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Grand strategic adjustments in post-revolutionary Iran: A neoclassical realist account

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The Yuval Ne'eman Workshop for Science, Technology and Security

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List of abbreviations

ABNA:	Ahlul Bayt News Agency
AEI:	American Enterprise Institute
AFP:	Agence France Presse
AP:	Associated Press (also Additional Protocol, depending on context)
BBC SWB:	BBC Summary of World Broadcasts
BMI:	Business Monitor International
CCMES:	Crown Center for Middle East Studies (Brandeis University)
CIA:	Central Intelligence Agency
CFR:	Council on Foreign Relations
CNA:	Center for Naval Analysis (Corporation)
CRS:	Congressional Research Service
CSIS:	Center for Strategic and International Studies
CSM:	Christian Science Monitor
CSR:	Center for Strategic Research (Tehran)
CTC:	Combating Terrorism Center
FNSP:	Foreign and national security policy
FP:	Foreign Policy (magazine)
FPRI:	Foreign Policy Research Institute
FPNSE:	Foreign policy and national security executive
FT:	Financial Times
HMEIR:	Harvard Middle Eastern and Islamic Review
IFRI:	Institut Français des Relations Internationales
IHT:	International Herald Tribune
IISS:	The International Institute for Strategic Studies
IRGC:	Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps
IRIB:	Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting (Seda o Sima)
ISIS:	Institute for Science and International Security

MEI:	The Middle East Institute
MEJ:	Middle East Journal
MEQ:	Middle East Quarterly
MEP:	Middle East Policy
MERIA:	Middle East Review of International Affairs
MES:	Middle Eastern Studies
NYT:	New York Times
RAND:	RAND Corporation
RFE/RL:	Radio Free Europe/Radio Liberty
RSPI:	Rivista di Studi Politici Internazionali
SIPRI:	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
TNI:	The National Interest
TNR:	The New Republic
TWQ:	The Washington Quarterly
WP:	Washington Post
WINEP:	Washington Institute for Near East Policy
WRMEA:	Washington Report on Middle East Affairs
WSJ:	Wall Street Journal

Preface

The study of grand strategy is an undertaking which requires profound appreciation of a nation-state's history, geography and psychology, as well as an extensive understanding of its international interactions over time. The present monograph is the product of just such an undertaking. It offers a reinterpretation of one of the most critical and controversial international actors today, an indispensable major player in the Middle East, and a salient subject in contemporary world politics and security studies: Iran. Rather than focusing on intentions and capabilities in lockstep with conventional practice, it examines the record of grand strategic 'adjustments' undertaken by the Islamic Republic, and grounds the empirical work within the broader realm of international relations theory. It is ultimately also a narrative about how a non-great power like Iran has, despite its own limits, harnessed national resources to negotiate the delicate line between war and peace.

The intersection of contemporary Iran and grand strategy, particularly if one includes the nuclear dimension, is of great concern to a stakeholder like Israel. The timing of this monograph coincides with the climax of a decade of nuclear negotiations between Iran and the world powers, and the start of a period which may yet prove unjustifiably pregnant with optimism in regards to Iran's relationship with the West and particularly the US and Israel. While the author expressly refrains from drawing predictions concerning future Iranian behaviour, scrutiny of Iran's past policy and grand strategy cannot but help bring to the surface clear trends decisionmakers would do well to take notice of. This work seeks to balance theoretical discussion with a wealth of empirical detail drawn from both primary and secondary sources in several languages, including, chiefly, Persian, and will benefit policymakers, researchers and lay readers alike.

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Abstract

The present monograph examines post-revolutionary Iran's grand strategy by way of its adjustments at three key inflection points. The first spans the end of the Iran-Iraq war, the collapse of the bipolar order and the First Gulf War, along with internal structural changes following Ayatollah Khomeini's death (1988-91). The second inflection point encompasses the events of 11 September and the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq (2001-3). The third corresponds to the more recent Arab uprisings and the increasing internal and external pressures Iran faced over its nuclear program (2011-15). Given the epistemic challenges inherent in any reckoning of intentions or ends, as opposed to capabilities or means, a strict focus on the notion of 'grand strategic adjustments' instead permits an empirically-grounded analysis of grand strategy as opposed to a more sweeping but potentially speculative reading. In examining these inflection points, the author adopts Neoclassical Realism as a theoretical framework to structure the narrative, furnishing a systematic account linking systemic pressures and incentives (independent variable), via domestic filters (intervening variables), to final outcomes or grand strategic adjustments (dependent variable). Given the prominence and predominance of ideas and the structure of rule in the Islamic Republic, the focus of domestic factors specifically falls on the 'ideational-constitutive' (national identity, regime ideology, status aspirations and state interests) and 'institutional-competitive' (elite interfactional bargaining) aspects. The author concludes that while Iran's leaders have over the decades proven the capacity to both reconcile ends and means, and identify and respond to grand strategic threats and opportunities, they have ultimately yet to transcend the vicious circle of self-manufactured challenges.

1. Introduction

Why and how does a highly ideological, authoritarian state such as Iran formulate and adjust its grand strategy? To what extent do domestic, unit-level variables such as ideology and elite interfactional bargaining – as opposed to structural variables – influence grand strategic outcomes? Is there ‘method’ in Iranian grand strategy, that is can its ends-means enterprise be said to correspond to some semblance of a rational calculus? These are questions that the present study attempts to answer. Iran remains one of the more pressing epistemic puzzles in world politics. Since the 1979 revolution, Iranian state conduct has neither conformed to international norms, nor has its internal logic availed itself to ease of inquiry. Of greater concern still is Iran’s embroilment with a number of its regional neighbors, along with the US, which may come to involve a nuclear dimension. And yet, populous Iran occupies a region of paramount strategic importance, is flush with hydrocarbon resources, enjoys quality education and manpower, possesses one of the region’s largest conventional armed forces, and lays claim to a long history of assertive empire and subtle cultural influence. Taken together, these perhaps make Iran *the* indispensable major player in the Middle East.

The study of grand strategy may be approached in different ways. Diplomatic history has largely focused on great powers and empires and tends to be interpretive, for as Lawrence Freedman notes, ‘historians tend to look askance at attempts to formulate reliable laws of political behavior and are naturally more inclined to give weight to contingency and chance’.¹ Another approach comprises an analysis of ends and means, or alternatively intentions and capabilities, but is practicable mainly in contexts such as war campaigns and military operations where technical specificities provide some basis for (quantitative) measurement. A third approach, which I adopt, grounds itself conceptually in the international relations and security studies literature, and allows for theoretically-informed grand strategic narratives.

Accordingly, this study situates the post-revolutionary Iranian experience within a neoclassical realist perspective and hence attempts to furnish

1 Lawrence D. Freedman, ‘The War that didn’t end all wars: what started in 1914 – and why it lasted so long’, *Foreign Affairs* (November/December 2014) <http://goo.gl/LwZcTj>

an explanatory framework linking relative systemic power, via domestic filters, to outcomes, or as the case may be, (grand) ‘strategic adjustments’.² Neoclassical realism holds that such strategic adjustments are prompted primarily by systemic imperatives and alterations in the relative distribution of power. This study hence examines three key junctures at roughly ten year intervals in which Iran, alongside other states, confronted major systemic pressures, and the extent to which these inflection points prompted strategic adjustments. The first is the period spanning the end of the Iran-Iraq war, the collapse of the bipolar order and the First Gulf War (1988-91). The second spans the events of September 11 and the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq (2001-3). The third corresponds to the more recent events of the ‘Arab Spring’ and the P5+1 nuclear negotiations (2011-15). According to neoclassical realism, these systemic pressures are then mediated by domestic filters, which in turn shape grand strategic choices. Given the prominence and, I argue, predominance of ideas and the structure of rule in the Islamic Republic, I focus specifically on the ‘ideational-constitutive’ (national identity, regime ideology, status aspirations and state interests) and ‘institutional-competitive’ (elite interfactional bargaining) aspects of these intervening variables. By combining both structural and unit-level factors and actors, neoclassical realism as a conceptual framework more accurately captures the patterns of causality and is better placed to explain strategic adjustments as well as variation within Iranian grand strategic thinking over a period of time, compared to other theoretical traditions.³ The value of focusing strictly on ‘adjustments’ is that it permits an empirically-grounded, as opposed to a more sweeping but potentially speculative, analysis of grand strategy.

To be sure, academic and policy-oriented analyses of Iranian strategy are hardly lacking. These however tend to be ‘thick descriptions’ grounded in historiographical and area studies perspectives, or focused on security policy.⁴

2 The use of the term ‘strategic adjustment’ follows Peter Trubowitz & Edward Rhodes, ‘Explaining American strategic adjustment’, in Peter Trubowitz, Emily O. Goldman & Edward Rhodes, eds, *The politics of strategic adjustment: ideas, institutions, and interests* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1999).

3 ‘Neoclassical realism seeks to explain variation in the foreign policies of the same state over time or across different states facing similar external constraints. It makes no pretense about explaining broad patterns of systemic or recurring outcomes,’ Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, Steven E. Lobell & Norrin M. Ripsman, ‘Introduction: neoclassical realism, the state, and foreign policy’, in Steven E. Lobell, Norrin M. Ripsman & Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, eds, *Neoclassical realism, the state, and foreign policy* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2009) 21.

4 See, for instance, Daniel Byman, Shahram Chubin, Anoush Ehteshami, & Jerrold

In the case of IR specialists, one recent work similarly in the neoclassical realist tradition examines the reasons behind Iran's suboptimal foreign policymaking, but confines itself to the years 2001-9.⁵ What is still lacking is a broader, theoretically-informed narrative of Iranian grand strategy under the Islamic Republic, a gap which this study modestly attempts to address. To this end, driving my research are the following questions:

- Q1: Why does Iran undertake grand strategic adjustments?
- Q2: How are these grand strategic adjustments shaped and determined?
- Q3: To what extent do these grand strategic adjustments reflect a rational calculus of ends and means?

Whence the following hypotheses:

- H1: Iran undertakes grand strategic adjustments first and foremost in response to systemic imperatives such as accompanied the three inflection points discussed here.
- H2: Iran's grand strategic adjustments are shaped and determined by unit-level domestic factors, the most significant of which are 'ideational-constitutive' and 'institutional-competitive'.
- H3: Despite apparent inconsistencies at various times, there have been efforts to achieve greater strategic consistency of purpose.

The methodology follows George and Bennett's structured, focused comparison approach. I employ three in-country case studies, chronologically differentiated, as the determinative 'class' of events aimed at structuring the inquiry and yielding comparable data.⁶ I also depend on process-tracing and a lighter version of the congruence method to help illuminate causal pathways at the level of intervening variables.⁷ Given the near impossibility

D. Green, *Iran's security policy in the post-revolutionary era* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2001); Shahram Chubin, *Iran's national security policy: capabilities, intentions, and impact* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment, 1994).

5 Thomas Juneau, *Squandered opportunity: neoclassical realism and Iranian foreign policy* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, forthcoming) – reference throughout this thesis is to Juneau's *prepublication* manuscript, which the author was able to access in the course of bilateral correspondence.

6 Alexander L. George & Andrew Bennett, *Case studies and theory development in the social sciences* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press, 2005) 69.

7 'To identify the process, one must perform the difficult cognitive feat of figuring out *which* aspects of the initial conditions observed, in conjunction with *which simple principles* of the many that may be at work, would have *combined* to generate the

of access to official Iranian archives and closed-door deliberations on strategy and particularly national security and defense policy, I instead infer, as Iran analysts habitually do, from official statements and Iranian media reports including Persian language sources. Two further points bear mentioning. First, by employing theory I am implicitly testing its explanatory power even though its main purpose here is as a framework structuring the narrative. Second, I infer grand strategy only retrospectively from observed outcomes,⁸ and hence eschew assertions about how the Iranian leadership views its *own* strategy-making process, and importantly, predictions about the strategic direction it *intends* to take.

The study is organized as follows. Chapter 2 reviews the notion of grand strategy as object of inquiry and explains how the study of a non-great power like Iran is as relevant as that of traditional great powers. Chapter 3 establishes the neoclassical realist framework and briefly compares it with competing IR perspectives. Because of their posited role in specifying strategic outcomes, the chapter proceeds to unpack intervening variables in their ‘ideational-constitutive’ and ‘institutional-competitive’ aspects, situating them in the Iranian context. Chapters 4-6 constitute the core of this study, organized chronologically by inflection point. Each examines the prevailing international systemic imperatives (independent variable), the corresponding elite perceptions, ideology, interests and domestic politics at the time (intervening variables), and the resulting grand strategic adjustments (dependent variable). Given that the third inflection point has yet to fully pan out, this chapter will consequently be a tentative essay pending further research. Again, my intent is merely a representative survey of the major *adjustments* rather than a sweeping disquisition of Iranian grand strategy. Finally, I conclude by tying together these disparate elements into what I hope to be a fuller and more nuanced picture of Iran’s grand strategic trajectory.

observed sequence of events’, Jack Goldstone (emphasis in the original), cited in George & Bennett, *Case studies*, 206; for the congruence method, see ch. 9.

8 As Edward Luttwak noted regarding outcomes, ‘Whatever humans can do, however absurd or self-destructive, magnificent or sordid, has been done in both war and statecraft, and no logic at all can be detected in the deeds themselves. But the logic of strategy is manifest in the outcome of what is done or not done, and it is by examining those often unintended consequences that the nature and workings of the logic can be understood’, *Strategy: the logic of war and peace* (Cambridge: The Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1987), xi.

2. Grand strategy as object of inquiry

The term ‘grand strategy’ broadly denotes the husbanding and harnessing of a state’s resources and capabilities for the longterm promotion or preservation of its objectives and perceived interests, in war as in peace.⁹ It also requires balancing these political ends with *available* military, diplomatic, economic, geographic, sociocultural and moral means, and ‘think[ing] about actions in advance, in the light of our goals and our capacities’.¹⁰ However, grand strategy is also subject to the imponderables of historical contingency even as it is necessitated by them, so that as Germany’s great unifier Otto Von Bismarck noted, ‘Man cannot create the current of events. He can only float with it and steer’.¹¹ It must therefore ‘reconcile continuity with change’,¹² requiring the statesman to creatively adapt to new circumstances as they arise, iteratively ‘processing feedback and correcting course when necessary, all the while keeping core interests in view’.¹³ Hal Brands identified four core elements of grand strategy: essential interests, threats to these interests, the resources to advance these interests, and the resources to counteract those threats.¹⁴ The first two may be reformulated as *ends*, the latter two as *means*. Together, these constitute a state’s conceptual map to a desired destination, even as

9 The term, though not the concept, was apparently first advanced by Edward Mead Earle in his address, ‘Political and military strategy for the United States’, at the Academy of Political Science’s annual convention on ‘The defense of the United States’ in New York, 13 November 1940, available in *Proceedings of the Academy of Political Science* XIX (1941), 7; another useful starting point is Paul Kennedy, ‘Grand strategy in war and peace: toward a broader definition’, in Paul Kennedy, ed., *Grand strategies in war and peace* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1991).

10 Lawrence Freedman, *Strategy: a history* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2013) x.

11 Cited in Marcus Jones, ‘Strategy as character: Bismarck and the Prusso-German question, 1862-1878’, in Williamson Murray, Richard H. Sinnreich & James Lacey, eds, *The shaping of grand strategy: policy, diplomacy, and war* (NY: Cambridge University Press, 2011) 107.

12 Richard Hart Sinnreich, ‘Patterns of grand strategy’, in Murray, Sinnreich & Lacey, eds, *The shaping of grand strategy*, 257.

13 Hal Brands, *The promise and pitfalls of grand strategy* (Carlisle Barracks, PA: U.S. Army War College Strategic Studies Institute, August 2012) 50

14 Ibid., 3-4.

policy is the vehicle put into motion to reach that destination. Accordingly, if the means at the national level change even if the ends remain unaltered, grand strategy may still be said to have undergone adjustments. Because it ultimately concerns a state's relative position within the international system, grand strategy here finds expression mainly in the outward-looking instruments of statecraft, namely foreign (including trade) and national security policy (hereinafter FNSP), even if it also transcends them.

Grand strategy as a concept evolved from the lower level of military strategy.¹⁵ 'Narrowly defined,' Edward Mead Earle wrote, the latter 'is the art of military command, of projecting and directing a campaign'.¹⁶ European strategists until the nineteenth century occupied themselves with distilling universal and eternal (as they saw it) principles of war, some of which came to approximate spuriously abstract geometric exercises. Obsessed with the Napoleonic war juggernaut that had caused much of the continent and his own Prussia so much misery, Carl von Clausewitz understandably redefined the object of war as the absolute defeat and destruction of the adversary's forces. The later, more mature Clausewitz however conceded 'that war is not merely an act of policy but a true political instrument, a continuation of political intercourse, carried on with other means'. 'The political object', he continued, 'is the goal, war is the means of achieving it, and means can never be considered in isolation from their purpose'.¹⁷

This dictum transcends the military ambit of strategy and may be usefully regarded as the threshold of *grand* strategy. The British military specialist Basil Liddell Hart fiercely rejected the early Clausewitzian notion of total war, the fruit of which he personally suffered in the trench attrition of World War I, but embraced the later Clausewitz in advocating 'the art of distributing and applying military means to fulfill the ends of policy'.¹⁸ More importantly, 'while the horizon of strategy is bounded by the war, grand strategy looks beyond the war to the *subsequent peace*', the supreme political objective. 'It should not only combine the various instruments, but so regulate their use as to avoid damage to the future state of peace – for its security and

15 For a systematization of grand strategy, its subordinate components (theater-strategic, operational, tactical, technical) and the tensions inherent among them, see Luttwak, *Logic*.

16 Edward Mead Earle, 'Introduction', in Edward Mead Earle, Gordon A. Craig & Felix Gilbert, eds, *Makers of modern strategy: military thought from Machiavelli to Hitler* (NJ: Princeton University Press, 1970) viii.

17 Carl von Clausewitz, *On war*, Michael Howard & Peter Paret, eds & transl. (NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976) Ch. 1 (Section 24) 87.

18 Liddell Hart, B. H., *Strategy*, 2nd revised edition (New York: Praeger, 1967) 335.

prosperity'.¹⁹ Victory in war, in other words, does not guarantee victory in peace and the one may well countermand the other. Long before Liddell Hart, the ancient Athenians were perhaps among those less apt to lose sight of this political-military linkage: their *strategos* was not only one of Athens' ten preeminent generals but also a principal politician accountable to the *demos*.²⁰ Likewise, Liddell Hart's indirect approach locates its antecedents as far back as 5th century B.C. China, where Sun Tzu taught that the height of strategy is 'winning a victory and subduing the enemy without fighting'.²¹ Liddell Hart continues:

Victory in the true sense implies that the state of peace, and of one's people, is better after the war than before. Victory in this sense is only possible if a quick result can be gained or if a long effort can be economically proportioned to the national resources. The end must be adjusted to the means [...]. It is wiser to run risks *of* war for the sake of preserving peace than to run risks of exhaustion *in* war for the sake of finishing with victory.²²

19 Ibid., 336 (emphasis added); though unacknowledged then, Liddell Hart was, as in much of his writings, also echoing the ideas of J. F. C. Fuller. Fuller wrote that 'preparation for war or against war, from the grand strategical aspect, is the main problem of peace, just as the accomplishment of peaceful prosperity is the main problem of war', see his *The reformation of war* (London: Hutchinson & Co., 1923) 215; for Liddell Hart's unacknowledged intellectual debt to Fuller, see Azar Gat, *A history of military thought: from the Enlightenment to the Cold War* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2001) 661-68.

20 This is hardly surprising if we consider that Greek citizens were also simultaneously soldiers – the famous Hoplites, see Donald Kagan, 'Athenian strategy in the Peloponnesian War', in Williamson Murray, M. Knox & A. Bernstein, eds., *The Making of Strategy: Rulers, States, and War* (NY: Cambridge University Press 1994) 28; Edward Mead Earle, 'Lecture on grand strategy to the Army and Navy Staff College', September 15, 1944, Edward Mead Earle Papers, Seeley G. Mudd Manuscript Library, Princeton University, Box 37, 2, cited in Lukas Milevski, 'Grand strategy and operational art: companion concepts and their implications for strategy', *Comparative Strategy* 33.4 (2014) 350.

21 Sun Tzu, *The art of war* [孙子兵法], bilingual edition, trans. Luo Zhiye (Hong Kong: Shang Wu Yin Shu Guan, 1994) 30-1 (ch. 15); cf. Liddell Hart, 'Tactics lies in and fills the province of fighting. Strategy not only stops on the frontier, but has for its purpose the reduction of fighting to the slenderest possible proportions [...]. The perfection of strategy would be, therefore, to produce a decision without any serious fighting', *Strategy*, 337-8. At the tactical level, 'the artifice of "making a circuitous route direct"' was one of Sun Tzu's preferred leitmotifs, see *Art of war*, 87 (ch 42).

22 Liddell Hart, *Strategy*, 370.

The study of grand strategy has been overwhelmingly applied to empires and great powers. The military historian Williamson Murray held that ‘grand strategy is a matter involving great states and great states alone. No small states and few medium-size states possess the possibility of crafting a grand strategy’.²³ This is in keeping with the Athenian warning to Melos (a colony of archrival Sparta) in 416 B.C. ‘that right, as the world goes, is only in question between equals in power, while *the strong do what they can and the weak suffer what they must*’.²⁴ Yet, although power facilitates choice, it says nothing about how ends and means are reconciled, nor should it be conflated with the ‘grand’ in strategy, which strictly bespeaks its holistic compass rather than a state’s power or ranking.

