and improvement of international standing is reflected in the claim that in the contemporary world of globalization the key sources of power lie in the economic, scientific and technological realms—a Defensive Realist conviction that does not include ideology as a chief source of power as Offensive Realists or Islamic Idealists would posit.

To reach those objectives, the Outlook envisages the realization of a number of economic goals: fast and sustainable economic growth; durable employment opportunities; rising productivity; active presence in regional and international markets; a diversified and knowledge-based economy; elimination of inflation; food security; and an economic environment conducive to domestic and international entrepreneurship.

To facilitate the realization of those goals, the Expediency Council and its think-tank CSR have consulted Iranian experts to devise the tasks of both domestic and foreign policy towards that end. Given the large degree of consensus between these expert opinions, our brief account in the following can be regarded as representative.<sup>4</sup> According to those experts, the government should aim at creating the conditions for economic liberalization and privatization, thus providing the basis for an outward-oriented economy which is deemed necessary because of insufficient domestic resources for attaining those development goals. This should include the stimulation of market forces, especially the expansion of private-sector activities. Overall, a conducive environment should be provided, including

<sup>4</sup> See the volume edited by Vaezi (2008).

the rule of law and a more equitable distribution of state resources among various market forces. A key enabler in this regard would be the revised Article 44 of the Constitution that paves the way for an accelerated process of privatization, whose complete implementation, as urged by the Supreme Leader, should be viewed by the authorities as a form of *jihad*.<sup>5</sup>

The Outlook's underlying assumptions have been laid out by former long-time CSR president (1992–2013) Rouhani in his *National Security and Economic System of Iran* (in Persian), published in August 2010. He argues that development, security and stable international relations are intrinsically interconnected. In a first step, he maintains that development and security are correlated:

Economic growth and sustainable development will make the country more secure and will make it more powerful when confronting security challenges. This is why developing countries have more limited capacities than developed countries to provide for their security.<sup>6</sup>

He then adds the aspect of stable international relations, which he defines as the prerequisite for economic development:

There is a close correlation between economic development and political stability, which means maintaining dialogue and friendly relations with the outside world. As stable international relations pave the ground for economic development, in turn economic development renders a country more secure or stable as it makes the country less vulnerable to external threats. Thus, there is a positive correlation, akin to a virtuous cycle, between the objective of economic development and the policy of establishing or maintaining friendly relations with the outside world.<sup>7</sup>

Rouhani's account is an implicit rejection of a revolutionary foreign policy that is per his own definition inadequate to produce stability in the IRI's international relations. Moreover, among those three core elements, the concept of national security—being omnipresent throughout the book—is arguably the central concern, from which the need for economic development facilitated by stable international relations is derived. The primacy of national security in that model can certainly be read in various ways

<sup>5</sup> Ibid.; Khamenei 2007.

<sup>6</sup> Rouhani 2010: 33.

<sup>7</sup> Ibid.: 4.

(after all Rouhani himself has been one of the chief national-security figures in the IRI's history), one of which would be to convince groups sympathizing with schools other than Defensive Realism to follow the latter's recommendations due to overarching "national security" or "regime survival" considerations.

### *Developmentalist Foreign Policy: Objectives and Requirements*

In order to specify the tasks of foreign policy in the effort to achieve the Outlook's development goals, the concept of a "developmentalist foreign policy" (*siâsat-e khâreji-e tose'e-garâ*, henceforth referred to as DFP) was elaborated by the CSR.<sup>8</sup> DFP's prime terrains can be summarized as economic diplomacy, détente and constructive engagement (*ta'âmol-e sâzandeh*).

As to the economy-related objectives, foreign policy by way of economic diplomacy should aim to attract investment,<sup>9</sup> gain access to latest technology and pave the way for accessing regional and international markets.<sup>10</sup> Accordingly, establishing links with three sorts of countries should be prioritized: Iran's neighbours, Asia and the rest of the world. On the regional level, collaboration should be sought in order to promote peace and economic exchange as well as competition. Since Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey constitute the most important economies of the region, collaboration between them (especially in the field of energy) would render the emergence of a North–South axis possible, connecting Iran to the EU and Central Asia on one side and to West Asia and North Africa on the other. Ideally, this axis should replace the Iran–Russia axis, which is seen as not having benefitted Iran. On the Asian level, in the short-term, economic relations with China, India and other South Asian countries—all of them in need of oil, gas and petrochemical products—can establish the bases for an eventual reciprocal access to each other's markets. Meanwhile, a long-term strategic tie with China should be envisaged, which could provide Iran with investments and mid-level technologies, while offering

<sup>8</sup> See Vaezi 2008. The term, however, might be misleading as developmentalism in the usual sense refers to a politico-economic theory emerged in the Third World that posits the need for a strong domestic economy sheltered from malign external influences through high tariffs on imports. What DFP signifies here is rather a development-oriented foreign policy, but we will use that term nevertheless as Iranian scholars themselves do so.

<sup>9</sup> Saadat 2008.

<sup>10</sup> Mousavi-Shafae 2009.

a suitable market for Iranian products. It is also deemed necessary to build economic ties with Japan, especially to provide Iran with high-tech. Regarding relations with the rest of the world, distinction is made between developed and developing countries. While ties with the former should enable Iran to attract investments and access to latest technologies, those with the latter—especially Muslim-majority countries in Africa—should aim at creating markets for Iranian products and eventually services. Relations with other Muslim countries with an intermediate level of development, such as Malaysia and Egypt, should pave the way for accessing their markets and fostering trade links.<sup>11</sup>

As to the conduct of foreign-policy, DFP is effectively the reflection of the Defensive Realist school of thought. In this vein, as we have just seen, DFP advocates a foreign policy that seeks a reduction of tensions (*détente*) and constructive engagement with the world, with the guiding principle of producing win-win outcomes. Also, it vehemently opposes in particular the Ahmadinejad administration's style and in general the Offensive Realist and Global Rejectionist approaches mainly on grounds that they have deterred important international actors from seeking closer links with Iran, without which the Outlook's objectives could not be reached, as maintained by Rouhani in 2008.<sup>12</sup> Or as argued by Mahmoud Vaezi, then the CSR's Deputy of Foreign Policy and International Relations, revisiting the Outlook's key objectives would clearly show that they cannot be reached through a confrontational attitude towards the world order but most consistently through constructive engagement, embracing the elements of impartiality, accommodation (*hamráh-sâzi*), productive agreements and normalization of relations.<sup>13</sup>

### *Economic Development, National Security and Foreign Policy: A Critical Reading of the Proposed Development Model*

Taking into account the peculiar domestic and international situation of the IRI and the experiences by other countries with a similar development agenda helps identify the Outlook's conceptual merits and pitfalls. In Iranian discussions on the Outlook, the cases of other countries that are seen to be at a similar level of development, such as Turkey, Egypt, Brazil,

<sup>11</sup> Zanganeh 2008; Mirza-Amini 2005.

<sup>12</sup> Rouhani 2008.

<sup>13</sup> Vaezi 2008.

Malaysia but also India and China, are studied. The Outlook basically favours a neoliberal economic model, with its advocacy for liberalization and privatization as the economy's main organizing principles, coupled with the prioritization of a fast-paced economic growth over sustainability.<sup>14</sup> These aims should be facilitated by a DFP oriented towards détente and rapprochement with the rest of the world.

In fact, such an economic and foreign-policy agenda displays stark similarities with that of Turkey under the Islamic conservative AKP government during this study's period of investigation. Adopting a neoliberal economic model at home with a social base composed of a "devout bourgeoisie",<sup>15</sup> the AKP government has devised a foreign policy guided by the doctrine of "strategic depth" developed by Ahmet Davutoğlu, an academic turned politician (serving as Turkey's Foreign Minister between 1 May 2009 and 29 August 2014).<sup>16</sup> "Strategic depth" includes five principles, which echo some of the above DFP propositions such as "constructive engagement": Outreach to all surrounding regions; pro-active diplomacy premised on a "zero problem" and "maximum integration" policy towards all neighbours; presence in surrounding theatres of conflict in order to influence the developments there; equidistance vis-à-vis all actors and non-partisanship; as well as inclusion and mobilization of civil society and the economy into foreign policy.<sup>17</sup> A key objective of Turkey's model is to provide access for its firms to regional and international markets, seen as a way to enhance its "soft power". With this strategy it strives to be among the world's top ten economies by 2023—the

<sup>14</sup> As Farhi (2013) maintains, the Rouhani administration's economic team also reflects a belief in a neoliberal economic model: '[T]he desire to get state organs out of the economy seems to be the glue that holds together a largely neo-liberal economic team. It is one of the strange ironies of Iranian politics that the leftists of the 1980s were turned politically reformist and economically mostly neo-liberal in the late 1990s and continue to be so. It is true that the reaction Mohammad Khatami's neoliberal policies elicited in the form of Ahmadinejad's justice-oriented populism—at least rhetorically—has now been acknowledged and the economic policies pursued will try to strike a balance between "development" and "justice" and not simply assume that development will lead to the downward trickling of wealth. But the thrust of Rouhani's center-reformist economic appointments indicates more concern with production and productivity in both the industrial and agricultural sectors.' For similar arguments, see Seyf 2014.