As centuries of expansion gave way to decline, one source tells us that the late imperial Rome discarded the earlier robust frontier defense (emblemized by Hadrian’s Wall), and before that the client state system, for a grand strategy premised on massing a mobile central reserve away from the increasingly problematic border provinces and towards more comfortable urban centers. Yet, this ‘defense-in-depth’ gradually eroded military readiness and – coinciding with political instability, overextension and crucially, military recruitment of Germanic barbarians – eventually invited the sacking of Rome by Alaric’s Germanic tribes in 410 A.D.²⁵ In contrast, the eastern Roman Empire survived for another millennium despite relative geographical and material disadvantages. Byzantium did this, we learn, by first emulating the nomadic Huns’ superior ways of warfare – mounted archery with composite reflex bows – and subsequently through a piecemeal defensive grand strategy extending beyond fortifications like the triple Theodosian Wall in its emphasis on maneuver, dislocation, subversion, persuasion and payoffs – elements prefiguring Liddell-Hart’s indirect

23 Williamson Murray, ‘Thoughts on grand strategy’, in Murray, Sinnreich & Lacey, eds, *The shaping of grand strategy*, 1.

24 Thucydides, *The landmark Thucydides: a comprehensive guide to the Peloponnesian War*, a newly revised edition of the Richard Crawley translation, Robert B. Strassler, ed. (New York: The Free Press, 1996) 352 (Bk V:89), emphasis added; for the Melians, justice meant respecting a state’s independence, whereas for the Athenians, justice meant knowing one’s proper place in the pecking order of power.

25 The standard, if much criticised work is Edward Luttwak’s *The grand strategy of the Roman Empire: from the first century A.D. to the third* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1976). For critical summaries, see Arther Ferrill, ‘The grand strategy of the Roman Empire’, in Kennedy, *Grand strategies*: 71-85; and Kimberly Kagan, ‘Redefining Roman grand strategy’, *The Journal of Military History* 70 (April 2006): 333-62.

approach.²⁶ Force, the *ultima ratio*, was limited to containment rather than the frontal attrition and destruction so favored by Rome.²⁷

States or empires may also isolate themselves, inadvertently precipitating their own decline. In the Far East, the instability in the northern steppe and the chronic threat posed by the Mongols pressured late Ming dynasty China to first wrest control of those regions especially around the Ordos Loop, and failing which, to complete the Great Wall and withdraw into isolation. This, surprisingly, included retrenching all maritime trade and activity which had attained unprecedented scope with the achievements of the Ming admiral Zheng He.²⁸ But even a contractionist strategy proved futile when a fateful combination of imperial paranoia, bureaucratic emasculation, factional intrigue, rigid Sinocentric Confucianism (that posited moral norms as sufficient to underwrite order), and refusal to trade with lesser ‘barbarians’ (thus forcing the latter towards depredation in the first place) eventually precipitated dynastic turnover by another steppe people, the Manchus – and rendered the Wall useless altogether.

Of course, rare exceptions also exist where grand strategy exhibited conscious planning (albeit by the rational standards of specific individuals) although these tend to be shortlived. In our own era, Nazi Germany stands out. To secure *Lebensraum* and resources in Eastern Europe as the key to guaranteeing German continental hegemony and as it were, ensuring its ‘organic’ growth, Hitler first had to neutralize the French threat in the west to preclude a two-front war.²⁹ To achieve this aim, he proceeded to undermine French security and domination ‘in installments’ through a series of bloodless territorial acquisitions until 1939, while attempting to secure alliances with both Britain (unsuccessfully) and Italy and playing on Europeans’ fear of another Great War.³⁰ Before he finally subdued France in 1940, he secured his eastern flank through a pact

26 Liddell Hart sums this up as the physical ‘line of least resistance’ and psychological ‘line of least expectation’, *Strategy*, 341.

27 Edward Luttwak, *The grand strategy of the Byzantine Empire* (Cambridge, CT: Harvard University Press, 2009) 5, 58, 272; despite tributes extracted by the Huns, efficient Byzantine tax collection and the fact that the ‘Huns... inevitably used their tribute gold to buy necessities and baubles from the empire’ in fact meant greater economic stimulation and financial liquidity, 55.

28 Arthur Waldron, ‘Chinese strategy from the fourteenth to the seventeenth centuries’, in Murray, Knox & Bernstein, *The making of strategy*, 95-7, 112-4; on Ming China’s naval retrenchment, see Paul Kennedy, *The rise and fall of the great powers* (New York: Random House, 1987) 4-9.

29 Edward Mead Earle, ‘Hitler: the Nazi concept of war’, in Earle, Craig & Gilbert, *Makers of modern strategy*, 506-9.

30 Hitler, *Mein Kampf*, cited in *ibid.*, 509.

with Stalin which suited the latter for other reasons. Hitler sowed the seeds of his final defeat when he brought the USSR, and six months later, the US (through Japan's attack on Pearl Harbor) into the Allied war effort; had he refrained from a hot war altogether, Hitler's vision of Aryan supremacy and a *Judenfrei* European hegemony might have made Nazi Germany truly and worryingly preponderant. Like his own post-Bismarckian predecessors and Napoleon Bonaparte, Hitler's fixation with military strategy and operational-tactical necessity ultimately paved the way for grand strategic failure.

Though merely illustrative, these accounts intuitively suggest two broadly overarching types of strategic postures, what Henry Kissinger might characterize as 'those who seek to mold reality in the light of their purposes' and 'those who adapt their purposes to reality'.³¹ However, even with best-laid schemes, simplicity of circumstance or great freedom of action such as the US enjoyed in late 1945, contrary to the consistency of purpose so often credited in hindsight,³² even great powers have been more often constrained to adjust their grand strategies to historical contingency. Perhaps for this reason, Edward Luttwak notes that '[a]ll states have a grand strategy, whether they know it or not,' even if 'not all grand strategies are equal'.³³ For lesser powers, precisely because their margin of maneuver is limited and '[i]nopportune acts, flawed policies, and mistimed moves may have fatal results', grand strategy thus becomes a matter of meticulous necessity unlike for great powers, who 'can do the same dumb things over again'.³⁴ Instead of maximizing gains, preoccupation with fundamental threats compounded by uncertainty instead focuses lesser powers' choices on minimizing loss (what game theory would call 'minimax').³⁵ Insofar as choices exist then, the study of a non-great power like Iran can yield insights into grand strategy as useful as those from the study of great powers. Indeed, examining non-great powers is imperative if scholars in the realist tradition are not to be accused of selecting on the dependent variable.

31 Henry Kissinger, 'The white revolutionary: reflections on Bismarck', *Daedalus* 97.3 (Summer 1968) 910.

32 Sinnreich, 'Patterns', 254.

33 Luttwak, *Byzantine Empire*, 409. He goes on to explain: 'That is inevitable because grand strategy is simply the *level* at which knowledge and persuasion, or in modern terms intelligence and diplomacy, interact with military strength to determine outcomes in a world of other states, with their own "grand strategies"'.³⁵

34 Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of international politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley, 1979) 195.

35 Sinnreich puts this clearly: 'sound strategy favors policies the consequences of which threaten the least strategic damage should the premises underwriting them prove to be wrong', 'Patterns', 264.

3. Neoclassical realism as theoretical framework

A key question in the study of grand strategy is why certain outcomes materialize rather than others. Because its research agenda explicitly investigates how domestic unit-level factors interact with systemic imperatives, the convergence of which forms the operative arena for grand strategy,³⁶ neoclassical realism offers an appropriate theoretical framework to structure the narrative that follows. Before that, a brief overview of competing perspectives is useful. It is striking that classic works on grand strategy throughout the centuries have consistently been realist in complexion if not in explicit intent.³⁷ Classical realism, with an eclectic 2,500 year-old tradition spanning Sun Tzu and Thucydides in the 5th century B.C., through Machiavelli and Hobbes in the early modern period to Hans Morgenthau,³⁸ Edward H. Carr and others in the early 20th Century posits a bleak view of human nature. What results is the will to power in order to maximize security,³⁹ the inevitability of conflicts, inequality among states, amorality in the international realm, the centrality of statesmanship, and the counsel of prudence. Self-interest, understood as a function of power, ‘infuses rational order...and creates that astounding continuity in foreign policy’,⁴⁰

36 The requisite convergence of both levels of analysis for the study of grand strategy is also noted in Nicholas Kitchen, ‘Systemic pressures and domestic ideas: A neoclassical realist model of grand strategy formation’, *Review of International Studies* 36.1 (2010) 121.

37 Taliaferro et al., ‘Introduction’, 14

38 Hans J. Morgenthau, *Scientific man vs. power politics* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press 1946) 192-3.

39 Hence Thomas Hobbes’ declamation of the ‘perpetuall and restlesse desire of Power after power, that ceaseth onely in Death’, cited in MacGregor Knox, ‘Conclusion: continuity and revolution’, in Murray, Knox & Bernstein, *The Making of Strategy*, 643.

40 Hans J. Morgenthau, *Politics among nations: the struggle for power and peace*, 7th ed. (New York: McGraw-Hill, 2006) 5.

so Hans Morgenthau tells us.⁴¹ Yet, while intuitive, it remains interpretive and somewhat desultory.

Structural realism (neorealism) looks to the international system and posits that systemic anarchy, not human nature, necessitates self-help and hence drives the quest for power.⁴² Structural realists investigate structure-induced continuity to explain how similar states can produce varying international outcomes, and different states, similar outcomes. The system conditions state behavior,⁴³ they aver in a modern reinterpretation of Rousseau (although Hobbes cleaves closer to neorealist thought), not unlike the ‘invisible hand’ of the market’s influence on individual firms described by Adam Smith. By privileging structure and abstracting from unit-level variance, structural realism’s theoretical edifice attains parsimony and elegance.⁴⁴ The obvious problem this creates for any study of grand strategy is that it excises human agency and the genius or shortcomings implied therein. The offensive and defensive structural realist variants offer a higher degree of granularity. The former posit that because security is scarce and states exist ‘in the brooding shadow of violence’,⁴⁵ anarchy-induced uncertainty obliges states to maximize power as the only path to security, with the more successful logically attaining some form of hegemony.⁴⁶ Defensive realists posit that where adequate security exists, and where the offense-defense balance favors the latter, states can afford to demonstrate restraint in their power

41 Thucydides posited a similar continuity: ‘Of the gods we believe, and of men we know, that by a necessary law of their nature they rule wherever they can. And it is not as if we were the first to make this law, or to act upon it when made: we found it existing before us, and shall leave it to exist forever after us; all we do is to make use of it, knowing that you and everybody else, having the same power as we have, would do the same as we do’, *The landmark Thucydides*, 354 (Bk V:105:2).

42 Structure defined here not merely as the interaction between states so much as their specific ordering therein, according to Waltz, *Theory*, 80 (‘arrangement of the system’s parts’).

43 Kenneth Waltz, *Man, the state and war: a theoretical analysis* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1959) 5; Waltz, *Theory*, 47.

44 And that is because ‘Explanatory power... is gained by moving away from “reality,” not by staying close to it. A full description would be of least explanatory power; an elegant theory, of most’, Waltz, *Theory*, 7.

45 *Ibid.*, 102.

46 John J. Mearsheimer, *The tragedy of great power politics* (New York: W. W. Norton, 2001) 33-54, chap. 5.

ambitions by maximizing security,⁴⁷ especially if they effectively balance against common threats.⁴⁸ Still, neither adequately explains why a state might undertake specific strategic adjustments rather than others.

At the other extreme, while the various liberal, neoliberal and pluralist traditions are better able to explain variation derived from unit-level domestic actors and institutional agency, the emphasis on *Innenpolitik* gives short shrift to the conditioning and socializing effects of the wider environment in which states interact and continually seek to enhance their relative power positions – the ‘stuff’ of grand strategy.⁴⁹ Constructivists and social theorists stress intersubjective interaction and production of shared meaning in such notions as collective identity, beliefs, values, norms, motivations and interests. Consequently, states and elites construct and reify social realities, and habitually define themselves in opposition to a distinct Other.⁵⁰ Again however, while constructivism has much to say about how constitutive factors are produced and perpetuated, it says little about structural influence.

Neoclassical realism factors in structure, agent and choice.⁵¹ Like structural realism, neoclassical realism takes the systemic distribution of power as starting point and independent variable.⁵² Power, always relative in the presence of structure, is defined as the ability to leverage actualized tangible

47 For more on this, see Stephen van Evera, *Causes of war: power and the roots of conflict* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1999).

48 Stephen M. Walt, ‘Alliance formation and the balance of world power’, *International Security* 9.4 (Spring 1985), 8-9, 13-4, 35.

49 See Andrew Moravcsik, ‘Taking preferences seriously: a liberal theory of international politics’, *International Organization*, 51.4 (1997): 513-553.

50 See Alexander Wendt, ‘Anarchy is what states make of it: the social construction of power politics’, *International Organization* 46.2 (Spring 1992): 391-425.

51 Gideon Rose, ‘Neoclassical realism and theories of foreign policy’, *World Politics* 51.1 (October 1998) 146; this is also a response to Robert Keohane’s call for ‘systemic theories that retain some of the parsimony of Structural Realism, but... are able to deal better with differences between issue-areas, with institutions, and with change’, Robert O. Keohane, ‘Realism, neorealism and the study of world politics’, in Robert O. Keohane, ed., *Neorealism and its critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) 18.

52 Contemporary realist variants share a number of assumptions: firstly, states (i.e. expanded tribes) constitute the principal unit of analysis, and are undifferentiated from each other insofar as function (but not capabilities). Secondly, states exist in an international system characterized by anarchy. Third, power is the coin of the realm, and the struggle over it to ensure individual survival at the very least underlies international relations. Fourth, states are largely unitary, purposive, and often (though not necessarily) rational actors. Fifth, not least, these taken together allow for consistency and therefore calculations of ‘optimal’ policies and strategies.

and intangible assets to shape desired political outcomes or to cause change in another's behavior, both directly or indirectly, deliberately or unintendedly.⁵³ Power may thus be conceptualized as both asset *and* causative relation, or *relational asset*,⁵⁴ but can technically only be a means and not an end: to say that a state desires power is to mean that *through* power the state aspires to hegemony or domination, the functional manifestation of power.⁵⁵ Amid pervasive uncertainty in an anarchic system (historical contingency), states in the neoclassical realist universe seek to guarantee survival and relative advantage by maximizing power (classical realism and offensive-structural realism) and security (defensive-structural realism) but also particularly *influence*,⁵⁶ namely the use of available power as a means to 'control and shape the environment that [a state] inhabits'.⁵⁷ Maximizing influence is to ensure one has a say, or in Juneau's view, 'increasing the quantity and quality of a state's options and reducing those of rivals...on the basis of its relative power'.⁵⁸ This is especially pertinent to non-great powers with nonetheless some limited margin of maneuver (such as soft power). As Rose tells us, states' relative power shapes 'the magnitude and ambition...of their foreign policies: as their relative power rises states will seek more influence abroad, and as it falls their actions and ambitions will be scaled back accordingly'.⁵⁹ In this way, systemic relative power differentials continue to dispose states towards particular strategic trajectories and constrain them from others.⁶⁰

53 For a more expansive view of power's different dimensions, see Michael Barnett & Raymond Duvall, 'Power in international politics', *International Organization* 59.1 (Winter 2005): 39-75. The authors propose a useful formulation of the term beyond the realist paradigm: 'power is the production, in and through social relations, of effects that shape the capacities of actors to determine their circumstances and fate'; Cf. Robert A. Dahl's original formulation: 'the ability of A to get B to do what B otherwise would not do', in his 'The concept of power', *Behavioral Science* 2.3 (1957): 201-15.

54 My emphasis on the relational aspect differs from the neoclassical realist emphasis on aggregate elements of national power (assets), but nonetheless retains its relevance in a structural setting. See Brian C. Schmidt, 'Competing realist conceptions of power', *Millennium: Journal of International Studies* 33.3 (2005) 543.

55 To view power as an independent variable likewise really refers to the relative distribution thereof, and not absolute power.

56 Schmidt, 'Realist conceptions', 528, 530-1.

57 Ibid., 546.

58 Juneau, *Squandered opportunity*, 52.

59 Rose, 'Neoclassical realism', 152; Robert G. Gilpin, *War and change in world politics* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1981) 94-5.

60 Waltz, *Theory*, 65.

Still, neoclassical realism contends that the international system constitutes only a permissive rather than efficient cause, imposing only the outer parameters on a state's grand strategy.⁶¹ What made the Peloponnesian war inevitable, in Thucydides' retelling, was '[t]he growth of the power of Athens, and the alarm which this inspired in Sparta'.⁶² What governed the outcomes, conversely, had to do with the genius and leadership of men like Pericles, Nicias, Demosthenes, Alcibiades and Lysander, and some argue, ineluctable chance (Gk. *tyche*). Outcomes cannot exclude 'the connotations of will and skill that hover about the term "power",' as Zartman might put it, and structure is neither 'cataclysmic' nor 'impervious to any human tinkering'.⁶³ Unlike structural realists, neoclassical realists do not regard the state as a unitary and analytically impenetrable 'black box'; in this they offer a state-level theory of foreign and national security policy.⁶⁴ At the unit-level, intervening factors constitute an imperfect 'transmission belt' interposed between structure and strategic outcomes.⁶⁵ This in turn mediates, mitigates and motivates the way state elites formulate FNSP, the dependent variable.

In a world of human endeavor where theories can at best only fragmentally explain complex social phenomena, let alone predict with certainty, the picture that emerges is a richer and more discriminating one that combines 'theoretical parsimony and complexity, abstract metatextual formalism and contextually-embedded "thick description", a sort of theoretical middle

61 Taliaferro et al, 'Introduction', 4, 7; as Trubowitz, Goldman & Rhodes show however, new strategies can also materialize wholly from within as it were, such as US navalism at the height of industrialization in the 1890s, *The politics of strategic adjustment*, ebook version.

62 *The landmark Thucydides*, 16 (Bk I:23:6).

63 William Zartman, 'Introduction: the analysis of negotiations', in William Zartman, ed., *The 50% solution* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1983) 15-6.

64 His focus on systemic outcomes notwithstanding, Waltz concedes the importance of state- and substate-level variables (respectively, 'second-' and 'first-image' factors) in foreign policy analysis. 'The third image describes the framework of world politics,' he writes, 'but without the first and second images there can be no knowledge of the forces that determine policy.' See *Man, the state and war*, 232, 238; In *Theory*, he again stresses the conscious limits of the neorealist paradigm, 71-2; and again in 'Reflections on theory of international politics: a response to my critics', in Robert O. Keohane, ed., *Neorealism and its critics* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1986) 331.

65 Taliaferro et al., 'Introduction', 4.; Morgenthau called these the 'contingent elements of personality, prejudice, and subjective preference, and...all the weaknesses of intellect and will that flesh is heir to', *Politics among nations*, 7.

way', to explain strategic choices.⁶⁶ Problems of course remain, such as the potentially unmanageable proliferation of intervening variables,⁶⁷ and the accurate specification of variables within the causal complex. However, because I do not aim to refine theory, I leave these questions for others.

Intervening variables and the Iranian context

Neoclassical realists have studied a broad array of unit-level variables including: elite perceptions of shifting power balances;⁶⁸ liberal democratic ideology and political culture;⁶⁹ the *state's* ability to extract and mobilize the *nation's* resources;⁷⁰ nationalism;⁷¹ foreign policy as a foil for domestic politics and vice versa;⁷² elite cleavages and the influence of interest groups;⁷³

66 Rose, 'Neoclassical realism', 168.

67 In *Theory*, Waltz anticipated this problem nearly two decades before neoclassical realism consolidated as a school of thought, 65.

68 William C. Wohlforth, for instance, demonstrates how US and Soviet expectations gave rise to cycles of mutual crisis when mismatched, and to détente when coordinated, see *Elusive balance: power and perceptions during the Cold War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993) 10-17, 179-81; and Aaron L. Friedberg, *Weary titan: Britain and the experience of relative decline, 1895-1905* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1988) 279-91.

69 Christopher Layne, *The peace of illusions: American grand strategy from 1940 to the present* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2006); Colin Dueck, *Reluctant crusaders: power, culture and change in American grand strategy* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2006).

70 Fareed Zakaria, *From wealth to power: the unusual origins of America's world role* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1997) 30-37; Jeffrey Taliaferro, 'Neoclassical realism and resource extraction: state building for future war', in Lobell, Ripsman & Taliaferro, *Neoclassical realism*: 194-226.

71 Randall L. Schweller, 'Neoclassical realism and state mobilization: expansionist ideology in the age of mass politics', in Lobell, Ripsman & Taliaferro, *Neoclassical realism*: 227-50 – Schweller's article demonstrates how the combination of elite agreement on an ambitious grand strategy, broad state authority to pursue policy, and unreserved public support, all held together by ideology, can successfully pursue expansionist aims; Schweller, *Unanswered threats: political constraints on the balance of power* (Princeton: Princeton University, 2006) 117-25.

72 Thomas J. Christensen demonstrates how elites on both sides manipulated ideology and prolonged limited conflict in order to mobilize popular support for costlier and longer term grand strategies, see *Useful adversaries: grand strategy, domestic mobilization, and Sino-American conflict, 1947-1958* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1996) 6.