<sup>15</sup> Gümüşçü and Sert 2009; Gümüşçü 2010.

<sup>16</sup> That is also the title of his 2001 book *Stratejik Derinlik: Türkiye'nin Uluslararası Konumu*.

<sup>17</sup> Gürbey 2010.

centennial anniversary of the Turkish Republic.<sup>18</sup> In comparison to Turkey, Iranian commentators contend that Iran's international linkages are much weaker than Turkey and also Egypt's, while the specific external alliances Iran has barely help reach its development goals.<sup>19</sup>

Keeping the Turkish model in mind, we can observe that Iran's Outlook embraces an economic development model that is predicated upon a specific reading of globalization, deriving basically from accounts by experts associated with the Defensive Realist school. These pundits almost exclusively focus on economic growth figures while neglecting their socio-economic ramifications in particular and the uneven nature of globalization in general. Specifically, they fail to look into the "black box" of (re-) emerging economic powerhouses. It is conventionally stated that in following neoliberal economic models, these countries have witnessed impressive economic growth rates with considerable parts of their populations having experienced socio-economic upward mobility. Ignored, however, is that this tendency has been accompanied by the equally significant phenomenon of social polarization and consequently social frustration over an uneven distribution of the newly acquired wealth. Such socio-economic disparities could be witnessed in China, where in 2010 labour unrest swept over the country;<sup>20</sup> in India, where still a large portion of the population lives in poverty and where reactionary nationalisms have been on the rise; in Brazil and Turkey, where large-scale anti-government protests erupted in 2013.<sup>21</sup>

In fact, it can be argued that domestic unrest fuelled by socio-economic disparities and authoritarian rule does not leave foreign policy untouched. *First*, it tarnishes the oftentimes positive image of rising powers (predicated upon the debatable common view of capitalism and liberal democracy as indivisible couple), thus potentially undermining a country's "soft power" projection capabilities. *Second*, as the cases of China (whose leadership is increasingly concerned with the possibility of grave internal disruptions) and Turkey illustrate, internal problems can turn the political élite's focus to the domestic scene, thus reducing much-needed capacities for a pro-active foreign policy. The Turkish case, for example, illustrates the potential fallouts from outside-inside dynamics: One of the

<sup>18</sup> See Erdoğan and Yildirim 2013; MacLeod 2012.

<sup>19</sup> Hafezian 2008.

<sup>20</sup> See Straszheim 2008; Wacker 2002: 4; Simarro 2011.

<sup>21</sup> See Saad-Filho 2013; Yörük 2013; İğsız 2013. See also *Jadaliyya* 2013.

consequences of the 2013 anti-AKP protests (the so-called Gezi Park protests) was that they helped put a brake to the unbridled continuation of then-Prime Minister Erdoğan's Syria policy.<sup>22</sup> In sum, the very phenomenon of rising economies, all of them following neoliberal prescripts in various shades, carries the risk of internal divisions as a result of deepening socio-economic cleavages disrupting the chances of foreign-policy power projection.

Despite such a hypothesis on the potential downsides of the proposed strategy, Iran's Outlook and the concomitant DFP undoubtedly include corrective aspects. Arguably the most important one concerns the effort both to de-ideologize foreign policy and to define it as serving the purpose of domestic economic development. That constitutes a meaningful step towards the widely noticed absence of properly defining Iranian "national interests". As alluded to earlier, the Outlook's principles are, as Walter Posch correctly observes,

for the first time putting the goals of growth and prosperity on a par with the radical ideals laid down as the guiding principles of the constitution. This signifies more than just pragmatism or expediency (*maslahat*), for which ideological positions would not need to be forfeited, and constitutes a real prioritisation of national interests over revolutionary axioms in foreign policy.<sup>23</sup>

This significant valorization of objectives of an economic nature and thereby the relative degradation of those of an ideological nature has ramifications on the relationship between "national interest" and "regime survival", suggesting the possibility that the latter might move towards taking a back-seat as the focus will shift on more objectively verifiable criteria predicated upon economic development figures.