73 Steven E. Lobell, 'Threat assessment, the state, and foreign policy: a neoclassical realist model', in Lobell, Ripsman & Taliaferro, *Neoclassical realism*: 42-74; Norrin Ripsman, 'Neoclassical realism and domestic interest groups', in Lobell, Ripsman

the degree of autonomy the state's ruling elite enjoys from society; and the level of elite or societal cohesion.⁷⁴ By and large, domestic variables are inversely correlated with systemic imperatives. When external imperatives do not dominate (i.e. securing the state is not an imperative), domestic variables have greater leeway, and vice versa.⁷⁵ Similarly, when systemic imperatives impose themselves yet appropriate strategic and policy responses remain elusive, or state leadership is precarious, domestic variables can weigh in.⁷⁶ These variables are context-bound and potentially endless, a primary weakness of this research paradigm. Still, attempts have been made to categorize them, for instance into ideas, individuals, identity and institutions.⁷⁷ Here, limited space permits focus only on what I call 'ideational-constitutive' and 'institutional-competitive' variables; others, such as the economy and internal instability may be usefully examined in a separate study.

a. Ideational-constitutive variables

Responsibility for grand strategy typically lies with the foreign policy and national security executive (FPNSE) which, 'sitting at the juncture of the state and the international system, with access to privileged information from the state's politico-military apparatus, is best equipped to perceive systemic constraints and deduce the national interest'.⁷⁸ The Islamic Republic of Iran is famously characterized by a dual structure of government. The president and parliament (Islamic Consultative Assembly or *Majles*) cohabit in tension with a skein of unelected clerical and security-military institutions led by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei who oversees the system. But while the president, typically invested in domestic and economic issues,⁷⁹ has some sway over the style of foreign policy, it is the Supreme Leader, to whom the heads of the security, defense and intelligence establishment are directly accountable, who determines the substance of grand strategy. The FPNSE assesses threats or opportunities imposed by systemic shifts in relative

& Taliaferro, *Neoclassical realism*: 170-93; Steven E. Lobell, *The challenge of hegemony: grand strategy, trade, and domestic politics* (Ann Arbor: University of Michigan Press, 2003).

74 Taliaferro et al. 'Introduction', 4, 8-9 (FN 14-26); for 'pre-neoclassical realist' works in this tradition, see for instance Richard Rosecrance & Arthur A. Stein, eds, *The domestic bases of grand strategy* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993).

75 Ripsman, 'Domestic interest groups', 186-7.

76 Ibid., 188-9.

77 Juneau, *Squandered opportunities*, 23.

78 Taliaferro et al., 'Introduction', 25.

79 Art. 126 of Iran's amended constitution.

power through a series of cognitive-affective filters encompassing national identity, regime ideology, status aspirations and state interests. National identity, largely recast through regime ideology after 1979, sharpens status aspirations and in turn frames state interests, structures political discourse and practice, narrows the range of grand strategic options, and catalyzes collective action. Broadly defined, '[i]deas help to order the world,' and '[b]y ordering the world, ideas may shape agendas, which can profoundly shape outcomes'.⁸⁰

Two principal pillars of national identity stand in perennial mutual tension: Iranian particularism (and in some ways, nationalism) and Islam.⁸¹ Persian Iran stands at the juncture of a heavily Arab Middle East, Turkic Central Asia-Caucasus and the Indian sub-continent. It draws upon a 2,500-year historical memory and self-image as a world empire under the Achaemenids and a regional power under the Arsacid Parthians (early imperial Rome's foremost adversary), the Sassanians (the major challenger to Byzantium) and the Safavids, amid lesser interim dynasties.⁸² Even Iran's pageant of foreign conquerors – Alexander the Great, the Arabs and Genghis Khan included – found themselves indelibly influenced by their hosts. Despite the homogenizing pressures of Islamization, post-Sassanian Persia not only preserved its language (notwithstanding significant lexical alterations), culture and elements of the Zoroastrian religion,⁸³ Sassanian-era imperial bureaucratic practices found emulation by the Arab rulers as evidenced in

80 Judith Goldstein & Robert O. Keohane, 'Ideas and foreign policy: an analytical framework', in Judith Goldstein & Robert O. Keohane, eds, *Ideas and foreign policy: beliefs, institutions, and political change* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1993) 12.

81 To rephrase Iranian Nobel laureate Shirin Ebadi, Iranians think of themselves 'as children of both Cyrus the Great and Mohammad', in Farideh Farhi, 'Crafting a national identity amidst contentious politics in contemporary Iran', in Homa Katouzian & Hossein Shahidi, eds., *Iran in the 21st century: politics, economics & conflict* (Oxon, UK: Routledge, 2008) 13.

82 As Ali M. Ansari notes, this oft-cited 2,500-year timeline in itself is problematic since it excises Iran's pre-Cyrus lineage encompassing the Medes, the non-Aryan Elamites and the legendary Kayanids, whose narrative fill the first half of the *Shahname*, *The politics of nationalism in modern Iran* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2012) 167.

83 That Middle Persian's 'Parsi' after the Arab conquest became Modern Persian's 'Farsi' owing to the lack of 'P' in Arabic, other than the adoption of the new alphabet, is emblematic.

Abbasid Baghdad.⁸⁴ Unlike most other states in the region, Iran has long been an independent entity in principle if not entirely in practice, and its civilizational history has corresponded to the same territorial core, the Iranian plateau (*Iranzamin/Iranshahr*). State Shi'ism similarly sets Iran apart from its Sunni neighbors. Institutionalized only with the advent of the militant and gnostically-inclined Azeri Safavids from 1501, Twelver Shi'ism provided Shah Isma'il an instrument with which to legitimize dynastic rule (through a claim to the Imamate and hence to divinity), forge transethnic unity and social conservatism at home, and to mark Persia off from its hostile Sunni Ottoman neighbor.⁸⁵ Doctrinally speaking however, Twelver Shi'ites lacked a united spiritual authority and generally preferred quietism and non-involvement in politics (recognizing, for instance, the temporal rule of the Safavids and Qajars); elsewhere in the Middle East, this meant temporally and temporarily submitting to majority Sunni political rule.⁸⁶

Following the Islamic Revolution, national identity provided the stem onto which a distinct regime ideology was grafted.⁸⁷ While the revolution staked out the promise of a unitive, universalist Islam (*contra* the Westphalian nation-state)⁸⁸ with Iran merely being 'the starting point',⁸⁹ Iranian 'nationalism'

84 Michael Axworthy, *Iran, empire of the mind: A history from Zoroaster to the present day* (London: Penguin, 2008) 81; Ali M. Ansari, 'Myth, history and narrative displacement in Iranian historiography', in Ansari, ed., *Perceptions of Iran: history, myths and nationalism from Medieval Persia to the Islamic Republic* (London: I.B. Tauris, 2014) 10; more generally, see Arthur J. Arberry, ed., *The legacy of Persia* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1952); for the linguistic perspective, see Dénes Gazsi, 'Arabic-Persian language contact', in Stefan Weninger, ed., *The Semitic languages: an international handbook* (Berlin: Walter de Gruyter, 2011): 1015-21.

85 Nikki R. Keddie, *Modern Iran: roots and results of revolution*, updated edition (New Haven: Yale University Press 2006) 10-11, 13-14.

86 This precedent was established by Ja'afar al-Sadiq, Shi'ism's sixth Imam who believed in the separation of state and mosque. The 12th Imam's disappearance merely reinforced this thinking, see Nikki R. Keddie, *Iran and the Muslim world: resistance and revolution* (NY: NYU Press, 1995) 22, 225.

87 Ali Ansari phrases it slightly differently: 'Thus the history of Iran and the apotheosis of Iranian identity was achieved through Islam, and such a dynamic was replicated in the triumph of the Islamic Revolution, which by situating itself as the pivotal event of modern Iranian history has systematically and often deliberately sought to refract the flow of narrative interpretation to its own particular and deterministic end', *Politics of nationalism*, 295.

88 See Khomeini's 2 November 1979 sermon, cited in Farhang Rajaee, *Islamic values and world view: Khomeyni on man, the state and international politics*, Vol. XIII (London: University Press of America, 1983) 82.

89 Khomeini, in an interview with *Al-Mustaqbal*, 13 January 1979.

continued to surface, if largely by inference,⁹⁰ in the government's inveighing against Western exploitation, imperialism and penetration,⁹¹ and certainly during its war with Iraq when overwhelming Arab support for Saddam controverted the notion of pan-Islamism. Memories of the Shah's capitulations to the US in 1963-4 (through the status-of-forces agreement), the CIA's toppling of the Mossadegh government, British and Soviet wartime occupation of Iran and deposal of Reza Khan, and before that, Britain and Russia's extortionary concessions from the Qajars provided grist to the propaganda mill of Iran's new rulers. Part of the virulent and ultimately Islamist backlash came in response to the Pahlavis' 'apish imitation of the West' (*gharbzadegi*), especially the US, since 'mimicry and submission are fraudulent and counterfeit states of being'.⁹² Curiously, while the Shah was widely perceived by Iranians as an American puppet, in the US he was seen as 'anything but'.⁹³ Equally excoriated alongside foreign imperialism was the Shah's domestic tyranny. When the US refused to extradite the Shah, radical students held US embassy staff hostage for 444 days, contravening all diplomatic practice and establishing 'enduring antagonism'⁹⁴ with the US as the cornerstone of Iranian state conduct.⁹⁵ As Bahman Baktiari notes, the 'fundamentalists saw the hostage crisis as an important political opportunity for them not only to weaken their opponents but also to institutionalize the

90 In the 1980s, Iran's leadership made only rare mention, if at all, of the 'national interest', focused as it was on exporting the *Islamic* revolution. That the National Consultative Assembly was renamed the Islamic Consultative Assembly, and that professional career diplomats were replaced by individuals vetted for their ideological fealty, was further evidence in this direction. For Khomeini's explicit views concerning exporting the revolution, see Rouhollah Khomeini, *Sahife-ye nou*, vol. 18 (Tehran: Vezarat-e Ershad, 1364/1985) 129.

91 In contrast to Islamizing proponents of independence were ultranationalist thinkers who took a dim view of Iran's Islamic episode. These included Mirza Agha Khan Kermani in the late 19th Century, the novelist Sadegh Hedayat in the 1940s, and Ahmad Kasravi until his assassination in 1946, see Keddie, *Modern Iran*, respectively 177-8, 183, and 185; this brand of nationalism subsequently acquired prominence under the Pahlavi Shahs.

92 Mehrzad Boroujerdi, 'Iranian Islam and the Faustian bargain of western modernity', *Journal of Peace Research* 34.1 (1997) 4.

93 Robert Jervis, *Why intelligence fails: lessons from the Iranian Revolution and the Iraq War* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2010) 25, 30.

94 Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, 'Islamic Utopian Romanticism and the foreign policy culture of Iran', *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 14.3 (Fall 2005) 283.

95 Robert Snyder, 'Explaining the Iranian Revolution's hostility toward the United States', *Journal of South Asian and Middle Eastern Studies* 17.3 (1994) 19.

Islamic revolution'.⁹⁶ Likewise, given Iran's manifest destiny, Khomeini sought comity with 'neither [communist] East nor [Zionist and capitalist] West, only the Islamic Republic' (*na shargh, na gharb, faghat Jomhouri-ye Eslami*), thereby rejecting both the Shah's perceived dependency and the superpower-dominated status quo.⁹⁷ To paraphrase then foreign minister Velayati, Iran had already suffered under one superpower and would hardly allow another superpower to take its place.⁹⁸ Down the road, the most dramatic bid for independence would assume the form of the nuclear program.

Likewise, Khomeini transformed the notion of *Velayat-e Faghih*, originally the strictly social custodianship of society's weaker members, into the 'rulership of the Jurisconsult' (Supreme Leader), thereby fusing religion and politics into a blueprint for comprehensive Islamic government in anticipation of the Twelfth Imam's reappearance.⁹⁹ In its revolutionary guise, historical Shi'ite victimhood and oppression – immortalized by Hossein's martyrdom at the hands of Yezid – became sublimated into a potent reserve for social mobilization and, during the war, self-sacrifice for the sake of the national weal. Khomeini's universalist Islam and *Velayat-e Faghih*'s reinvented mandate meant that Iran, more than just domestically, now saw itself as the custodian, vanguard and paragon for all Shi'a and *all Muslims*, allowing it to overcome its own Persian-Shi'ite minority status. The 'dispossessed' and the 'barefoot', including even all of the world's non-Muslims if one pushed the limits, entered a carefully calibrated Manichean dichotomy vis-à-vis the 'global arrogance', affirming the justness and transcendence of the Revolutionary cause and,¹⁰⁰ it was hoped, a new Islamic order. Shi'ism thus transformed into another bulwark against creeping Westernization and

96 Bahman Baktiari, *Parliamentary politics in Revolutionary Iran: the institutionalization of factional politics* (Gainesville: University Press of Florida, 1996) 70; according to the leading radical in the hostage affair (Abbas Abdi), the conservatives were against this, *Iran-e Farda*, Mehr-Aban 1371/October-November 1992, 38-49.

97 Rouhollah K. Ramazani, *Revolutionary Iran: challenge and response in the Middle East* (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1986) 21-2.

98 'Sino-Iran accord for cultural, scientific exchanges', *Tehran Times*, 17 September 1983.

99 The *Faghih*'s mandate was conceived as hierarchically subordinate to those of the Prophet, followed by the Imams, and was to bridge the occultation period until the return of the twelfth and last Imam, as enshrined in article 5 of the 1979 constitution.

100 Khomeini and early revolutionaries such as Ayatollah Mahmoud Taleghani and Mir-Hossein Mousavi emphatically referred to the Revolution's universal, rather than Islamic-only, message. See David Menashri, *Post-revolutionary politics in Iran: religion, society, and power* (London: Frank Cass 2001) 173-4.

perceived hegemony.¹⁰¹ As MacGregor Knox put it, ideology influences strategy by ‘shap[ing] the expectations and goals of those who decide and the ferocity and stamina of those who fight’.¹⁰² But if the revolutionary government initially promoted Islam to the detriment of Iranian particularism, the ledger has since cautiously shifted towards some kind of Islamo-Iranian synthesis.¹⁰³

National identity, refracted through the prism of regime ideology, accentuates Iran’s perceived status or national role conception. Kal Holsti speaks of status as a ‘rough estimate of a state’s ranking’.¹⁰⁴ Juneau usefully employs the notion of status discrepancy, namely the gap between Iran’s *aspirations* as a state actor, and its *perception of the status ascribed to it* by other states,¹⁰⁵ a necessarily structural and socially constructed phenomenon.¹⁰⁶ Considering history, geography and demography, Iran understandably demands greater recognition of its regional influence – this fact has remained constant throughout its history. Post-revolutionary Iran’s aspirations to an internationalist Islamism and indeed, a new international order flow from, and in turn exacerbate this status discrepancy.¹⁰⁷ Status can be granted and withheld arbitrarily. Under Shah Pahlavi, Iran’s regional status increased with its growing industrial and military power, but crucially because it

101 Until Khomeini, some of the leading proponents of an anti-Western Islamic-Iranian identity included Sayyed Jamal ad-Din ‘al-Afghani’ in the late 19th Century, Jalal Al-e Ahmad in the 1960s, and taking over him with a virulently revolutionary, Third Worldist if somewhat anti-clericalist bent from the 1970s, Ali Shariati. For a brief overview, see Keddie, *Modern Iran*, respectively 175-7, 189-90, and 200-8.

102 MacGregor Knox, ‘Conclusion: continuity and revolution’, in Murray, Knox & Bernstein, *The Making of Strategy*, 627.

103 Shireen T. Hunter, *Iran after Khomeini*, The Washington Papers 156 (New York: Praeger, 1992) 92-5.

104 Kal J. Holsti, ‘National role conceptions in the study of foreign policy’, *International Studies Quarterly* 14.3 (September 1970) 244.

105 Juneau, *Squandered opportunities*, 41, esp. FN 18.

106 A related notion, known as power cycle theory, investigates the gap between a state’s relative power and the actual role – defined as the state’s ability to exercise power without consuming it – it is granted. See Charles Doran, ‘Systemic disequilibria, foreign policy role, and the power cycle’, *Journal of Conflict Resolution* 33.3 (1989): 371-401; see also Trita Parsi, ‘Israeli-Iranian relations assessed: strategic competition from the power cycle perspective’, in Katouzian & Shahidi, eds., *Iran in the 21st century*, 140-2.

107 Sayyed Jalal Dehghani Firooz-Abadi, ‘The Islamic Republic of Iran and the ideal international system’, in Anoushiravan Ehteshami & Reza Molavi, eds, *Iran and the international system* (Oxon: Routledge, 2012) 51-3.

also served as one of two pillars of Western security in the Persian Gulf in line with the Nixon Doctrine.¹⁰⁸ With the Revolution, the US and many of its regional Sunni allies have stonewalled Iran's aspirations, denying it a significant role in its immediate neighborhood. Iran may therefore be said to be a revisionist state vis-à-vis status, not territory.¹⁰⁹

These in turn shape and define state interests or *raison d'état* (i.e. ends), a fundamentally realist if exasperatingly fluid notion.¹¹⁰ Since survival in a security-scarce world constitutes the irreducible 'ground of action',¹¹¹ we may *with certainty* postulate only irreducible, rather than discretionary or maximal interests. This accords with the findings of Kahneman and Tversky, according to which humans are *by and large* more loss-averse than gain-seeking.¹¹² Iran's core interests are encapsulated in 'Islamic', 'Republic' and 'Iran', and spelt out in the constitution's triple formula to preserve the Islamic Revolution, national sovereignty, and Iran's territorial integrity.¹¹³ In its original 17th century rendering, Cardinal Richelieu's *raison d'état* meant the 'well-being of the state [i.e. Catholic France and specifically its ruling elite]' but this also 'justified whatever means were employed to further it [e.g. alliances with Protestant princes to oppose attempts by the Habsburg Holy Roman Empire to dominate Europe and encircle France]'.¹¹⁴ In Iran, the preservation of the political order midwived by Revolution and articulated by the ruling establishment similarly eclipses all else in importance, including Islamic law, and permits expediency (*maslahat-e nezam*, lit. 'regime welfare') in case of clashing interests. Political expediency is however hardly novel in the Shi'ite historical experience, closely devolving as it does from the jurisprudential practice of *ejtehad*, that is the issuance of circumstantially-

108 Indeed, the Shah was so confident in Iran's re-ascendance he even sought to bring the Indian Ocean under his sphere of influence. Defense spending in the 1970s rose nearly ten-fold to \$9.4 billion by 1977.

109 Shahram Chubin, 'Iran's power in context', *Survival* 51.1 (February-March 2009) 166; territorial exceptions are the two Tunbs and Abu Musa (islands), but this type of restricted claims are rather common to many other states and do not therefore count as revisionism here.

110 It should likewise be pointed out that there is, of course, no logical impediment to interests shaping ideology and identity instead.

111 Waltz, *Theory*, 92.

112 Daniel Kahneman & Amos Tversky, 'Prospect theory: an analysis of decision under risk', *Econometrica* 47.2 (March 1979): 263–291.

113 Iran is obviously not a republic in the full sense of the term. Still, aside from Islam, republicanism is domestically represented as the main basis of national legitimacy, and therefore, sovereignty as well.

114 Henry Kissinger, *Diplomacy* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994) 58.

necessitated independent rulings, in contradistinction to the Sunni practice of employing legal precedent. An Expediency Council was even explicitly created for this purpose in the event of disputes between parliamentary and Guardian Council rulings.¹¹⁵ As Khomeini admonished Khamenei in 1988:

The government (state) which is a part of the absolute vice-regency of the Prophet of God is one of the primary injunctions (*ahkam-e avvaliyeh*) of Islam and has priority over all other secondary injunctions, even prayers, fasting and *Hajj*.¹¹⁶

Concretely, these irreducible interests translate into: ensuring regime survival; countering the West's cultural onslaught (*tahajom-ye farhangi*) since it weakens Islamic identity, solidarity and rule;¹¹⁷ preserving Iran's dignity (*aberu*); ensuring national survival and mitigating security vulnerabilities; degrading hostile and especially American regional influence and by the same stroke, enhancing Iran's position in the Persian Gulf, the Caspian, and the Middle East; securing energy export pathways especially through the Straits of Hormuz, and concurrently, decreasing structural economic dependencies on hydrocarbons. To belabor irreducible ends is hardly to deny maximal ones such as 'defending the rights of all Muslims' or regional hegemony, which can even represent the extreme outcome of security-maximization and is likely given historical precedents and official rhetoric. It is merely to emphasize their logical priority for non-great powers in security-scarce environments preoccupied with regime survival. Iran's geography, while a source of leverage, makes it an 'arena of great power rivalry...extremely

115 Headed by moderate conservative Rafsanjani, the Expediency Council was at the time intended to balance the traditional conservative-dominated Guardian Council with the then radical-dominated parliament.

116 Cited in Mehdi Moslem, 'Ayatollah Khomeini's role in the rationalization of the Islamic government', *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 8:14 (1999) 81. The same article offers an excellent analysis of the origins of 'expediency' in Iranian politics. Khomeini's admonishment originally appeared in *Ettela'at*, 18 Dey 1366/8 January 1988.

117 Khomeini once declared that to lose the cultural war was to render any political or military victory meaningless, *Ettela'at*, 2 Tir 1367/23 June 1988; during the revolution, Azar Nafisi recollects how one of her English literature students called it 'a rape of our culture', Azar Nafisi, *Reading Lolita in Tehran* (New York: Random House, 2004) 126; the theme of cultural imperialism is ubiquitous and deeply ingrained in modern Iran, even captured in high school textbooks such as *Taarikh, tamaddon va farhang* [History, civilization and culture] (Tehran 1365/1986-7), 152-61, and *Danesh-e Ejtema'i* [Social studies], from the same year, 120-5, both cited in Menashri, *Post-revolutionary politics*, 220-21 (FNs 6 and 38).

vulnerable to events beyond its control, especially changes in the great power relations and the character of regional and international political systems'.¹¹⁸ The means to these ends, as we see further, vary over time. These interests in turn color the way threats and opportunities are perceived and prioritized.¹¹⁹

Even assuming rational decisionmaking, cognitive, epistemic and perceptual lapses regularly interpose themselves. FPNSEs, Fordham reminds us, do not 'always know best'.¹²⁰ Bridging the conceptual gap between perfect rational actor models and seemingly irrational outcomes is Herbert Simon's notion of 'bounded rationality', or Thomas Schelling's parsing of 'irrationality... within a theory of rational behavior'.¹²¹ Chronically overwhelmed with tasks and frequently wanting in computational ability, self-reflection and adequate information despite access to classified intelligence, decisionmakers tend to 'satisfy rather than maximize utility' and 'simplify the world by adopting interpretive categories',¹²² collegial consensus or even wishful thinking as heuristic devices: they 'satisfice'.¹²³ Moreover, as Robert Jervis argues, 'people assimilate discrepant information to their pre-existing beliefs'.¹²⁴ In addition, many establishment hardliners are reportedly untutored in western languages and shun modern social sciences, instead receiving much of their information from briefs and translations prepared, for instance, by the Ministry of Intelligence and Security (MOIS).¹²⁵ If intelligence agencies play a key role in information processing and decisionmaking, it would be

118 Hunter, *Iran after Khomeini*, 101.

119 This is in addition to more 'objective' threat identification criteria such as Stephen Walt has proposed: aggregate power, proximity, offensive capability and offensive intentions. See his 'Alliance formation and the balance of world power', *International Security* 9.4 (Spring 1985) 9-13.

120 Benjamin Fordham, 'The limits of neoclassical realism: additive and interactive approaches to explaining foreign policy preferences', in Lobell, Ripsman & Taliaferro, *Neoclassical Realism*, 256.

121 Herbert A. Simon, *Models of bounded rationality* (Cambridge, MA: MIT Press 1982); Thomas C. Schelling, *The strategy of conflict* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1963) 16-7.

122 Christensen, *Useful adversaries*, 17.

123 On this point, see for instance Alex Mintz & Geva Nehemia, 'The poliheuristic theory of foreign policy decision making', in Alex Mintz & Nehemia Geva, eds, *Decision making on war and peace: the cognitive-rational debate* (London: Lynne Rienner, 1997): 81-102

124 Robert Jervis, *Perception and misperception in international politics* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1976) 180.

125 Masoud Kazemzadeh, 'Foreign policy decision making in Iran', forthcoming book chapter (obtained in private correspondence with the author) 7-8.

reasonable to question, given Iran's authoritarian and ideological character, the extent to which intelligence estimates speak truth to power or instead relate 'truth' as decisionmakers desire to hear it.¹²⁶

Ideational-constitutive variables collectively portray post-revolutionary Iran as fiercely independent, anti-imperial and anti-colonialist (Iranian particularism), mistrustful and justice-seeking (Shi'ism), ideologically rejectionist especially vis-à-vis the US and Israel (regime ideology), and revisionist with respect to the prevailing systemic order (status aspirations).¹²⁷ Yet, this notwithstanding, Iran is also highly amenable to opportunities and threats affecting regime survival (expediency as the overarching determinant of *raison d'état*), which accounts significantly for turns outside observers deem 'pragmatic'. Ideational-constitutive variables serve interpretative but also extractive-mobilizational purposes. While authoritarian rule allows Tehran to circumvent resource extraction problems associated with genuine democracies subject to rigorous legislatures, the leadership must still dress policy choices in simplistic, ideological garb in the interests of maintaining some semblance of domestic legitimacy, if not to co-opt Iranian society. Relatively broad and 'static' as these variables are, what remains is the 'dynamic' character of elite differences, which also helps account for seemingly 'irrational' outcomes.

b. Institutional-competitive variables

If ideational-constitutive variables set the tone for grand strategy, they are further specified by individuals and institutions which vie and logroll with each other for domestic power, resources, and policy prerogatives. Morgenthau remarked half a century ago that '[d]omestic and international politics are but two different manifestations of the same phenomenon: the struggle for power'.¹²⁸ Later, Allison and Zelikow's study of the Cuban missile crisis demonstrated how organizational competition and governmental politics provide an alternative explanation for policy outcomes alongside

126 As Michael Herman reminds us, the politicization of intelligence is particularly pervasive in authoritarian regimes, see '11 September: legitimizing intelligence?' *International Relations* 16 (August 2002): 227-41.

127 In his study of Iranian foreign policy from 2001-9, Juneau employs status discrepancy as the first in a causal chain of three intervening variables, followed by ideology and then domestic politics. Accordingly, Iran's limited aims revisionism was further shaped by rejectionism and finally specified by the push and pull of factional politics. See *Squandered opportunity*, 84-5.

128 Morgenthau, *Politics among nations*, 50.

the idealized rational actor model,¹²⁹ while Putnam recast this domestic-international entanglement as ‘two-level games’.¹³⁰ The nature of elite competition follows from regime type, and in our context, the specifically diffused nature of Iranian politics.¹³¹ The Islamic Republic is *sui generis* in that the elected republican establishment functions in parallel with, and often in subordination to an unelected coterie of religious and revolutionary institutions with its own security-intelligence apparatus.¹³² Far from fiat rule however, Ayatollah Khamenei serves as balancer-in-chief and regulates a political arena within which recognized factional elites compete and engage in horse-trading over narrow interests. Political competition takes place between factions and within them, but manifests itself through the interests of the institutions they control,¹³³ and is moreover accompanied by vigorous and sometimes very public debates and altercations. The Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) then serves as the final arena in which FNSP, the principal outward-looking instruments of grand strategy, are debated and ‘ratified’ before being implemented.¹³⁴ In sum, the nuances of interfactional competition influence the definition of ends and interests, the selection of means, and the timing and style of policy and grand strategy.

Despite regular popular elections at the presidential, parliamentary and municipal levels (and less frequently for the Assembly of Experts), factions, constituencies and bureaucratic organizations within the ruling establishment with ‘decisive power to select, back, or eject leaders’ are most able to influence FNSP.¹³⁵ Operating within established ideological, discursive and normative boundaries marked by acceptance of the existing political order and *Velayat*,¹³⁶ they also continually push their own agendas and definitions of state interests, and are capable of modifying these boundaries, if subtly.

129 Graham Allison & Philip Zelikow, *Essence of decision: explaining the Cuban missile crisis*, 2nd ed. (New York: Longman, 1999).

130 Robert D. Putnam, ‘Diplomacy and domestic politics: the logic of two-level games’, *International Organization* 42.3 (1988) 433-36.

131 Mehdi Moslem, *Factional politics in post-Khomeini Iran* (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002) 11.

132 See Kevjn Lim, ‘National security decisionmaking in Iran’, *Comparative Strategy* 34.2 (2015), esp. figures 1-3.

133 Moslem, *Factional politics*, 9, 37.

134 Putnam, ‘Logic of two-level games’, 436.

135 Ripsman, ‘Domestic interest groups’, 182-3.

136 Moslem, *Factional politics*, 4; see also Maximilian Terhalle, ‘Revolutionary power and socialization: explaining the persistence of revolutionary zeal in Iran's foreign policy’, *Security Studies* 18.3 (2009): 557-586.

While factions may be ‘ideological’, the direction of influence between ideational-constitutive and institutional-competitive elements do not only run one way: the state, through the faction dominating it at a given moment, is constantly ‘producing and reproducing national identities’.¹³⁷

Political factions in Iran are mainly represented by loose ideological camps rather than political parties *sensu stricto* – though these exist – and are often associated with key individuals within and outside of official government, supported by media outlets. Broadly, five such camps have existed continuously or at one time: radical Islamists, (who after Khomeini reinvented themselves as) reformists, modern pragmatic conservatives, traditional conservatives (the mainstay of the ruling elite), and the even more hardline neoconservatives.¹³⁸ While the currently existing factions tout differing positions on the economy, religion and especially Islamic jurisprudence, sociocultural mores, and foreign policy, these labels are now more closely associated with non-economic issues. Reformists and pragmatists thus tend to be relatively conciliatory in foreign policy and liberal in sociocultural and religious matters (especially women’s rights), even as the conservative-neoconservative fold reflects the opposite tendencies. But even then, as Mehdi Moslem has shown, factions themselves undergo ‘shifts and rifts’ in response to the political environment.¹³⁹ These factions likewise tend to exhibit similar socioeconomic backgrounds,¹⁴⁰ and have in common their loyalty to the Islamic Republic and the supreme role of *Velayat* (though they debate its absolutism). While they may agree on ends

137 Roxanne Lynn Doty, ‘Sovereignty and the nation: constructing the boundaries of national identity’, in Thomas J. Biersteker & Cynthia Weber, eds., *State sovereignty as social construct* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1996) 128.

138 In the early 1990s an even more aggressive, fundamentalist leftwing tendency surfaced with respect to sociocultural mores, but coalesced into a serious political force only when they shifted rightwards and became the neoconservatives later associated with Ahmadinejad. See Behzad Nabavi, *Asr-e Ma*, 7 Dey 1373/28 December 1994; and Moslem, *Factional politics*, 134–41.

139 Moslem, *ibid.*, 7; one prominent example was in the way the radicals and traditional conservatives viewed *Velayat-e Faghih*’s scope of authority: during Khomeini’s time, the former favored a far stronger *Faghih* than the latter. After Khomeini, it was the reverse. When the former radicals (now reformists) allied themselves with the pragmatic conservatives, they assailed the traditional conservatives’ absolutist reading of *Velayat*, as exemplified in the writings of Mohsen Kadivar.

140 Amin Saikal, ‘The politics of factionalism in Iran’ (draft), in Jerrold D. Green, Frederic Wehrey & Charles Wolf Jr., ‘Understanding Iran’ (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2009) 96.

and Iran's higher place in this world, they sharply disagree on the means to achieving these.¹⁴¹

In the first years of revolutionary government after the anti-*Velayat* elements (liberals, nationalists, Marxists) were sidelined, two major factions took shape within the Islamic Republican Party which eventually dissolved by June 1987 over irreconcilable, mainly socioeconomic, differences.¹⁴² Thus, a radical 'left' advocating a command economy, Third World socialist redistributive principles and unrelenting export of the revolution existed alongside a traditional conservative 'right' that, other than its sociocultural conservatism, enjoined ownership of private property and a less exuberant if more cautious foreign policy.¹⁴³ In the executive branch, growing factional animosity was reflected in the disagreement over the scope of constitutional authority between the radical Prime Minister Mir-Hossein Mousavi and the conservative President Ali Khamenei. In the legislative branch, factions concerned with economic issues split between Mehdi Karroubi and Ayatollah Ahmad Azari-Qomi.¹⁴⁴ Still, Khomeini 'maintained a balance between various factions, not allowing one to eliminate the other'.¹⁴⁵ By the time Khomeini died, Khamenei and Rafsanjani, who had respectively become Supreme Leader and president, joined forces to eliminate the radicals now bereft of Khomeini's backing from active politics altogether.¹⁴⁶ This was

141 For an elaboration, see for instance Sayyed Jalal Dehghani Firooz-Abadi, *Tahavvol-e goftemani dar siyasat-e khareji-ye Jomhuri-ye Eslami-ye Iran* [The evolution of discourse in the IRI's foreign policy] (Tehran: Entesharat-e Ruznameh Iran, 1384/2005).

142 The existence of 'two camps' was noted early on by then President and secretary-general of the IRP Khamenei, *Jomhuri-ye Eslami*, 30 Mordad 1362/21 August 1983; For a detailed account, see Baktiari, *Parliamentary politics*, esp. ch. 3; in parliamentary politics, radicals had come to be known as *Maktabis* and had labelled their conservative opponents *Hojjatis*, a derogatory reference to the Messianist *Hojjatiyeh* movement, Baktiari, *ibid.*, 81. Finally, from this dissolution emerged the right-leaning *Jame'-ye Rouhaniyat-e Mobarez* (Militant Clergy Society, founded 1977) and the left-leaning *Majma'-ye Rouhaniyun-e Mobarez* (Combatant Clerics Association, founded in 1988).

143 See Moslem, *Factional politics*, 47-8; The issue of private property was likewise an intensely debated one, see Baktiari, *Parliamentary politics*, 84.

144 *Ibid.*, 140-1.

145 *Ibid.*, 63.

146 For one account of this very public power struggle towards the 1992 parliamentary elections, see David Menashri, 'Revolution at a crossroads: Iran's domestic politics and regional ambitions', Policy Paper 43 (Washington, D.C.: WINEP, 1997) 24-26; according to Baktiari, Khomeini first openly backed the radicals on 17 December

necessary for the post-war shift from ideological fundamentalism to a more pragmatic basis for reconstruction and rehabilitation.¹⁴⁷ Over time, Rafsanjani's predominant influence gradually ceded way to that of Khamenei's.¹⁴⁸ A moderate conservative himself, Rafsanjani began parting company with the traditional conservatives after the 1992 parliamentary elections, finally sealing the break in February 1996 with the creation of the technocratic and socially progressive *Kargozaran-e Sazandegi* (Servants of Reconstruction).¹⁴⁹ By the time Mohammad Khatami succeeded Rafsanjani in the May 1997 presidential elections, the erstwhile radicals, including former parliamentary speaker Mehdi Karroubi and former prime minister Mousavi had reinvented themselves as reformists intent on transforming and galvanizing the system from the inside.¹⁵⁰ The most powerful clerical voice to lend them support was Khomeini's disgraced one-time heir, Ayatollah Hossein-Ali Montazeri.¹⁵¹ The alliance between reformists and pragmatists thus temporarily solidified.¹⁵²

In the years leading up to Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's presidency, yet another faction known as neoconservatives emerged from within the conservative wing with even more hardline views with regards to foreign policy and social issues, alongside their economic populism.¹⁵³ These consisted of lay individuals of the Revolution's second generation who served in the

1983 when he commended Mousavi's wartime government on 'an excellent job' despite protests by the latter's opponents. See *Parliamentary politics*, 99, and *Kayhan*, 27 Azar 1362/18 December 1983.

147 See David Menashri, 'The domestic power struggle and the fourth Iranian Majlis elections', *Orient* 33.3 (1992) 387-408.

148 This was largely a consequence of Khamenei gaining support at the expense of Rafsanjani, whose painful economic reforms had incurred popular anger by the mid-1990s.

149 *Kargozaran* was founded by 16 government figures close to Rafsanjani and competed in the 1996 parliamentary elections as an independent faction, coming in second after the traditional conservatives. The faction's mouthpiece is still *Hamshahri*; for the founding text, see *Ettela'at*, 28 Dey 1374/18 January 1996.

150 For the subgroups comprising the reformist camp, see Wilfried Buchta, 'Who rules Iran? The structure of power in the Islamic Republic' (Washington, DC: WINEP and Konrad Adenauer Stiftung, 2000) 12-3.

151 Montazeri's alliance with the radicals (proto-reformists), according to Baktiari, began in response to the execution of Montazeri's son-in-law Mehdi Hashemi for having blown the whistle on the Iran-Contra affair managed by Rafsanjani, *Parliamentary politics*, 171-4.

152 Aside from the left's deradicalization, abetting this rapprochement was the moderate conservatives' greater economic statism. Moslem, *Factional politics*, 227-8.

153 Many of these were also associated with *Abadgaran* (Alliance of Developers of Islamic Iran), and *Isargaran* (Society of Devotees of the Islamic Revolution).

military-security establishment during the Iran-Iraq war, and who allied themselves with members of the clerical far-right among the traditional conservatives such as Ayatollah Mesbah Yazdi and longtime Guardian Council chair Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati.¹⁵⁴ The Supreme Leader and the traditional conservatives found them useful allies in their own struggle to marginalize the reformists and the pragmatic conservatives associated with Rafsanjani. Among the neoconservatives was a small cabal including Ahmadinejad and his chief-of-staff Esfandiyar Rahim Mashaei who tended towards an openly Messianist and Chiliastic reading of Shi'ite politics.¹⁵⁵

But the dominant faction by far remained the traditional conservatives with the thinly-veiled patronage of Khamenei,¹⁵⁶ whose hardline has become the norm from which 'any departure... must be justified'.¹⁵⁷ Khamenei has been Supreme Leader since 1989, and his closest associates have presided over or held majorities in key institutions such as the Guardian Council which vets all legislation and election candidates; the Assembly of Experts which selects and oversees the Supreme Leader; the judiciary; the Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting agency (*Seda o Sima*); and the various charitable foundations and security/intelligence organizations such as the Revolutionary Guards (IRGC). Importantly, the traditional conservatives retained a powerful alliance with the *bazaari* merchant class, the only two social sectors the Shah could not fully subjugate,¹⁵⁸ which explains the traditional conservatives' twin emphasis on free market economics and sociocultural conservatism.

154 The same Mesbah Yazdi also argued that because of the *Vali's* infallibility, and therefore the absolute nature of the *Velayat*, republican participatory politics served no active purpose, see Mesbah Yazdi, *Hoghugh va siyasat dar Qur'an* [Law and politics in the Qur'an], M. Shahrabi, ed. (Qom: Entesharat-e Mo'assase-ye Amuzeshi va Pazhuheshi-ye Emam Khomeini, 1999) 317.

155 Ahmadinejad and Mashaei were associated with what would become *Maktab-e Irani*, the 'Iranian School' of thought that sought to reinstate pre-Islamic (Achaemenid and especially Sassanian) nationalism along with Shi'ism in Iran's identity, Ansari, *Politics of nationalism*, 279.

156 Besides the *Jame'-ye Rouhaniyat-e Mobarez* (Militant Clergy Association), there was also the *Jame'-ye Modarresin-e Houze-ye 'Elmiye-ye Ghom* (Society of Qom Seminary Teachers), some of whose membership overlapped with the former, as well as a host of other religious and charitable foundations (*bonyads*). For details, see Buchta, *Who rules Iran?*, 13.

157 Chubin, *Iran's national security policy*, 68.

158 Ervand Abrahamian, *Iran between two revolutions* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 1982) 533; the clergy and the *bazaari* class were united in their respective opposition to policies that weakened the former's influence and the

Finally, the desire to affect changes in the domestic balance of power or even the domestic politics of another country can influence threat identification and foreign policy. As Steven Lobell argues, the FPNSE ‘can act internationally for domestic reasons or domestically for international ends’.¹⁵⁹ Thus, the radicals’ US embassy takeover also aimed at weakening the liberal prime minister Mehdi Bazargan, Khomeini’s 1989 Rushdie fatwa simultaneously questioned the revolutionary commitment of pragmatic elements in the government, and the ‘chain murders’ of Iranian dissidents and the Karine-A affair sought to undermine the credibility of Khatami’s reformist government. Such internecine jostling for power came to shape decisionmaking and grand strategy and accounted for much of the apparent vacillation and contradictions in its foreign and security policy,¹⁶⁰ something that even domestic constituents took issue with.¹⁶¹

latter’s livelihoods (in favor of increasingly industrialized sectors and foreign competition) under the Shah’s rule, Keddie, *Modern Iran*, 222-7.

159 Lobell, ‘Threat assessment’, 56.

160 Menashri, *Post-revolutionary politics*, 175.

161 See Menashri, *Crossroads*, 71.

4. The first inflection point, 1988-91

The independent variable: systemic imperatives

In August 1988, Iran emerged from a decade of unbridled revolutionary zeal and war militarily stalemated, economically debilitated, diplomatically isolated and ideologically sobered. The eight-year war came perilously close to jeopardizing regime survival. Together with Khomeini's death in June 1989, key changes in the constitution, and the rise of a new leadership, this marked the transition towards a more pronounced pragmatism.¹⁶² But the collapse of the Soviet Union, the end of the Cold War, and the First Gulf War would add decisive impetus to Iran's grand strategic adjustments.

At a time of massive internal change, post-war Iran welcomed better relations and hence stability with its northern neighbor, so that what instead transpired generated anxiety in Tehran. Yet, when the already moribund Soviet Union finally disintegrated in 1991, so did Iran's two century-old adversary, who in two wars and three humiliating treaties in the Czarist nineteenth century cut Qajar Iran down to size by appropriating a number of its northern provinces.¹⁶³ Soviet collapse transformed erstwhile borderlands

162 Anoushiravan Ehteshami, 'The foreign policy of Iran', in Raymond Hinnebusch & Anoushiravan Ehteshami, eds., *The foreign policies of Middle Eastern states* (London: Lynne Rienner 2002) 299; again, pragmatism was already clearly in evidence under Khomeini in instances such as the Iran-Contra affair, investigation of which Khomeini himself quashed. Further, as a constant refrain goes, the first major adjustment of truly strategic moment was Khomeini's acceptance of the 'chalice of poison' despite earlier promises of 'war until victory'. His passing however allowed for greater *institutionalization* and relative *routinization* of pragmatism.