However, such a hypothesis needs to be further scrutinized through a closer look at the development agenda, for which we will return to Rouhani's above-mentioned book. Such an 'Iranian-Islamic development' project, he writes, shall transform the IRI into a country that is 'advanced, secure and that has the smallest class divisions', which could only be achieved by a 'strategy of competitive production'.<sup>24</sup> If we take into account that the economic model envisaged in the Outlook is the

<sup>22</sup> See, for example, Fraser and Emiroğlu 2013; Tepper 2013; Adilgızı 2013.

<sup>23</sup> Posch 2013a: 20.

<sup>24</sup> Rouhani 2010: 35.

acceleration of neoliberalism, his suggestion that this would constitute a prerequisite for a reduction of class divisions is misleading. In fact, on the one hand, proponents of the Outlook agenda proclaim the aim to multiply the variety of economic actors that would engage in economic activities by providing them with better access to state resources. On the other, also in Rouhani's book there is no conception of a truly free entrepreneurship. Rather the argument can be read as one calling that the economy should be opened to wider sections of the political élite through enhanced privatizations who then would all engage in "competitive production" requiring reduced production costs to the detriment of labour. Therefore, it could rather be suggested that the pursuit of such a development pattern with its aim to involve more élite groups (and not free entrepreneurs) is ultimately geared towards safeguarding "regime survival" through fortifying and expanding its economic base.

*Is There a Way Out of the Imperial Interpolar Trap?  
Developmentalist Foreign Policy and the Fate  
of the Independence Leitmotiv*

Adding to the discussions on Iran in world politics, the study has maintained that in the period under investigation Iran's international relations have increasingly been characterized by the Imperial Interpolar world-order constellation, which can have far-reaching consequences for the pursuit of its "national interests", most notably affecting its prospects for development (domestic and international) and its independence vis-à-vis great-powers (both "Western" and "Eastern"). As concluded in Chap. 7, Iran had found itself entrapped within an Imperial Interpolar constellation in which it was geopolitically rejected by the West but not geopolitically integrated into the East. Vis-à-vis the latter (as the cases of Russia and China have shown), it has found itself giving more concessions than obtaining benefits in return. Therefore, we have suggested the possibility that new patterns of dependency towards those "Eastern" great-powers were emerging, since repelling them would not be a viable option for Iran.

Against this backdrop, taking Iran's historically grown desire for independence into account, the question that imposes itself is *how to safeguard independence in an interdependent world?* In 2008, Ramazani has rightly emphasized that in an interdependent world there is no such thing as absolute independence but rather degrees of dependence:

[A]wareness of the limits of Iranian power to be absolutely independent must be deepened, because the evolution of the objective world is fast leaving behind the complete sovereign independence of nations. The quest for an independent foreign policy in today's dot.com world in the end must continue to cope with degrees of dependence. Today there is immense demand for scientific knowledge and technical expertise. How independent are energy-dependent powerful industrial democracies? How independent are capital- and know-how-starved less-developed countries? [...] Such a pace of change is bound to produce a world of such interdependence that to underestimate its impact on life could amount to committing national suicide.<sup>25</sup>

In other words, a fervent, ideological adherence to an abstract notion of absolute independence within an interdependent world would necessarily have multiple negative consequences for national development. Such realization is shared by a DFP which, upon noting that there is an unprecedented level of international interdependence today, holds that this makes it impossible to further rely on past self-reliant economic development models that were conceived to even function in isolation to the outside world. This is why a DFP posits that an opening to and active engagement with the world would be indispensable.

Now, if deepening relations within an increasingly multipolar world are the order of the day, what shape do they take? Here, the distinction between alliance and alignment needs to be addressed. As Parag Khanna has stressed,

Rather than a world of alliances, it's a world of *multi*-alignment. Globalization means never having to choose sides. Look at the Persian Gulf [Arab] states. They make big-ticket arms deals with Washington, buying weapons to recycle their petrodollars and deter Iran; sign huge trade agreements with China, where ever more of their oil flows; and negotiate currency arrangements with the European Union. If there is any doubt as to the general lack of foresight that governs international relations today, just consider how America has ceased certain joint weapons production with Israel as punishment for Israel's selling sensitive technology to China, which in turn sells missile technologies to Iran.<sup>26</sup>

<sup>25</sup> Ramazani 2008: 10–11.

<sup>26</sup> Khanna 2010.