163 For a short and readable historical account, see Peter Hopkirk, *The Great Game: on secret service in High Asia* (London: John Murray, 1990) 109-114; the Treaties of Golestan (1813) and Turkmenchay (1828) gave Russia control of Azerbaijan (Shirvan), Dagestan, Eastern Georgia and Armenia, in addition to exclusive naval use of the Caspian Sea and extraterritorial privileges in Iran, among other things; the Treaty of Akhal (1881) gave Russia control of Khwarezm, i.e. the southern parts of present-day Turkmenistan. From 1945-7, the Soviets again attempted, unsuccessfully, to incorporate Iran's northwest through a pro-Moscow coup by Ja'afar Pishevari's Azerbaijan People's Government, and Qazi Mohammad's

into sovereign states – Turkmenistan, Azerbaijan and Armenia – and granted Iran access to a potentially captive Muslim population in Central Asia and the Caucasus, even as it opened the way for a future ally in Russia. Conversely, Soviet collapse exposed Iran to potential ethnic or irredentist agitation (Shi'ite Azeris and Sunni Turkmens) and conflict (between Azerbaijan and Armenia) across the border, and critically, freed up Iran's adoptive arch-nemesis the US as the world's unchallenged superpower.¹⁶⁴ The balance of threats implicit in Khomeini's 'neither east nor west' paean now tilted decisively in favor of the latter, along with a perceived decline in Iran's security, power and influence. Iran now needed to counteract the American-led 'new world order'.

Although Washington had by the late 1980s shifted from tacitly supporting Iraq to actively punishing Iran in Operation Praying Mantis, unrestrained US hard power truly came to the fore in early 1991. When Saddam Hussein invaded oil-rich Kuwait, US forces annihilated the Iraqi army in a conventional war within forty-three days, unhinging the same powerbrokers in Tehran who had waged years of attrition warfare with little impact on the strategic balance. US forces leveraged superior command, control, communications and intelligence as well as precision-guided air power which Iran could not match let alone overcome.¹⁶⁵ If the eight-year war seared into Iran's military brass the indispensability of retaliatory missile capabilities potentially enhanced by weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in the absence of aerial superiority or even battlefield competence,¹⁶⁶ Desert Storm reaffirmed the futility of a frontal conventional approach and the desperate need for an asymmetric edge. The Gulf War led to the temporary removal of Iran's immediate wartime adversary. Yet the US' entrenched military and its perceived regional hegemony quickly forced Iran, a possible next target, onto an aggressively defensive footing.

Kurdish Republic of Mahabad. As if this weren't enough, Russia also assisted in quashing the early twentieth century Constitutional Revolution in favour of the Qajar monarchy.

164 In a Radio Tehran address, Rafsanjani quipped that with the collapse of the USSR, the US would now seek to 'ensure absolute dominance', 18 September 1992, cited in Menashri, *Post-revolutionary politics*, 189.

165 See Geoffrey Kemp & Robert E. Harkavy, *Strategic geography and the changing Middle East* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace/Brookings Institution Press, 1997) 206-8.

166 *Resalat*, 10 Dey 1369/31 December 1990; Chubin, *Iran's national security policy*, 22-3.

Intervening variable: ideational-constitutive aspects

By the early 1990s, the experience of war and isolation had galvanized both pillars of national identity, Iranian particularism and Shi'ism. Remarkably, the balance was cautiously shifting towards the reinstatement of nationalism, evidenced in the year-long commemoration of Ferdowsi (author of Iran's best known national epic, the *Shahname*) in 1990 and in a discreet visit by President Rafsanjani to Persepolis/Takht-e Jamshid in 1991.¹⁶⁷ Iran's rejectionism towards the US and especially Israel endured – this animus constituted a bedrock of regime ideology – but the more febrile aspects of revolutionary export softened under Rafsanjani's watch and allowed for détente with other nations. Iran's status discrepancy persisted, but was at least mitigated by improved foreign relations. Perceiving momentous geostrategic threats and opportunities, Iran's leaders undertook a re-reckoning of state interests to better calibrate ends and means.¹⁶⁸ The exuberance which carried the Revolution knew no limits to ambitions and greatly outstripped the means with painful consequences, as the mistake of pursuing a total war into Iraqi territory in mid-1982 had demonstrated: the peace that followed six years later wasn't better than that which preceded in 1980.¹⁶⁹ Crucially, dwindling oil exports could simply no longer finance the war's continuation.¹⁷⁰ Rafsanjani needed to alter and backpedal on some of Khomeini's policy pronouncements in order to preserve regime, revolution, and republic. While Iran still perceived Saddam Hussein as a threat, by the Gulf War, US forces intended to police Iraq became the immediate concern, and abortive

167 Ansari, *Politics of nationalism*, 232-3.

168 Even before the Gulf War and the final dissolution of the USSR, the then secretary of the Supreme National Security Council and Rafsanjani's go-to man for foreign policy, Hassan Rouhani, already put it this way: 'The extraordinary events that have taken place in the world recently and are continuing [as of end 1989], the events that have happened in our own region, as well as the events that have taken place within our country, are persuading us to re-examine once more our own place and position in the world'. The Iranian Parliament, *Record of parliamentary debates*, 18 December 1989, cited in Baktiari, *Parliamentary politics*, 206-7.

169 For a brief synopsis of the turning point, see Kenneth M. Pollack, *The Persian puzzle: the conflict between Iran and America* (NY: Random House 2004) 193-5; for an Iranian view justifying the war's continuation, see Hossein Ardestani, *Tajziye va tahlil-e jang-e Iran va Aragh*, Jeld 3: tanbih-e motajavez [An analysis of the Iran-Iraq war, vol. 3: Punishing the aggressor] (Tehran: Markaz-e Motala'at va Tahghighat-e Jang, 1384/2005-6) 11.

170 'Rafsanjani on Iran's conduct of the war', *Aftab News*, 21 June 2008, via National Security Archives <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB394/docs/2008-06-21%20Rafsanjani%20interview.pdf>

attempts at dialogue followed by US sanctions entrenched Tehran's mistrust and conviction in its own cause.

Intervening variable: institutional-competitive aspects

With Khomeini's passing, the duumvirate comprising Supreme Leader Khamenei and President Rafsanjani underwent a consolidation phase.¹⁷¹ Rafsanjani had been the one to convince both Khomeini to accept Resolution 598,¹⁷² and the Assembly of Experts to elect Khamenei as Supreme Leader.¹⁷³ His personal influence peaked alongside the widely held view that he was the most qualified person to oversee Iran's postwar rehabilitation,¹⁷⁴ and his institutional appointments reflected this.¹⁷⁵ In facilitating Khamenei's accession, Rafsanjani likely sought a weakened Leader – a 'theological

171 An anecdote has it that while Rafsanjani was a founding member of the Islamic Revolutionary Council in 1979 along with the likes of Ayatollahs Mohammad Beheshti, Mousavi Ardebili and Mahmoud Taleghani, it was only at his behest that Khamenei was later invited by Khomeini into the council. Akbar Ganji however believes that Khamenei was directly appointed by Khomeini. See his 'Who is Ali Khamenei?: the worldview of Iran's Supreme Leader', *Foreign Affairs* September/October 2013 <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2013-08-12/who-ali-khamenei>

172 Based on his own account, the then IRGC commander Mohsen Rezaie had originally addressed a letter to commander-in-chief Rafsanjani requesting \$4.5 billion in resources in order to invade Baghdad and end the war. Instead, Rafsanjani presented a fait accompli to Khomeini by reporting that the requested resources were unavailable according to ministers of the economy, whereupon Khomeini accepted Resolution 598. Rezaie was certain those resources were available. See interview with Rezaie, *Baztab* 28 September 2006, via the National Security Archives, <http://www2.gwu.edu/~nsarchiv/NSAEBB/NSAEBB394/docs/2006-09-28%20Rezaie%20interview.pdf>

173 YouTube video recording of the 4th June 1989 Assembly of Experts session, released in 2009 https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=fSk3Ij_l0XA

174 Mehdi Moslem, *Factional politics*, 89; that he won nearly 95% of the votes for the presidency is also telling. In fact, on the eve of his second tenure as president, no less a conservative stalwart as Nategh-Nouri admitted that since Khomeini's passing, 'the ship of the country has been navigated by the only person who could have done it, Mr. Hashemi Rafsanjani. No one knows and can tackle the problems of postwar Iran better than him', *Parliamentary debates*, 3 May 1993, cited in Moslem, *Factional politics*, 202.

175 These included a heavily empowered executive (on his own recommendation); direct appointment, subject to parliamentary approval, and oversight of all ministers; chair of the revamped Supreme National Security Council (previously the wartime Supreme Defense Council); and concurrently, chair of the newly created Expediency Council.

nonentity' as he was, to cite one scholar —¹⁷⁶ vis-à-vis an empowered executive. With Khamenei still building up personal influence, the duo cooperated to emasculate the radicals, removing them from their redoubts in the executive,¹⁷⁷ parliament,¹⁷⁸ and the Assembly of Experts.¹⁷⁹ Furthermore, the ceasefire with Iraq had dampened the radicals' uncompromising revolutionary zeal, and the slow-motion collapse of the USSR would discredit their economic statism.¹⁸⁰

When Rafsanjani set about the task of rehabilitation, the gravity of the crisis ensured that the longstanding socioeconomic dispute with the radicals was settled in favor of the conservatives.¹⁸¹ Rafsanjani similarly persuaded the hardliners that for reforms to work, Iran needed external assistance, which meant re-establishing ties with international economic organizations such as the World Bank and the International Monetary Fund, industrialized countries and regional neighbors.¹⁸² When the French foreign minister visited Iran three days after Khomeini's Rushdie fatwa in February 1989, Rafsanjani welcomed doing business with Paris 'on the basis of mutual interests' and Khamenei called for 'a broadening of mutual cooperation in all technical, industrial, commercial, cultural, political, and economic fields'.¹⁸³ This attitude largely extended to other industrialized states such as Germany, Japan and even Britain. Balancing pragmatic state interest with regime ideology, Rafsanjani said 'we support the policy of respect for international regulations and are committed to the policy of nondomination and nonacceptance of domination',¹⁸⁴ and a year later, '[i]f people think we can live behind a closed door, they are mistaken. While we must be reasonably independent, we are in need of friends and allies around the world'.¹⁸⁵ Initially supportive of Rafsanjani, Khamenei emphasized that export of the revolution, instead of state-sponsored overseas subversion, really meant

176 Ansari, *Politics of nationalism*, 230.

177 Till then held by Mir Hossein-Mousavi, the prime ministry was abolished in favor of a presidential system under the 1989 constitutional amendment.

178 A massive conservative majority led by Speaker Ali Akbar Nategh-Nouri ended the radicals' twelve-year dominance in the 1992 parliamentary elections. According to Baktiari, the only known radical to be reelected to the 4th Majles was a previous deputy speaker, Hossein Hashemian, *Parliamentary politics*, 219.

179 Moslem, *Factional politics*, 156-61.

180 *Asr-e Ma*, 9 Dey 1374/30 December 1995.

181 Baktiari, *Parliamentary politics*, 158-60.

182 Ehteshami, 'The foreign policy of Iran', 289-90.

183 *Ettela'at*, 30 Bahman 1367/19 February 1989.

184 *Radio Tehran*, 20 July 1990, cited in Moslem, *Factional politics*, 175.

185 *Ettela'at*, 19 Mordad 1370/10 Aug 1991.

enabl[ing] all nations in the world to see that they are capable of standing on their own feet, resisting submission with all of their strength by relying on their own will and determination and by replacing their trust in God.¹⁸⁶

With the radicals marginalized, the traditional and moderate conservatives however turned on each other.¹⁸⁷ The former vehemently criticized aspects of the latter's economic reforms (especially increased taxation and the shift from an import to export economy) and the annual budget.¹⁸⁸ While both favored laissez-faire economics, the traditional conservatives viewed the globalizing and industrializing effects of Rafsanjani's economic five-year plan as a threat to the traditional bazaar economy, which they in turn depended on.¹⁸⁹ They likewise censured the administration's sociocultural liberalization and attempts to reach out to the West. In 1992, Khamenei warned:

The enemy is claiming that during the period of reconstruction, revolutionary spirit and morality must be put aside. The enemy is advertising that the postwar period and the reconstruction phase is the time of the demise of revolutionary fervor and that it is time to go back and live the oblivious life of some countries. Is this the meaning of reconstruction? It surely is not.¹⁹⁰

In FNSP, the post-war/post-radical period was one in which Iran's political class largely agreed on Iran's need for external rebalancing.¹⁹¹ However, concerning Iran's key grand strategic dilemma, engagement with the US, despite the systemic pressures imposed they held starkly different views and maintained no coherent approach. During the Gulf War, while he criticized the US, Rafsanjani pressed for neutrality in opposition to radical voices at home,¹⁹² cautioning that the US' regional buildup 'can well be turned against

186 Tehran Radio, 15 March 1990, cited in Moslem, *Factional politics*, 150.

187 According to Mehdi Moslem, a book written by Rafsanjani in 1967 lauding the 19th century prime minister Mirza Taghi Khan provides strong evidence that Rafsanjani's modernizing views far pre-dated the Revolution, *Factional politics*, 134.

188 Ehteshami, 'The foreign policy of Iran', 294; for the budget, see Baktiari, *Parliamentary politics*, ch. 6.

189 Moslem, *Factional politics*, 128-9.

190 *Ettela'at*, 30 Mehr 1371/22 October 1992.

191 As then Foreign Minister Velayati noted in this respect, 'there is not a great deal of difference of opinion among the domestic forces', *Salam*, 22 Shahrivar 1375/12 September 1996.

192 *Ettela'at*, 30 Dey 1369/20 January 1991; *IHT*, 21 January 1991.

us if we go too far in our denunciation of the Americans'.¹⁹³ Khamenei accused the Americans of 'planning to expand their power',¹⁹⁴ a view widely shared and even taken to extremes by radicals on the left who demanded expulsion of over half a million American troops from the region, and if necessary through outright cooperation with Saddam Hussein.¹⁹⁵ Caught in the dilemma of Western-assisted reconstruction and Washington's Gulf presence, Rafsanjani appealed for a resolution by the littoral powers.¹⁹⁶

After the war, Khamenei, like Khomeini before him, remained highly critical and convinced that the 'global arrogance' would be 'brought to its knees' not too long after the Soviets,¹⁹⁷ and that for relations to resume, the US must 'repen[t] of all the tragedies they have created in the world'.¹⁹⁸ Rafsanjani remained guarded, but called on the US to 'prove its good intentions' in practice, a theme he would repeat throughout his presidency.¹⁹⁹ In 1993, *Tehran Times* addressed incoming US President Bill Clinton by stating that '[a]ny sign of goodwill will be responded to by goodwill'.²⁰⁰ That October, a close Rafsanjani associate and former representative to the UN, Saeed Rajai-Khorasani, advocated the reestablishing of relations with the US in a letter to Khamenei, drawing the ire of conservative intransigents such as Azari-Qomi and Nategh-Nouri.²⁰¹ Ayatollah Abdolkarim Mousavi Ardebili, a founding member of the defunct Islamic Revolutionary Council and the war-time chief of judiciary, called any reconciliation an act against the Revolution,²⁰² and the notorious longtime Chair of the Guardian Council Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati charged that '[s]howing mercy to the "wolf" [the

193 *Ettela'at*, 30 Dey 1369/20 January 1991.

194 Cited in Baktiari, *Parliamentary politics*, 210. Moslem believes this stance may have been due to Khamenei's initial weakness as Supreme Leader and therefore the need to maintain Khomeini's line, *Factional politics*, 149. This was also the view of Rafsanjani associate Rajai-Khorasani, who saw Khamenei's rightward shift on FNRP as a means to 'maintain his legitimacy as Leader', interview, 17 July 1996, cited in Christin Marschall, *Iran's Persian Gulf policy: from Khomeini to Khatami* (London: RoutledgeCurzon, 2003) 20.

195 This was the view of Ali Akbar Mohtashami, *Kayhan*, 30 Dey 1369/20 January 1991, and Behzad Nabavi, see Moslem, *Factional politics*, 124.

196 Baktiari, *Parliamentary politics*, 210.

197 *IRNA*, 1 Shahrivar 1371/23 August 1992.

198 *Radio Tehran*, 12 Aban 1372/3 November 1993.

199 Interview with Rafsanjani, *Middle East Insight* 11.5 (July-August 1995), 7-14, cited in Menashri, *Post-revolutionary politics*, 189.

200 *Tehran Times*, 20 January 1993.

201 Moslem, *Factional politics*, 225-6.

202 *Ettela'at*, 29 Aban 1372/20 November 1993.

US]....is unlikely either to satisfy the wolf or rescue the sheep [Iran]'.²⁰³ The radicals for their part matched the magnitude of their political decline only with the asperity of their anti-US rhetoric.²⁰⁴

By 1996, Rafsanjani continued to cling onto hopes of a thaw, this time insisting that for Iran to reciprocate the US should release Iranian assets frozen in the US during the embassy hostage crisis.²⁰⁵ Rafsanjani's views enjoyed the backing of other moderate pragmatists including Iran's UN ambassador, Kamal Kharrazi, who conditioned relations on a change of US attitude and behavior towards Iran,²⁰⁶ and as far back as 1990, Rafsanjani's own vice-president Ata'ollah Mohajerani, who cited Islamic historical precedent to justify dialogue with the enemy.²⁰⁷ As David Menashri notes however, conservative pressure was so overwhelming that the president either refrained from making his policy views explicit or dissociated himself from such views made by other moderates.²⁰⁸ Mehdi Moslem held that anti-Americanism was aimed at undermining Rafsanjani especially as economic rehabilitation ran into obstacles,²⁰⁹ an example of factions harnessing foreign policy to improve domestic maneuvering. Outside the clerical leadership, a member of the IRGC's top command singled out the US as Iran's only principal strategic threat and that military preparations were being made accordingly.²¹⁰ When the Clinton administration responded with sanctions targeting Iran, the hardliners found vindication (notwithstanding their own alleged involvement in targeting US and Israeli interests overseas).

In other foreign policy issues, Iran's domestic bickering was less pronounced. The Persian Gulf was clearly to be dominated – the question was just how. Following Rafsanjani's election, the GCC decided to re-engage Iran.²¹¹ Rafsanjani believed that had Iran not been so antagonistic,

203 *Radio Tehran*, 7 Bahman 1373/27 January 1995.

204 See, for instance, Ali Akbar Mohtashami(pour), in *Salam*, 5 Mordad 1373/27 July 1994.

205 *IRNA*, 21 Esfand 1374/11 March 1996.

206 *IRNA*, 6 Dey 1375/26 December 1996.

207 'Direct negotiations', *Ettela'at*, 26 April 1990, cited in Menashri, *Post-revolutionary politics*, 194; a prominent example is the willingness of Ali, the first Shi'ite Imam, to enter into dialogue with his arch-nemesis Mu'awiya, the Umayyad ruler and father of Yazid.

208 David Menashri, *Post-revolutionary politics*, 196

209 Moslem, *Factional politics*, 226.

210 See remarks by Brig. Gen. Mohammad Bagher-Zolghadr, then chief of the IRGC's joint staff, in *Kayhan*, 20 Azar 1375/10 December 1996.

211 Baktiari, *Parliamentary politics*, 204.

Saudi Arabia and Kuwait, among others, would not have supported Iraq.²¹² Senior members of his administration similarly supported renewing ties. Rafsanjani's positive response to the GCC was however challenged by the radicals, who until 1992 still controlled the parliament. Speaker Mehdi Karrubi criticized Rafsanjani for deviating from the 'Imam's line' and encouraging the same 'American Islam' in the likes of Saudi Arabia opposed by Iran's Revolution.²¹³ Chairman of the defense and military affairs committee Ali Akbar Mohtashami censured rapprochement with the Gulf states if this was to 'secure the interests of foreign powers or blocs in the region'.²¹⁴ The traditional conservatives too were critical of the Saudis, with memories of the Hajj incident still fresh in mind.²¹⁵ Khamenei called Riyadh's rulers 'the sinful idols of arrogance and colonialism'.²¹⁶ Rafsanjani however eventually found common ground with his critics by rejecting the monarchies' attempts to create a regional security order excluding Iran. Ultimately, ties were reestablished to varying degrees on the basis of common interests, and but for a spell continued improving under president Khatami (with Rafsanjani's continued personal involvement).

For some, the end of the bipolar system was an opportunity for Iran to lead the non-West.²¹⁷ According to the then deputy parliamentary speaker, 'Iran is shouldering the leadership of many communities of the world. But Iran's leadership is different from American's domineering leadership'.²¹⁸ Nonetheless, systemic pressures aggravated by irreconcilable differences with the sole superpower, as well as a shifting alignment of interests paved the way for alliances with the other major powers, Russia and China. No

212 *IRNA*, 28 Aban 1367/19 November 1988.

213 *Kayhan*, 6 Esfand 1368/25 February 1990.

214 *Tehran Times*, 8 January 1990; interestingly, the chair of the parliamentary committee for foreign relations during this period was held by a pragmatic conservative figure, Saeed Rajai-Khorasani.

215 According to the Iranian version of events, over 400 people, 270 of them Iranian Hajj pilgrims, were killed during an anti-US/Israel demonstration in Mecca on 31 July 1987 when Saudi security forces fired upon them. Others apparently died in the resulting stampede.

216 *Radio Tehran*, 6 July 1989, cited in Menashri, *Post-revolutionary politics*, 241.

217 *Ibid.*, 203; former Deputy Foreign Minister for Education and Research Manouchehr Mohammadi called this Iran-led paradigm a struggle of the oppressed against hegemonic oppressors, see 'The Islamic Republic of Iran and the international system: clash with the domination paradigm', in Ehteshami & Molavi, eds., *Iran and the international system*, 72.

218 Hassan Rouhani, cited in *Kayhan Weekly* (English), 13 January 1994.

longer border threat, Iraq's main ally,²¹⁹ or occupying force in neighboring Afghanistan, post-Soviet Russia offered Iran a clean slate. While it had a far more robust imperial-colonial history,²²⁰ Russia was nowhere as culturally attractive and, it follows, subversive as the US.²²¹ And as far back as a 1985 visit to Beijing, then parliamentary speaker Rafsanjani called China 'the best country for Iran to cooperate with. ... China does not have a colonialist mentality. In the process of cooperating with Iran, China absolutely will not aggress against or injure Iran's interests'.²²²

At the same time, systemic incentives in ex-Soviet Muslim Central Asia facilitated consensus on Iranian influence projection in the region,²²³ though some disagreement emerged over the desired extent. Rafsanjani's focus was practical: 'Co-operation should certainly be carried out via Iran. For links between the north and the south, the 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'.²²⁴ Others along the fringes called for revolutionary assertiveness including support for the Islamists in Tajikistan's civil war, but for various reasons, including the republics' lack of receptivity to Iran's revolutionary messaging and Russia's overwhelming importance to all concerned, realism became the default position. Interestingly, it was not until mere days before 11 September 2001 that Foreign Minister Kamal Kharrazi officially described Central Asia as an Iranian priority.²²⁵

If timing for détente with the US was unripe, it remained categorically unthinkable vis-à-vis Israel. Among other things, Iran's overt opposition to the peace process was initially also a last-ditch attempt by the radicals in

219 According to Rafsanjani's memoirs, the then Speaker believed that Russia had also supplied chemical weapons to Saddam Hussein, *Khaterat-e sal-e 1363* [Memoirs, 1984] (Tehran, publication date unknown) 30.

220 Part of the inspiration behind Iran's Constitutional Revolution was the spectacle of Russia, a Western empire, being defeated by Japan, an eastern nation which had adopted a constitution, during the Russo-Japanese war of 1904-5.

221 Khamenei specifically singled out the US as 'the main propagator of corrupt, materialist culture aimed at Iran', *Iran Times*, 24 July 1992, cited in Baktiari, *Parliamentary politics*, 223.

222 中国外交概简 [China's diplomatic overview] (Beijing: Shijie zhishi chubanshe, 1987) 104.

223 See Rafsanjani's remarks, *Voice of the IRI*, 11 February 1992, via BBC Summary of World Broadcasts ME/1303/A/3, 13 February 1992.

224 *Ettela'at*, 29 Bahman 1370/18 February 1992.

225 *Khabar*, 5 September 2001, cited in Vladimir Mesamed, 'Iran: ten years in post-Soviet Central Asia', *Central Asia and the Caucasus* 1 (2002) 28.

order to preserve their domestic political influence and force Rafsanjani into a quandary, notably at a time when he was seeking better relations with the west.²²⁶ Finally, while borne of military necessity, Iran's shift to the indirect approach under Rafsanjani had its rhetorical antecedents in 1987, when he then criticized the wastefulness of the human wave tactic and instead argued for a 'battle strategy of retaliatory strikes and limited offensives *based on caution rather than fervor*'.²²⁷ Rafsanjani recognized no less the importance of alliances in the military-strategic (and not only economic) context. In July 1988, Rafsanjani lamented Iran's ideological conduct of foreign policy during the war, suggesting that the alternative might have led to a preferable outcome: 'by the use of an inappropriate method...we have created enemies for our country'.²²⁸

The dependent variable: strategic adjustments

The adjustments of the early 1990s were closely intertwined with Rafsanjani, who understood that the pursuit of grand strategy required the rehabilitation of exhausted means.²²⁹ After all, despite military preponderance, the Soviet Union's parlous economy (and indeed, deteriorating moral and social fabric) did little to prevent its collapse. The Rafsanjani government's first priority was therefore to initiate reconstruction at home and stabilize its immediate neighborhood in Iran's favor by respectively renewing relations with industrialized nations and mending fences with the Gulf Arab monarchies.²³⁰

a. Internal rebalancing: economic rehabilitation and cooperation with industrialized nations

The war had wrought damage to the tune of \$200-450 billion.²³¹ When Rafsanjani took over the helm, inflation had trebled from under 10% a decade before, per capita GDP had nearly halved following the war,²³² and

226 Baktiari, *Parliamentary politics*, 214.

227 Elaine Sciolino, 'Iran queries toll of war strategy', *Sydney Morning Herald*, 6 July 1987 (emphasis added).

228 *Ettela'at*, 12 Tir 1367/3 July 1988.

229 See Rafsanjani's vision of the reconstruction era, outlined in *Ettela'at*, 19 Khordad 1368/9 June 1989.

230 In May 1981, the six monarchies bandwagoned to form the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) mainly in response to the perceived threat of revolutionary Iran.

231 Eliyahu Kanovsky, 'Iran's economic morass: mismanagement and decline under the Islamic Republic', Focus on Iran series policy paper 44 (Washington, D.C.: WINEP, 1997) 12.

232 Jahangir Amuzegar, *Iran's economy under the Islamic Republic* (London: I. B. Tauris, 1993) 276.

actual unemployment figures stood between 25-30%. As a result of the Revolution, Iran had experienced massive capital flight and brain-drain, and with a 1990 growth rate of 3.5%, Iran's population had doubled compared to 1979, effectively undercutting real GDP growth.²³³ Further straining dwindling resources was 3-4 million Afghan, Kurdish and Iraqi Shi'a refugees.²³⁴ Despite the self-reliance rhetoric, Iran remained heavily oil-dependent and hence vulnerable to price fluctuations for as much as 90% of its foreign exchange earnings.²³⁵ Amid this backdrop, Rafsanjani's first \$120 billion five-year plan (1989/90-1993/4) aimed to revive the economy by decentralizing it and bolstering the private sector. The plan likewise expected to privatize unproductive state-owned entities,²³⁶ increase the proportion of non-hydrocarbon exports and hence introduce greater stability to government revenues, and domestically sensitive though this was, attract foreign investment and loans. If Rafsanjani's mercantilist worldview already favored the renewal of ties with leading industrial nations and international financial organizations, the imperatives of reconstruction certainly demanded it.

Meanwhile, despite Rafsanjani's cautious outreach attempts, the Clinton administration all the same announced a policy of dual containment against Iran (and Iraq) in May 1993, imposed a ban on US investment in Iran's energy sector in March 1995 and a broader trade and investment ban in May 1995, followed by the more extensive Iran-Libya Sanctions Act (ILSA) in August 1996.²³⁷ These came in response to 'Iran's [or at least the implacable hardliners'] continuing support for terrorism, including support for the acts which undermine the Middle East peace process, as well as its intensified efforts to acquire weapons of mass destruction'.²³⁸ These unilateral sanctions passed up lucrative commercial contracts to other industrialized states and kept the US out in the cold, as it were. When an unprecedented \$1 billion deal expressly awarded to US oil giant Conoco to develop the offshore Sirri fields was nixed by the trade ban in 1995, France's Total took up the slack with alacrity. Iran's ties with Europe (and Japan), which advocated

233 Jahangir Amuzegar, 'The Iranian economy before and after the Revolution', *The MEJ* 46.3 (Summer 1992) 418.

234 Ibid., 417.

235 Ibid., 419.

236 The *bonyads* remained the exception: their appointees reported directly to Khamenei, rendering them off-limits to elected officials.

237 For a summary, see relevant sections in Kenneth Katzman, 'U.S.-Iranian relations: an analytic compendium of U.S. policies, laws and regulations (Washington, D.C.: Atlantic Council of the United States, December 1999).

238 *Financial Times*, 12 June 1995.

‘critical dialogue’ rather than isolation, improved under these circumstances and Tehran was thus able to drive something of a wedge into trans-Atlantic relations. Nonetheless ‘critical dialogue’ remained marred by strong evidence of Iranian-sponsored terrorism (including on European soil), human rights violations (particularly the ‘chain murders’ of 1998-99), the Rushdie affair, and rejectionism towards the peace process.²³⁹ Gratuitous bureaucracy and weak legal and regulatory frameworks furthermore deterred large-scale foreign investments.

Domestically, Rafsanjani sought to routinize the Revolution,²⁴⁰ prioritizing professional ability over ideological sloganeering. The constitutional amendments he helped shape aimed at centralizing and institutionalizing strategic decisionmaking; no longer would factional caprice set the tone for foreign policy as it did in the case of the hostage crisis.²⁴¹ Rafsanjani established government-funded thinktanks staffed to a large degree by US-trained scholars ‘with a view to producing a rational (and ‘realist’) interpretation of the international order, and more specifically, of the United States’.²⁴² Like Stalin’s ‘socialism in one country’, the post-Khomeini leadership limited revolutionary aspirations to Iran, even though lower-key cultural and socioeconomic outreach activities continued overseas. If his foreign policy tilted towards conciliation in place of costly and irrational revolutionary commitments, the internal balancing embodied in Rafsanjani’s initiatives also aimed to prepare the country to better deal with future crises such as another war.

Reconstruction came with a cost. Among other things, between 1989-92, Iran accumulated \$25 billion in foreign debt,²⁴³ part of which it defaulted on for the first time and had to have rescheduled owing to overoptimistic revenue projections, an unforeseen 30% decrease in oil prices in 1993 to

239 Shireen T. Hunter, ‘Iran’s pragmatic regional policy’, *Journal of International Affairs* 56.2 (Spring 2003) 142.

240 Ali M. Ansari, ‘Iran and the United States in the shadow of 9/11: Persia and the Persian question revisited’, in Katouzian & Shahidi, eds., *Iran in the 21st century*, 109.

241 Moslem, *Factional politics*, 176.

242 Ansari, ‘Iran and the United States’, 109; Clément Therme, ‘When Tehran looks at its regional environment: Iranian think tanks and their analysis of Central Asia’, *Iran Regional Forum* 2 (November 2012) 5.

243 Interview with Ali Naghi Khamoshi, president of Iran Chambers of Commerce, Industries and Mines, *Salam*, 11 Azar 1372/2 December 1993.

\$15 per barrel,²⁴⁴ and premature hopes that the private sector *bazaaris* would greatly invest in productive industries. Worse, the *bazaaris*, who thrived from import-substitution and were hence threatened by government-promoted exports, were manipulating prices for personal profit (encouraged by multiple exchange rates), ironically forcing the government back towards greater economic statism. An increasingly painful burden on Iranians now suffering still greater inflation and wealth disparities, Rafsanjani's economic reforms ran aground by the mid-1990s, only partially owing to conservative opposition. Though a critical economic assessment belongs elsewhere, there is little doubt that despite the shortcomings, his stewardship created a precedent for Iran to shift onto a more rationalized footing.

b. Diplomatic suasion and regional stabilization: the GCC

When Saddam invaded Kuwait on 2 August 1990 (to rehabilitate Iraq's own depleted economy and expand its maritime frontage), Rafsanjani's government issued verbal condemnations but remained neutral throughout, which improved conditions for the renewal of ties with the Gulf, Amman, Tunis, Rabat and even for a while, the Bush administration.²⁴⁵ Iran's neutrality reversed what it had failed to achieve in 1988, for prior to invading Kuwait, Saddam had secretly promised Rafsanjani that he would accept Iran's ceasefire conditions including full Iraqi implementation of Resolution 598 and the 1975 Algiers Treaty concerning the Arvand-Rud/Shatt al-Arab maritime border, since he needed his troops redeployed to the southern front.²⁴⁶ After Saddam's invasion, UN Secretary-General Perez de Cuellar designated Iraq as the aggressor during the eight-year war, opening the way for Iran to claim war reparations.²⁴⁷ Importantly, Iran's neutrality also 'accelerated [its] transformation into a status quo power'.²⁴⁸ The Gulf War

244 Youssef M. Ibrahim, 'Oil prices, plunging, may not have hit bottom', *NYT*, 13 September 1993.

245 Ehteshami, 'The foreign policy of Iran', 301; the Bush administration apparently changed its mind after the assassination of the Shah's last prime minister Shapour Bakhtiar in August 1991, Pollack, *The Persian puzzle*, 248.

246 This correspondence took place via a letter dated 15 August 1990, see Gary Sick, 'Iran's foreign policy: a revolution in transition', in Ali M. Ansari, ed., *Politics of modern Iran: critical issues in modern politics*, vol. IV (Oxon: Routledge, 2011) 147 (FN 7).

247 Ehteshami, 'The foreign policy of Iran', 301.

248 Mohsen M. Milani, 'Iran, the status quo power', *Current History* 104.678 (January 2005).

saw a spike in oil prices and hence Iranian revenues,²⁴⁹ gravely weakened Iraq, removed the prospect of renewed hostilities in the near term, and drove a wedge between Iraq and its former Gulf sponsors. Iran eventually renewed diplomatic relations with Riyadh, Iraq's main wartime financier and the GCC's center of gravity in March 1991 (with Omani mediation), just as it had done earlier in September 1988 with Kuwait, the GCC state with which it directly clashed during the 'tanker war' in 1987-88. Tehran could not afford ongoing animosity with Saudi Arabia in particular, the only OPEC swing state capable of influencing global oil prices and allowing other states greater market share by manipulating its own excess production capacity.²⁵⁰ Rapprochement with the GCC states was thus indispensable for Iran to secure its export pathways and primary source of revenue. Similarly, trade might just wean them away from America's embrace.²⁵¹

Saddam's Kuwait gambit however brought a massive US military presence onto Iran's doorstep, the removal of which became an Iranian priority. After a half-century hiatus, the US Fifth Fleet was revived in 1995 and re-headquartered in Manama, Bahrain. Rafsanjani called the US' presence a 'powderkeg'.²⁵² Invoking article 8 of Resolution 598,²⁵³ he pressed for a new regional order based on collective security and cooperation,²⁵⁴ even demilitarization,²⁵⁵ but involving the littoral powers exclusively. Any such arrangement would naturally redound to Iran's favor and significantly assuage its status discrepancy. Since Iraq still posed an irrepressible military threat, Oman and the UAE – both having attempted to mediate between Iran and the GCC – had viewed an Iranian role favorably,²⁵⁶ perhaps even desiring greater balance vis-à-vis Riyadh.²⁵⁷ However, Washington and Cairo ultimately undercut Tehran's efforts by counterproposing a regional

249 Iran's oil revenues were \$9.7 billion in 1988, jumping nearly twofold to \$16.9 billion in 1992, see Kanovsky, 'Iran's economic morass', 2.

250 Chubin, *Iran's national security policy*, 10.

251 Nader Habibi, 'The impact of sanctions on Iran-GCC economic relations', Middle East Brief 45, *CCMES* November 2010, 3.

252 Cited in Marschall, *Iran's Persian Gulf policy*, 108.

253 This simply called for 'measures to enhance the security and stability of the region'. For the text, see <http://daccess-dds-ny.un.org/doc/RESOLUTION/GEN/NR0/524/70/IMG/NR052470.pdf?OpenElement>

254 Cited in Bakhtiari, *Parliamentary politics*, 205.

255 Ibid., 214.

256 *Kuwait Times*, 11 September 1988; *Kayhan International*, 8 August 1990.

257 Marschall, *Iran's Persian Gulf policy*, 96.

security condominium incorporating the GCC states, *Egypt* and *Syria* (the ‘six-plus-two’), but not Iran.²⁵⁸

When the resulting Damascus Declaration of 6 March 1991 collapsed, the slack was taken up by bilateral security arrangements between these governments and Washington encompassing basing and matériel prepositioning rights as well as massive arms sales.²⁵⁹ Impressive battlefield performance, as well as the scaling down of US defense procurements after the Cold War and the consequent need for US arms producers to seek out foreign markets no doubt exercised some influence in these transactions.²⁶⁰ Most of the Gulf states remained wary of Iranian potential to foment unrest among their own Shi’ite minorities and condemned Iran’s move to enforce its claims on three islands west of the Straits of Hormuz in 1992. Ostensible nationalism aside, Iran feared that growing US-GCC security ties would lead to hostile US deployments on these islands which control the Straits’ crucial bottleneck.²⁶¹ That said, while the GCC states were hardly keen to see the US leave the Persian Gulf, they also refrained from antagonizing Iran, preferring to neutralize a potential adversary by embracing it, and at any rate feared Iraqi revanchism to a greater degree. To its credit, Iran likewise conscientiously delinked its critical relations with the Gulf monarchies from pressures exerted on them by Washington, even if this meant the ongoing unfeasibility of a regional-only security arrangement. The more it provoked the Gulf states, the more reason they would have to welcome US forces in the region.

c. External balancing against US hegemony: alliances with Russia and China

Domestically constrained from reconciliation with Washington and unable to maximize relations with other industrialized states, Iran bolstered its major power alliances even at the risk of creating new dependencies. In the 1980s, Iran’s allies were extremely limited. By the early 1990s, even these, prominently Syria and Pakistan, were making an effort to accommodate

258 Syria’s momentary volte-face, later reversed, was premised on the hope of a change in the US’ stance towards the Arab-Israeli conflict.

259 Claude van England, ‘Iran steps up arms purchases to prop military’, *CSM*, 20 April 1992 <http://www.csmonitor.com/1992/0420/20012.html>

260 Richard F. Grimmett, *Conventional arms transfers to the Third World, 1985-1992* (Washington, D.C.: CRS, July 1993), 66; for an excerpt, see <http://www.dtic.mil/docs/citations/ADA497054>

261 The principal oil tanker route runs in between the Tunbs to the north and Abu Musa to the south. For an overview of the issue, see Marschall, *Iran’s Persian Gulf policy*, 121-42.

the prevailing order.²⁶² While Iran cooperated with a few other countries including India and North Korea, the external balancing aspect of Iran's grand strategy of the period turned upon Russia and China and the natural big power rivalries between both and the US. Both would become Iran's principal military and technological purveyors, and the latter, the principal client for its main source of revenue and by extension, the hard economic means to sustaining a grand strategy.

Rapprochement with Moscow had been evident as early as January 1989, when an Iranian delegation led by Ayatollah Abdollah Javadi-Amoli visited the Soviet capital bearing Khomeini's most significant missive to any foreign leader at the time.²⁶³ Six months later, in the transition period between Khomeini's death and the consolidation of the new leadership, Majles speaker Rafsanjani met Gorbachev in Moscow to conclude economic and military agreements.²⁶⁴ After Soviet disintegration in 1992, Moscow announced its willingness 'to cooperate with Iran in order to improve its ability to defend itself',²⁶⁵ at a time when Western states were halfhearted about dealing with Tehran.²⁶⁶ The end of the Cold War meant lower-cost surplus armaments and military equipment from a cash-strapped Russia. Iranian acquisitions mattered since Russia's other arms clients were either saddled with sanctions (Iraq and Libya) or struggling economically (Syria was low in hard currency and was already in arrears of \$10 billion to Russia).²⁶⁷ In January 1995, Russia formally agreed to help advance Iran's nuclear program by completing two German-initiated light water reactors in Bushehr despite US pressure,²⁶⁸ although Yeltsin also concurrently nixed the sale of

262 Chubin, *Iran's national security policy*, 3.

263 'Study Islam, Khomeini suggests to Gorbachev', Reuters via *NYT*, 5 January 1989 <http://www.nytimes.com/1989/01/05/world/study-islam-khomeini-suggests-to-gorbachev.html>

264 Robert O. Freedman, 'Russian-Iranian relations in the 1990s', *MERIA* 4.2 (June 2000), unpaginated.

265 Van England, 'Iran steps up arms purchases'.

266 Pointing to Tehran's demonstrated overtures, one scholar concluded that the reason US-Iranian relations stagnated in the 1990s was due to *American* intransigence. See Houman A. Sadri, 'Trends in the foreign policy of revolutionary Iran', *Journal of Third World Studies* XV.1 (April 1998).

267 Freedman, 'Russian-Iranian relations'.

268 Adam Tarock, 'Iran and Russia in strategic alliance', *Third World Quarterly* 18.2 (1997) 210; Leszek Buszynski, 'Russia and the West: towards renewed geopolitical rivalry?', *Survival* 37.3 (1995) 120; Kenneth R. Timmermann, 'Iran's nuclear menace', *TNR*, 25 April 1995 <http://www.newrepublic.com/article/world/97335/irans-nuclear-menace>

proliferation-risky gas centrifuges originally proposed by his atomic energy minister, Viktor Mikhailov.²⁶⁹

Importantly, veto-wielding Russia became Iran's major diplomatic counterweight against the US. In turn, Moscow appreciated Iran's feisty (anti-western) independence and placed great store in Tehran's ability and willingness to rein in Sunni radicalism; despite economic competition over energy exports (especially to European gas markets), bilateral trade flourished.²⁷⁰ The relationship was clearly asymmetrical but at least based on solid *realpolitik* – consider Iran's non-interference in the first Chechnya war (1994-96) which Tehran regarded as an internal Russian affair, and common interests with regards to the Caspian Sea.²⁷¹ Still, because Russia was undergoing tremendous post-Soviet internal changes, and the Kremlin of the 1990s under Yeltsin, Kozyrev and their relatively liberal associates evinced a preference to improve relations with the west, its reliability was suspect. The Gore-Chernomyrdin agreement of 30 June 1995 halting Russian arms sales to Iran by 2000 confirmed the latter's suspicions. This is where parallel relations with China counted.