As in the Indian case, Iran's option would therefore lie in pursuing "strategic independence" through multi-alignment based on bilateral arrangements. However, as we discussed in the case of India, such a policy is not free from contradictions and tensions, since some bilateral ties might be privileged over others. For Iran to pursue multi-alignment in order to carve out space to safeguard its desire for independence, the prerequisite here would be that there are willing counterparts for such multiple alignments. In other words, even if Iran prepares the domestic ground to accept the notion of calibrating its foreign policy towards different degrees of dependence as well as engages in the pursuit of a multi-alignment policy, this does not necessarily mean that it will succeed in doing so. For the main challenge lies in the international arena, and here the very configuration of Imperial Interpolarity presents a potentially salient stumbling block.<sup>27</sup>

Another dimension of the problem of safeguarding independence is related to the domestic context. As we have seen in the case of China–Iran relations, there are powerful Iranian domestic constituencies who benefit from the status-quo marked by a sanctions-induced orientation towards China as well as the concomitant preservation of an authoritarian polity when aligning with a like-minded autocracy. Corroborating that logic, Ramazani has maintained that a democratic polity is a necessary precondition guarding against dependency:

Iranian political culture shows a "freedom deficit" that lies at the heart of arbitrary laws and injustice. In turn the breakdown of the rule of law and politicized judiciary will ultimately undercut Iran's ability to maintain its independence in world politics. The first Iranian constitution and the present one postulate that freedom and independence are inseparable. But in reality, freedom has not fared well. This striking phenomenon cannot easily be explained, although one might conjecture that Iran's geo-strategic environment and its oil and gas resources have invited foreign invasion, occupation and intervention. As a result, protecting Iran's independence and security has often taken priority over the promotion of freedom.<sup>28</sup>

In other words, a more open political climate (e.g. like the one in India) would allow for domestic debates about foreign-policy orientations, which could critically discuss the ramifications of specific foreign-policy

<sup>27</sup> On "multi-diplomacy", see Mojahedi 2013.

<sup>28</sup> Ramazani 2008: 12.

preferences by any of the political élite's factions for the wider population's well-being and the country's overall development. Also, democratization would significantly change the international image of Iran and potentially help its bargaining power vis-à-vis great-powers in its bid to retain the highest possible level of interdependence, especially given Western powers' occasional tendency towards instrumentalizing human rights in order to generate political pressure.

### IDEAS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

As a way to further deepen the present study's analytical foci, the following fields of enquiry might be of interest for future research: (1) Monitoring the evolution of Iran's foreign-policy schools of thought during the Rouhani administration is worth being pursued, which will deepen our analytical understanding and even test the adequacy of the categorizations offered so far. One could particularly monitor and analyse the administration's and the schools' assessments and policy preferences regarding regional (e.g. the post-2011 Syrian crisis or Defensive Realism's ambition to markedly improve ties with Saudi Arabia) and international issues (above all the way in which Iran has coped with Imperial Interpolarity during the new chapter of its negotiations with the P5+1, where there are hints of a multilateral diplomacy trying to get various great-powers on board—through various offers of cooperation or potentially concessions—to support a diplomatic settlement at the core of which would stand improved Iran–U.S. ties and eventually the end of sanctions). It should also be assessed whether the emerging new world order in the 2010s can still be meaningfully conceived as Imperial Interpolarity, or if that concept needs to be modified so as to integrate new global geopolitical dynamics (as e.g. witnessed in the post-2013/14 NATO–Russia antagonism over Ukraine) or even replaced. (2) A politico-economic analysis of the sources of and reasons for the Iranian élite's preferences in terms of geopolitical orientation, with a special emphasis on the respective factions' political and economic stakes involved, would be an immensely fruitful task. (3) Related to that, regarding our query into the primacy of ideational or material factors in the agent's foreign-policy behaviour, it might be advisable to explore the analytical and methodological tools of a Marxist or historical-materialist approach, which could fill that blind-spot in studies

on Iran's international relations.<sup>29</sup> (4) The ramifications of the Iran sanctions regime on domestic and international power structures would need more scholarly attention, including their uses and abuses. (5) In order to identify spaces for Iran's foreign-policy manoeuvring in a post-unipolar world order, studying the place that each of today's great-powers reserves for Iran in their respective grand strategies (accounting for their various dominant foreign-policy schools of thought and their respective prevalent geopolitical orientations) would be worthwhile. Ideally, this endeavour should be done in collaboration with scholars from those countries, in order to be able to properly unearth their respective domestic foreign-policy debates.<sup>30</sup>

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<sup>29</sup> For potential starting-points, see Callinicos 2004; Pozo-Martin 2007; Bina 2009b; Matin 2013b.

<sup>30</sup> On Russia, see Laruelle 2008.

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In some cases where this was thought to be useful the author's affiliation has been provided in square brackets following her/his name.

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<sup>1</sup> Note: If not otherwise indicated, the outlet is published out of Iran.

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