Ideologically, Chinese communism could not be further away from Khomeini's revolution. Yet, driven by the shared experience of national humiliation, both worldviews rejected imperial hegemony, exploitation and cultural penetration, and both states ranked among 'the most accomplished, powerful, and durable kingdoms created by humankind since the beginning of urban settlement', to cite one scholar.²⁷² Located at the other end of the ancient Silk Road started between the Han and Parthian empires and building upon the Achaemenid Royal Roads,²⁷³ China had no territorial designs in Iran's neighborhood. In May 1989, president Khamenei became the first Iranian head of state ever to visit China,²⁷⁴ while Rafsanjani had already

269 Freedman, 'Russian-Iranian relations'.

270 Personal exchange with Russian diplomat, Tel Aviv, 5 February 2015.

271 David Hearst, 'Russia sees rich reward in Iranian links', *The Guardian*, 31 May 1995.

272 John W. Garver, *China and Iran: ancient partners in a post-imperial world* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006) 4.

273 Liu Xinru, *The Silk Road in world history* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2010) 62; Maria Brosius, *The Persians: an introduction* (Oxon: Routledge, 2006) 90-1, 2.

274 Khamenei had already visited China at least once before in February 1981 as member of parliament.

visited in 1985 as parliamentary speaker and did again in 1992 as president.²⁷⁵ The world's fastest rising economy provided a development model, and an alliance allowed Iran an eager partner in its reconstruction and greater leverage in both balancing against the US-led status quo and maneuvering to improve its own status discrepancy. Beijing's permanent membership in the UN Security Council (UNSC) was also an indispensable asset.²⁷⁶ With Russia, China became Iran's most important partner for military technology. Indeed, throughout the eight-year war, despite parallel sales to Iraq, China was the only major power to supply Iran, often through North Korea, with billions of dollars' worth of arms and munitions (including Silkworm HY-2 anti-ship cruise missiles which proved deleterious to maritime traffic, although Beijing ceased supplies in 1988 owing to US pressure).²⁷⁷ Over time, Iran's indigenous arms industry acquired the ability to produce local variants of Chinese missiles.²⁷⁸ China was also Iran's main partner in nuclear cooperation, agreement for which was secretly inked during Rafsanjani's 1985 visit and followed by the delivery of a subcritical, lightwater reactor among other things.²⁷⁹ Only when China decided to defer to American pressure in 1997 did Russia assume this role.²⁸⁰

Crucially, China became a net oil importer in 1993 just as Iran was becoming increasingly isolated by Washington's dual containment. Motivated by energy security concerns, Beijing thus became the leading purchaser of Iranian oil and the leading investor in Iran's energy sector.²⁸¹ Between 1993 and 1999, Iran's oil exports to China jumped over fivefold from \$95.13 million to \$519.8

275 Interestingly, both were allowed to visit China's Xinjiang province despite the risk that Muslim Uyghurs might draw inspiration from Iran's Revolution.

276 Commentary on Foreign Minister Velayati's China visit, *Voice of the IRI*, 26 March 1995, FBIS-CHI-95-058, 27 March 1995.

277 See Yitzhak Shichor, 'Unfolded arms: Beijing's recent military sales offensive', *Pacific Review* 1.3 (1988): 320-30. See also Garver, *China and Iran*, 80-2; Arms sales to Iran were indirect in part to avoid jeopardizing China's own relations with the Arabs, and in part to preserve a semblance of Chinese neutrality.

278 Scott Harold & Alireza Nader, 'China and Iran: economic, political, and military relations', *RAND Corporation*, 2012, 7; Jane's Defence Weekly, 17 November 2004, cited in Dan Blumenthal, 'Providing arms: China and the Middle East', *MEQ* 12.2 (Spring 2005).

279 Yossef Bodansky, 'The grand strategy of Iran', *Global Affairs* 8.4 (1993) 30-2; Marie Colvin, 'Secret Iranian plans for a nuclear bomb', *The Sunday Times*, 28 July 1991.

280 Garver, *China and Iran*, 209.

281 Harold & Nader, 'China and Iran', 4.

million, or nearly three quarters of total exports to China in that last year.²⁸² Additionally, China secured a number of construction contracts involving sensitive civilian infrastructure such as Tehran's metro system, signed in 1995 and completed in 2006. State interests eclipsed regime ideology and the Islamic pillar of national identity, for Tehran refrained from criticizing Beijing following crackdowns on the Turkic Uighur Muslim minority in Xinjiang province. Violent state suppression of the 1989 Tiananmen demonstrations and the west's resulting criticism pushed China still closer to Iran. In addition, Beijing's mandarins regarded the US presence in the Persian Gulf (and later, in Central Asia and the Caspian) as a threat to its energy security that required balancing by means of a more commensurate regional role for Iran.²⁸³ Perhaps only half-coincidentally, Iran had also accepted Resolution 598 when China was chairing the Security Council.²⁸⁴

That China, like Russia, still regarded the US as a crucial interlocutor moderated Iranian expectations however. Desiring to defray tensions with the Clinton administration following the 1996 Taiwan Strait crisis, Jiang Zemin momentarily toned down relations with Iran, suspending \$4 billion worth of assistance to its nuclear and missile programs in 1997. While this was so far the most significant concession at Iran's expense, China had already cancelled the delivery of a 27-megawatt research reactor in 1992 as well as four 300-megawatt reactors capable of producing plutonium in 1996, all on supposedly 'technical' grounds.²⁸⁵ That Beijing contemporaneously maintained nuclear cooperation with a non-signatory to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), Pakistan, despite US requests to the contrary, says something about the actual quality of Sino-Iranian relations.²⁸⁶ Finally, while China entered into partnerships qualified 'strategic' with Russia, the US and even Saudi

282 Feng Wang, 'China's ties with Iran and its national interests', in Michel Korinman & John Laughland, eds, *Shia power: next target Iran?* (Middlesex: Vallentine Mitchell Academic, 2007) 56.

283 See Tang Shiping, 理想安全环境与新世纪中国大战略 [The ideal security environment and Chinese grand strategy in the new century], 战略与管理 [Strategy and Management] 6 (2000) http://www.sirpa.fudan.edu.cn/_upload/article/0f/45/7264b2b54ee0bb429e1577179fda/26de6f5c-de26-46c6-9a13-b4034d99e084.pdf

284 Garver, *China and Iran*, 91.

285 Ibid., 214, 219; the smaller 27 MW reactor was wholly manufactured and assembled with Chinese parts, unlike the 300 MW reactors which incorporated Western components, and which were therefore theoretically subject to US pressure and lobbying.

286 Pakistan's nuclear program was targeted at India, which happened to be China's major rival.

Arabia, it brooked no such thing with Iran, let alone support Iran's vision of an anti-US Eurasian alignment.²⁸⁷ Indeed, China had also normalized relations with Israel in 1992 as the Middle East peace process was underway following years of discrete cooperation. Iran needed Russia and China far more than either needed Iran.

d. Measured influence projection and regional stabilization: Central Asia and Azerbaijan

Iran initially encountered sufficiently permissive conditions to maneuver for advantage in Central Asia and Azerbaijan (CA/A), where Soviet collapse had created an influence vacuum. CA/A were historically a part of Persia's cultural imperium,²⁸⁸ and while predominantly Turkic, Tajikistan's Persian majority and Azerbaijan's nominal Shi'ism and Azeri ethnicity overlapped with both pillars of Iranian identity if not regime ideology (about a quarter of Iran's population is Azeri).²⁸⁹ Furthermore, CA/A as a bloc could help roll back Iran's isolation, balance against Arab unity, and compensate for Iran's slow-moving commerce with the GCC states.²⁹⁰ In the early 1990s, Iran was also reportedly interested in acquiring nuclear materials from Kazakhstan, the only Central Asian republic (in addition to Belarus and Ukraine) to possess Soviet-era arsenals. Pro-Western Turkey however positioned itself as Iran's main contender for the region's hearts and minds, and ultranationalistic elements intermittently invoked, albeit with little resonance, late-19th century pan-Turkic ideology and the accompanying cultural-territorial notion of Turkestan or 'Turan' in binary – if implicit – opposition to 'Iran' (as recounted in the *Shahname*).²⁹¹ Turkey exemplified

287 Garver, *China and Iran*, 124-25.

288 Indeed, so were Georgia and Armenia; other than in Tajikistan, Persian continues to be spoken on a daily basis in the Silk Road cities of Samarkand and Bukhara (in Uzbekistan) which were once part of the Achaemenid province of Sogdiana. For a side treatment of this particular demographic, see Boris Pétric, 'Les Ironi à l'heure du nationalisme ouzbek: exemple d'une renégociation des marqueurs identitaires turco-iraniens', in Mohammad-Reza Djalili, Alessandro Monsutti & Anna Neubauer, *Le monde turco-iranien en question* (Geneva: Karthala/Institut de Hautes Etudes Internationales et du Développement, 2008).

289 While the Azeris are Iran's largest minority, rather than disgruntled separatists they have played a central role in Iran's history. Supreme Leader Khamenei, for instance, is himself half-Azeri.

290 Kamal Kharrazi, 'New dimensions of Iran's strategic significance: challenges, opportunities, and achievements', *HMEIR* 1 (1994) 87.

291 Anthony Hyman, 'Turkestan and pan-Turkism revisited', *Central Asian Survey* 16.3 (1997) 342; Turkish, Azeri and Turkmen belong to the western branch of

a moderate Muslim nation capable of balancing secular constitutionalism with economic success unlike Iran, aspects which the CA/A governments better identified with in their own search for a post-Soviet identity, though not without problems given their authoritarian-statist dispositions. While Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Israel, China, India and others also attempted to secure a foothold in the region, the US made sure to undercut Iranian influence and particularly its Caspian energy pipeline ambitions.²⁹²

But whatever they were initially, Iran's motivations and interests in CA/A had to be traded off against the signally more important improvement of ties with Russia,²⁹³ for which stability in CA/A remained critical to securing its soft Eurasian underbelly. Unlike Saudi Arabia and Pakistan,²⁹⁴ Iran refrained from ideological-religious activities and instead confined its outreach to matters of functional and strategic interest such as transport and energy corridors, notably the 300km Mashhad-Sarakhs-Tejen rail link (inaugurated in May 1996) and the 200km Korpeje-Kordkuy gas pipeline (completed in December 1997) adjoining Iran and Turkmenistan.²⁹⁵ From 1997, Iran swapped Gulf oil sales for matching Kazakh, Turkmen and Azeri quantities to Iran's oil-poor northern regions. Tehran likewise leveraged on the revived Economic Cooperation Organization which now expanded to include CA/A.²⁹⁶ For their part, the latter remained deferent to, or at least refrained from provoking Russia,²⁹⁷ and at any rate became consumed with the threat posed by the Afghan Taliban later in the decade.²⁹⁸ Iran's stability

the Oghuz Turkic dialects and are hence mutually intelligible to a large extent; one exceptionally pan-Turkic CA/A leader was Azerbaijan's President Abulfaz Elçibey (1992-3).

292 US Secretary of State James Baker made it clear that the US' Central Asia policy aimed at countering Iran, see Thomas L. Friedman, 'U.S. to counter Iran in Central Asia', *NYT*, 6 February 1992 <http://www.nytimes.com/1992/02/06/world/us-to-counter-iran-in-central-asia.html>

293 *Tehran Times*, 18 August 1991.

294 Farhad Kazemi & Zohreh Ajdari, 'Ethnicity, identity and politics: Central Asia and Azerbaijan between Iran and Turkey', in David Menashri, ed., *Central Asia meets the Middle East* (London: Frank Cass, 1998) 66.

295 The construction of the rail link also symbolized Iran's reconnection with what would later become China's revived Silk Road Economic Belt.

296 The ECO was originally co-founded by Iran, Turkey and Pakistan in 1985 and expanded during the 1992 ECO summit in Tehran to include the six Muslim CA/A republics and Afghanistan. Its secretariat is located in Tehran.

297 Kazemi & Ajdari, 'Ethnicity, identity and politics', 56.

298 Hunter, 'Iran's pragmatic regional policy', 140; despite its proximity, Turkmenistan under president Niyazov reportedly did not view Iran as an ideological threat.

relative to its post-Soviet environs stood out,²⁹⁹ and it proved a stabilizing influence through its mediation in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict and between warring parties in Tajikistan,³⁰⁰ as well as a curb on Islamic fundamentalism that threatened to inflame Russia's own north Caucasus republics.³⁰¹ Despite the conspicuous opportunity, Iran's relative (lack of) power and appeal in the 1990s constrained its ambitions and influence so that irreducible security concerns, including territorial integrity, ultimately eclipsed maximal gains.³⁰²

e. Ideological one-upmanship and external balancing: Israel

Conversely, in the relatively distant Israeli-Palestinian arena Iran retained its revolutionary idealism, sustained by aspirations to Islamic leadership and impelled by the need to overcome the Sunni-Shi'ite schism in equal measure. This instance also prompted scholars to suggest, more generally, a curious Iranian policy of proximate pragmatism and remote militancy.³⁰³ Throughout the period that spanned the Madrid Conference and the Oslo Peace Accords, Iran vehemently opposed what it considered a betrayal by the PLO and Yasser Arafat of the Palestinian cause and Muslims more generally, in effect taking up the torch from the fervently pan-Arab former Egyptian president Gamal Abdel Nasser's heyday (with emphasis on Islam instead). Aligning itself with majority sentiment on the Arab street, Iran sought to delegitimize moderate Arab governments refusing to disavow peace with the Zionists, illustrating Iran's propensity to outbid and upstage other Muslim governments.³⁰⁴ In October 1991, responding to Madrid's fanfare, Tehran

299 Ansari, 'Iran and the United States', 109.

300 Iran's forestalling of a military victory by its ally Armenia over Shi'ite Azerbaijan in the Nagorno-Karabakh conflict suggests Tehran had learnt some of the lessons of its eight-year war concerning the 'subsequent peace', even if this peace was meant to benefit Tehran by, among other things, preventing an Azeri refugee crisis in Iran.

301 Tarock, 'Iran and Russia', 208; the fear of Iranian fundamentalism in the 1990s was a real concern for Russia, see John P. Hannah, 'Evolving Russian attitudes toward Iran', in Patrick Clawson, ed., *Iran's strategic intentions and capabilities*, Institute for National Strategic Studies, McNair Paper 29 (Washington, D.C.: National Defense University, 1994) 56.

302 In 1999, Iran's Central Bank reported foreign currency earnings of only \$9 billion instead of the anticipated \$16 billion, further constraining Tehran's CA/A options, see Mesamed, 'Iran: ten years'.

303 Menashri, *Crossroads*, 78-9; Shaul Bakhash, 'Iran's foreign policy under the Islamic Republic, 1979-2000', in Ali M. Ansari, ed., *Politics of modern Iran: critical issues in modern politics*, Vol. IV (Oxon: Routledge, 2011) 41.

304 Chubin, *Iran's national security policy*, 13.

hosted an anti-conference along with Palestinian rejectionists such as Hamas, Islamic Jihad and the Popular Front for the Liberation of Palestine–General Command. The concurrent rise during this period of Islamist movements in Africa and the Middle East provided another incentive to tighten its ideological commitment.

Yet, Iran's obstructionism also served a thoroughly realist interest by undermining the emerging post-Gulf War alliance among the US, Israel and moderate Sunni governments and thereby prevent its own isolation. Even Iran's closest state ally Syria had participated in the Gulf coalition against Saddam and was now contemplating peace with Israel. Iran thus viewed the peace process as an extension of a regional anti-Iran US strategy. In this rare instance, regime ideology coincided with objective state interests.³⁰⁵ In addition, with Iraq temporarily laid low, Israel – the region's only putative nuclear weapons state – now represented Tehran's main regional competitor for power, if not influence (a role occupied instead by Saudi Arabia, Turkey and Egypt).³⁰⁶ Already regionally status-discrepant, exclusion from the peace process rendered its revisionism more virulent and its congenital rejectionism overruled backpeddling. Given that relations with other states were warming up in the early 1990s and that Rafsanjani was attempting to take Iran in a different direction, Israel, if not the US, provided a safety valve for revolutionary zeal and would remain the common denominator among factions,³⁰⁷ what Chubin called Iran's 'discretionary foe'.³⁰⁸ Nonetheless, this same attitude would incur high costs in other areas.

f. Military force posture: rearmament, self-sufficiency, and asymmetric deterrence

Besides operational experience, the eight-year war and the Gulf crisis yielded critical lessons that deeply conditioned Iran's security thinking. On the grand strategic plane, Tehran was 'initiated' into the virtue and necessity of long-range planning, efficient organization, and the rational balancing of ends and means.³⁰⁹ At the military-strategic level, the war exposed the futility of spiritual faith without material power and disproved the utility of the

305 Juneau, *Squandered opportunity*, 148.

306 Ibid., 148.

307 Chubin, *Iran's national security policy*, 66.

308 Chubin, 'Iran's power in context', 179.

309 Chubin, *Iran's national security policy*, 17. For an overview of the lessons of war, see 17-28.

frontal approach, certainly for a militarily mediocre power.³¹⁰ Henceforth, to rephrase Liddell Hart, Iran would adopt a physical ‘line of least expectation’ and psycho-ideological ‘line of greatest resistance’, as exemplified in its anti-US/Israel posturing. As in the economy, the Rafsanjani government too presided over improved professionalization in the military.³¹¹

By one account, Iran had lost some 50% of its military and up to three quarters of its airforce during the eight-year war. Rearmament was thus vital, and technological obsolescence along with the incompatibility between US weapons systems from the Shah’s era (such as F-4s, F5s and F-14 Tomcats) and others acquired during the war required urgent addressing.³¹² The types and quantities of acquisitions were geared towards these needs, and yet in light of Iran’s historical record, they were also understandably perceived as offensive in intent. Iranian defense expenditures are notoriously nebulous. Iran’s parliament announced a 5-year \$10 billion defense allocation (for arms imports) in 1989, but the outlays later reported by Iran’s Central Bank fell short of these figures.³¹³ According to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute, Iran’s military expenditures in the 1990s actually dipped in both absolute and relative terms compared to other Middle Eastern states surveyed, even Lebanon. As a percentage of GDP, the decade’s (1990-99) average stood at 2%, with 1992 being the lowest year (1.4%) and 1999 the highest (3%).³¹⁴ According to the International Institute for Strategic Studies, Iran’s defense expenditures fluctuated from \$9.9 billion in 1988, to \$5.7 billion in 1989, \$3.18 billion in 1990, and \$3.77 billion in 1991.³¹⁵

Whatever the real figures, the contrast in defense expenditures of principal rivals like Saudi Arabia and Iraq, which in 1991 stood respectively at \$35.5 billion and \$7.49 billion, was exponential at minimum.³¹⁶ As Chubin remarked, Iran’s *wartime* expenditures remained dwarfed by those of *peacetime* Saudi Arabia,³¹⁷ which accounted for over a fifth (\$63.6 billion) of all Third World

310 See Shahram Chubin, ‘The last phase of the Iran-Iraq war: from stalemate to ceasefire’, *Third World Quarterly* 11.2 (1989): 1-14.

311 Anthony H. Cordesman, *Iran and Iraq: the threat from the northern Gulf* (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1994) 26-7.

312 Chubin, *Iran’s national security policy*, 29, 40.

313 Michael Eisenstadt, ‘Iranian military power: capabilities and intentions’, Policy Paper 42 (Washington, D.C.: WINEP, 1996) 2.

314 SIPRI Military Expenditure Database 2014 (covers the years 1988-2013 for 171 countries) <http://milexdata.sipri.org/>

315 See *The Military Balance 1989-90, 1990-91 & 1991-92* (London: IISS).

316 *The Military Balance*, 1991/1992 (London: IISS).

317 Chubin, *Iran’s national security policy*, 35.

arms transfers between 1985 to 1992.³¹⁸ Granted, Iran's figures were as reported by its government, excluded spending on the IRGC and most likely the revived nuclear program, and were therefore skewed. Yet, limited oil revenues in those years combined with the urgency of economic rehabilitation also likely placed restraints on Iranian military expenditures.

The war compelled Iran to diversify its arms suppliers, secure technology transfers, and indigenize production where possible.³¹⁹ According to one estimate, Russia and China respectively supplied Iran with 64 percent and 16 percent of its arms between 1989 and 1992.³²⁰ Importantly, the discontinuation of US armaments imposed the need for greater consistency in the procurement and servicing of non-US advanced systems such as Russian aircraft and Chinese missiles, as opposed to the desperate palimpsest accumulated during the war. Noteworthy post-war conventional acquisitions included MiG-29 air superiority fighters, SU-24 strikecraft, T-72 main battle tanks (MBTs), Kilo-class submarines, and SA-5/SA-6 SAMs (surface-to-air missiles) from Russia; and F-7 fighters, SA-2 SAMs, Hudong-class fast missile boats and C-801/C-802 anti-ship missiles (based on the French Exocet) from China.³²¹ But again, this quantitatively and qualitatively paled in comparison to the other Gulf states (Saudi alone signed contracts for some \$20 billion worth of advanced US-made weaponry), undermining the massive offensive buildup hypothesis. Moreover, acquisitions seldom translated into effective force integration, let alone in the combined arms context. Iran's naval buildup, with significant Chinese assistance, reflected the importance of the Gulf and the Straits of Hormuz. But again, a theater-strategy emphasizing submarines and minisubmarines, minelayers, fast attack craft, antiship missiles, amphibious warfare and logistics, and maritime air cover strongly suggested objectives linked to limited anti-access/area denial (i.e. to non-Gulf powers) rather than all-out domination or blue-water force projection, which required heavier-displacement surface combatants at the least. Corroborating this was the character of highly publicized Iranian naval exercises, which in turn was a response to the US' own focus on littoral warfare.³²²

318 Grimmett, *Conventional arms transfers*, 73.

319 See Rafsanjani's statement on self-sufficiency, *Voice of the IRI*, 25 July 1992, via BBC Summary of World Broadcasts ME/1443/A/8-9, 27 July 1992.

320 Grimmett, *Conventional arms transfers*, 30-32.

321 Cordesman, *Iran and Iraq*, 39-41; while China stopped supplying Iran with Silkworm anti-ship missiles in March 1988, it merely replaced them with the more advanced C-801/C-802s, Garver, *China and Iran*, 208.

322 Saideh Lotfian, 'Threat perception and military planning in Iran: credible scenarios of conflict and opportunities for confidence building', in Eric Arnett, ed., *Military*

By the early 1990s, the newly constituted Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics (MODAFL) oversaw a growing military-industrial complex capable of domestically producing ammunition, spare parts, light infantry arms and assorted weapons systems including the Zolfaqr MBT, mostly reverse engineered.³²³ Self-reliance would hedge against future wartime isolation. As mentioned, China played an important role in Iran's indigenization drive especially for the various missile classes, even as it took the opportunity to modernize aspects of the People's Liberation Army in the process.³²⁴

Additionally, both Gulf wars counseled the development of non-conventional capabilities. To overcome perennial conventional inferiority and eschew an estimated outlay of \$25 billion to recover pre-revolution force levels, Iran needed to invest in high-leverage assets such as ballistic missiles and robust air defenses.³²⁵ Iran's ballistic missile program compensated for lagging air power in particular and conventional forces more generally, and furthermore allowed Tehran to 'leapfrog back into Middle Eastern politics'.³²⁶ As the eight-year war deteriorated, Iran purchased Scud-Bs (320km) and Scud-Cs (500-600km) from North Korea and helped Pyongyang finance the development of the far more powerful Nodong-1 (1,000km) and Nodong-2 (1,500km+?).³²⁷ It acquired and indigenized the production of solid-fueled M-9s (600km), M-11s (280km, a solid-fueled improvement on the Scud-B), and M-18s (300km+) thanks to the Chinese, who also helped with the development of the Shahab-3 (1,000-1,300km, based on the Nodong-1) in the late 1990s.³²⁸ Even though the volume of Russian arms to Iran superseded those of China after the Cold War, visits of Iranian officials to China in the context of military cooperation still spoke volumes.³²⁹

capacity and the risk of war: China, India, Pakistan and Iran (London: Oxford University Press/SIPRI, 1997) 199-200.

323 Eisenstadt, 'Iranian military power', 62.

324 Garver, *China and Iran*, 173.

325 Henry Sokolski, 'The bomb in Iran's future', *MEQ* 1.2 (June 1994) <http://www.meforum.org/222/the-bomb-in-irans-future>

326 Chubin, *Iran's national security policy*, 63.

327 Stephen J. Cimbala, *Nuclear strategy in the twenty-first century* (Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000) 82-3; David C. Wright & Timur Kadyshev, 'An analysis of the North Korean Nodong missile', *Science and Global Security* 4 (1994) 87.

328 Shirley A. Kan, *China and proliferation of weapons of mass destruction and missiles: policy issues*, RL 31555 (Washington, D.C.: CRS, August 2003) 9-10.

329 These included then President Khamenei, both defense ministers Ali Akbar Torkan and later Mohammad Forouzandeh, Chief of the Armed Forces' Joint Staff Maj.

The critical complement to a missile program, nuclear weapons – putting aside chemical and biological weapons programs³³⁰ – would represent the ultimate value-for-cost equalizer and deterrent, especially with respect to US, Iraqi or Israeli aggression. If covert, it would deflect regional tensions resulting from an inescapably noticeable conventional arms buildup.³³¹ Despite Iranian rhetoric forswearing the use of WMD as anti-Islamic, impracticable or a tripwire for a regional nuclear arms race, international media took note of statements to the contrary. In October 1988, then parliamentary speaker Rafsanjani publicly told the IRGC that ‘we should fully equip ourselves both in the offensive and defensive use of chemical, bacteriological and radiological weapons. From now on you should make use of the opportunity and perform the task’.³³² In February 1987, then President Ali Khamenei told Iran’s Atomic Energy Organization that ‘[r]egarding atomic energy, we need it now.... Our nation has always been threatened from outside. The least we can do to face this danger is to let our enemies know that we can defend ourselves.... With this in mind, you should work hard and at great speed’.³³³ Furthermore, a quote attributed to Ayatollah Mohammad Beheshti from May 1979 has Khomeini’s go-to-man telling a Shah-era nuclear scientist to ‘build this bomb for the Islamic Republican Party’ because ‘[o]ur civilization is in danger’.³³⁴ Iran’s nuclear cooperation agreements with China (1985) and Russia (1995) have been mentioned, and it reportedly sought assistance

Gen. Ali Shahbazi, IRGC commander-in-chief Mohsen Rezaie, and in 2000, President Khatami.

330 For a brief overview, see Eisenstadt, ‘Iranian military power’, 25-7. While Iran apparently did experiment with chemical and biological weapons in the 1980s and 1990s, I believe a discussion limited to the nuclear aspects of its WMD program suffices to sketch out the broader lines of its grand strategy.

331 As the US entrenched its regional presence, so Iran’s perception of a possible invasion led it to self-arm more robustly, which in turn prompted the US to arm its Gulf allies, giving rise to a security dilemma. See Richard W. Cottam, ‘US-Iran relations: losses under spiral conflict, gains under cooperation’, in Hooshang Amirahmadi & Eric Hooglund, eds., *US-Iran relations: areas of tension and mutual interest* (Washington, D.C.: The Middle East Institute, 1994) 119-20.

332 *IRNA*, 19 October 1988, via BBC Summary of World Broadcasts ME/0288/A/2, 21 October 1988; also cited in Elaine Sciolino, ‘Report says Iran seeks atomic arms’, *NYT*, 31 October 1991 <http://www.nytimes.com/1991/10/31/world/report-says-iran-seeks-atomic-arms.html>

333 David Segal, ‘Atomic ayatollahs: just what the Mideast needs – an Iranian bomb’, *WP*, 12 April 1987.

334 *Ibid.* loc. cit.

from other states such as India, Pakistan and Argentina.³³⁵ Assuming Iran's 1990s nuclear program included military dimensions, a strong case exists for deterrence to ensure its survival and irreducible interests especially with memories of Iraq's chemical offensive still fresh in mind. An indicator of a security-desperate cast of mind was Iranian tenacity in pursuing the near-term 'luxury' of a nuclear program despite difficulties in maintaining the basic oil infrastructure critical to its economy. At the same time however, the poor accuracy of Iran's ballistic missiles made it more suitable for countervalue (targeting an adversary's population) rather than counterforce (targeting its military and especially second-strike capability) deployments, which set off alarms.

Finally, the physical 'line of least expectation' and psycho-ideological 'line of greatest resistance' converged in Iran's growing network of non-state actors, rejectionists like Iran, who allowed for a highly flexible instrument of statecraft in parallel to or in lieu of hard military power. In the 1990s, these included Lebanese Hezbollah, Palestinian Jihad and Hamas, although Iran also supported such groups as the PKK and others elsewhere for different political objectives. Much of these frontline contacts and coordination were handled by the IRGC's extraterritorial unit, the Qods Force (IRGC-QF or QF) along with MOIS, with Damascus serving as contact node in the case of Hezbollah and the Palestinian groups. While these non-state proxies varied in their level of cooperation and allegiance, they allowed Tehran to expand its geographical scope of maneuver and negotiational leverage, especially with a view to checking the US and Israel's operational freedom in the Mideast, as the attacks in Beirut, Khobar and as far afield as Buenos Aires, attributed to Iran and Hezbollah, demonstrate.

335 Iran's relations with Pakistan are rather peculiar. Iran was the first nation to recognize independent Pakistan and the Shah regarded Pakistan as an ally, but since 1979 relations have been tense in light of the mistreatment of Pakistan's Shi'a and both governments' backing of opposing sides in Afghanistan's conflicts. In the late 1980s and 1990s however, Iran-Pakistan cooperation included nuclear technology and training with A.Q. Khan (from 1987 onwards) representing only the tip of the iceberg, possibly with official knowledge. With Iran-India relations now improving and a complete ISAF withdrawal expected in 2016, greater friction may ensue.

5. The second inflection point, 2001-3

The independent variable: systemic imperatives

The cautious accommodation begun by Rafsanjani's reconstruction campaign expanded into positive conciliation when the reformist Mohammad Khatami became president in May 1997. Khatami articulated the centerpiece of his outreach in a CNN interview in January 1998 addressed to the 'great American people', when he called for a 'crack in this wall of mistrust' between both nations,³³⁶ and in his General Assembly speech that September calling for a broader 'dialogue among civilizations'.³³⁷ The measure of Washington's own shift in attitude was reflected in Secretary of State Madeleine Albright's speeches in June 1998 and March 2000,³³⁸ and President Clinton's 1999 admission that Iranian grievances were legitimate,³³⁹ alongside a series of piecemeal conciliatory gestures.³⁴⁰ If Rafsanjani prioritized economic reconstruction, Khatami prioritized the 'reconstruction of civilization',³⁴¹ and 'reintegrative legitimation' within the international order.³⁴² Consonant with

336 'Transcript of interview with Iranian President Mohammad Khatami', *CNN*, 7 January 1998 <http://edition.cnn.com/WORLD/9801/07/iran/interview.html>

337 This was in reference to, and rejection of Samuel Huntington's 'clash of civilizations'; English version of the speech available at http://www.parstimes.com/history/khatami_speech_un.html

338 See Madeleine K. Albright's speeches at the Asia Society in New York, 17 June 1998, and at the American-Iranian Council in Washington, D.C., 17 March 2000, accessible respectively at <http://1997-2001.state.gov/www/statements/1998/980617a.html> and <http://1997-2001.state.gov/www/statements/2000/000317.html>

339 See Clinton's remarks at the Millennium Evening, 12 April 1999, <http://clinton4.nara.gov/WH/New/html/19990413-850.html>

340 Inter alia, these included bilateral people-to-people exchanges in various fields and the corresponding easing of visa restrictions for Iranians visiting the US; sales of Boeing aircraft spare parts; inclusion of the Mojahedin-e Khalgh on the US' list of terrorist groups; the removal of Iran from the State Department's list of narco-states; and the removal of trade sanctions on Iranian carpets, pistachios and caviar.

341 Khatami's CNN interview.

342 Ali Ansari, 'Iranian foreign policy under Khatami: reform and reintegration', in Ali Ansari, ed., *Politics of modern Iran: critical issues in modern politics* Vol. IV (Milton Park, Routledge, 2011) 24.

his approach, Khatami continued improving relations with the neighboring GCC monarchies (in part also to hasten an elusive region-only security arrangement),³⁴³ the Europeans (settling the Rushdie affair once and for all in 1998), and even hinted that Iran would not sabotage any peace deal the Palestinians agreed to with Israel.³⁴⁴

But then the suite of events triggered by September 11, which itself marked a watershed since the end of the Cold War, reshaped the systemic status quo. US president George W. Bush declared a 'War on Terror' that initially garnered widespread sympathy and support, invaded Afghanistan to eradicate the Taliban regime hosting Al-Qaeda, and then embarked on an ambitious campaign to democratize the Middle East with the toppling of Iraq's Saddam Hussein. Ali Ansari noted the irony of an increasingly de-revolutionized and realist Iran faced with an astonishingly revolutionary and idealist US,³⁴⁵ bent on prosecuting a preemptive 'forward strategy of freedom in the Middle East'.³⁴⁶ The Pentagon complemented its operational footprint in Afghanistan and Iraq by rapidly expanding support infrastructure in the

343 In his first address to the General Assembly as Khatami's foreign minister in 1997, Kamal Kharrazi stated that Iran's 'highest foreign policy priority...is to strengthen trust and confidence and peace in our immediate neighborhood [the Gulf]', see *Our foreign policy: a collection of the speeches of Seyyed Kamal Kharrazi* (Tehran: Foreign Ministry Publications, 1380 [2001-2], AHs), cited in Edmund Herzig, 'Regionalism, Iran and Central Asia', *International Affairs* 80.3 (2004) 506; This was borne out in reality. After Khatami's election, Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah attended the December 1997 OIC meeting in Tehran, direct Iran Air flights between Tehran and Jeddah resumed for the first time in eighteen years, and in May 1999 Khatami became the first Iranian president to visit Riyadh since 1979. Facilitating ongoing rapprochement were external factors such as the need for OPEC's two leading giants to cooperate to adjust production quotas and prices, and the apparent failure of the Peace Process which the GCC states had backed.

344 *IRNA*, 6 Khordad 1376/27 May 1997; one of Khatami's vice presidents, the former hostage crisis spokesperson Ma'soumeh Ebtekar even deigned to be interviewed by Israeli daily *Yedi'ot Acharonot*, and was reported supporting greater bilateral dialogue, 'Report: Iran vice-president wants dialogue with Israelis', *Yedi'ot Acharonot*, via Hurriyet Daily News, 2 February 1998 <http://www.hurriyetdailynews.com/default.aspx?pageid=438&n=report-iran-vice-president-wants-dialogue-with-israelis-1998-02-02>; it is also worth pointing out that consistent with Iran's efforts to prevent its own isolation in the earlier Madrid and Oslo era, no similar situation threatened Iran this time round, thanks to the rise of Netanyahu and the Likud Party in Israel.

345 Ansari, 'Iran and the United States', 108.

346 See Bush's remarks at the National Endowment for Democracy, 6 November 2003, <http://georgewbush-whitehouse.archives.gov/news/releases/2003/11/20031106-11>.

Persian Gulf, Pakistan and Central Asia. In the latter, where Iran already had trouble expanding its influence, the US' War on Terror altered regional alignments altogether, eliciting even Russia's cooperation.³⁴⁷ This had the odd effect of liquidating the two-front dilemma hitherto posed by Saddam and the Taliban and completely reshaping Iran's strategic environment in the space of 18 months, even as it tightened the noose around Tehran.

Iran's strategic adjustments in this period must be viewed in two phases. In the first, between 9/11 and until the months following Operation Iraqi Freedom, expediency combined with some genuine willingness to work towards détente and the strategic uncertainty surrounding the US' near-term intentions nudged Tehran towards circumspection and cooperation. The second, longer phase began as the US found itself increasingly quagmired in Afghanistan and Iraq, a time that also corresponded to the rise of Iranian power and influence and as a result, greater assertiveness during the Ahmadinejad administration.

Intervening variable: ideational-constitutive aspects

In the late 1990s, the intellectual-ideational climate that accompanied the reformists' rise to power initially appeared pregnant with promise. Public discourse in Iran continued to underscore state, or more accurately by then, *national* interest even as it built on civilizational self-awareness as the basis to dialogue with the Other.³⁴⁸ Like Iranian particularism, Islam as a pillar of national identity was increasingly enmeshed with an appreciation of Iran's Western inheritance. In other words, both pillars had to be viewed in light of their own historical debts and contributions to Western civilization, and common ground could hopefully in this way be attained. Khatami's charm diplomatic offensive blunted some of the rejectionism still brewing in the wings and helped assuage Iran's status discrepancy given that more states were now willing to acknowledge Iran's geopolitical significance. Khatami's

html; Richard H. Curtiss, 'Bush's "forward strategy" for freedom in the Middle East', *WRMEA* (Jan/Feb 2004) 20.

347 Nikolay Kozhanov, 'Russia's relations with Iran: dialogue without commitments', Policy Focus 120 (Washington, D.C.: WINEP, 2012) 6.

348 As an example of the changing rhetoric, Behzad Nabavi (of the reform-leaning Organization of the Mojahedin of the Islamic Revolution), praising Albright's 2000 speech, called upon the Iranian government 'to carry out a logical, calculated and wise analysis of the changes that have come about in American stances and policies. Instead of relying upon a wave of blind emotions, they must act on the basis of national interests', *Asr-e Ma* no. 156, 4 April 2000, 1, 6, 8, cited in Sick, 'Iran's foreign policy', 143.

discourse likewise propounded a subtle shift away from the ‘logic of power’ as the determinant of international relations.³⁴⁹ After 9/11 and the invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq, Iran’s leadership initially took stock of a symmetry of state interests with those of Washington. Yet, a series of developments leading to Bush’s ‘Axis of Evil’ speech, followed by Iran’s complete encirclement aggravated its threat perceptions. Until sometime around December 2004, Iran thought it might be the next in line for an invasion.

When the Ahmadinejad administration came to power, the neoconservatives sealed the transition ‘from cooperation to confrontation’,³⁵⁰ turning everything that Khatami outwardly stood for on its head. Ahmadinejad combined an unorthodox Messianic brand of Shi’ism with unprecedentedly strident ultranationalism and a return to the Revolution’s core ideological principles (hence ‘principlists’, *osulgerayan*). The neoconservatives’ sense of entitlement from having fought the Iran-Iraq war meant they were prepared to brook little compromise or dissent even vis-à-vis the conservative old guard. In practice this translated into a trifecta of economic populism, domestic repression and a permanent disposition towards antagonism in foreign policy, all legitimated by Ahmadinejad’s supposed personal connection with the Occulted Imam.³⁵¹ While the post-9/11 order and the war in Iraq in particular ‘affected Iran’s role conception in a region...almost completely dominated by the United States’,³⁵² the focus of Iran’s status aspirations projected itself onto the symbolism of a nuclear program, which became synonymous with Iranian national pride, prestige and independence. Owing to the security-heavy orientation of the new administration, state interests accorded with perceptions of Iran as an ascendant regional power nonetheless beset with threats. But these threat perceptions, themselves a product of systemic pressures of the period, also served to legitimize Ahmadinejad’s FNSP.

Intervening variable: institutional-competitive aspects

By the time George W. Bush became president, Khatami’s domestic standing was nearly in tatters. The student riots of 1999 had posed the most serious

349 See Khatami’s remarks, *Ettelaat*, 28 Khordad 1379/17 June 2000, 2, cited in Dehghani Firooz-Abadi, ‘Ideal international system’, 51.

350 Sanam Vakil, ‘Tehran gambles to survive’, *Current History* (December 2007) 414.

351 Ali M. Ansari, ‘Iran under Ahmadinejad: the politics of confrontation’, IISS Adelphi Paper 393 (London: Routledge 2007) 42; Golnaz Esfandiari, ‘Iran: president says light surrounded him during UN speech’, *RFE/RL*, 29 November 2005 <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1063353.html>

352 Anoushiravan Ehteshami, ‘Iran’s international posture after the fall of Baghdad’, *MEJ* 58.2 (2004) 180-1.

challenge to the ruling establishment since its inception, and the conservatives were quick to double down with the help of the coercive apparatus and the judiciary on the beneficiaries of Khatami's early sociocultural, educational and press reforms. Yet for a while, Khatami's justification for engaging with Western civilization in order to 'use its strengths' and avoid its 'defects by relying on our revolution's values' continued shaping Iran's official, public approach to the world.³⁵³ Even a character previously as hostile to the US as Mehdi Karrubi supported détente with Washington on shared strategic interests but quipped that while the US remained a 'wolf', Iran was now a 'lion'.³⁵⁴ With 9/11 and the Afghanistan invasion, cooperation on security matters – controlled and thus presumably greenlighted by the Supreme Leader – became standard operating procedure, facilitated by the thaw brought about by Khatami's presidency. The Iranians bore little affection for the extremist Sunni Pashtun-majority Taliban. In 1998, when the latter murdered eight Iranian diplomats and a journalist in Mazar-e Sharif, Iran massed 200,000 troops along the border and nearly went to war. The following year, the Taliban disrupted the Helmand's westward flow, crucial to irrigating Iran's chronically parched Sistan Basin. Consequently, irrespective of any momentary sympathy with the Americans, Tehran assessed that cooperation would best enable it to shape its eastern neighbor's political and security environment.

Then, Bush's January 2002 inclusion of Iran in the 'Axis of Evil' caught Khatami's government by surprise, created temporary domestic unity and vindicated the rejectionists for whom the US had again proven its perfidy.³⁵⁵ Khamenei declared that Iran 'is proud to be the target of the rage and hatred of the world's greatest Satan'.³⁵⁶ Stunned but not daunted, others speculated that '[b]y taking such a stance, George Bush is trying to test public opinion. And when the public opinion would correspond to his, he would then act....In truth, England is the one who fuels events [sic]'.³⁵⁷ Still others

353 Cited in Menashri, *Post-revolutionary politics*, 186, 206.

354 *Iran News*, 6 May 1999, cited in Menashri, *Post-revolutionary politics*, 211.

355 Neil MacFarquhar, 'A nation challenged: Iran; Bush's comments bolster Old Guard in Tehran', *NYT*, 8 February 2002 <http://www.nytimes.com/2002/02/08/world/a-nation-challenged-iran-bush-s-comments-bolster-old-guard-in-tehran.html>

356 'Khamenei calls Bush "thirsty of human blood"', *AFP*, 31 January 2002; 'Iran lashes out at Bush', *BBC*, 31 January 2002 http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/1793856.stm

357 *ISNA*, 2 February 2002, BBC Monitoring Middle East Political; *Nowruz*, 2 February 2002, BBC Monitoring Middle East Political.

counselled equanimity and reason, as reflected in the following passage by a prominent reformist journalist which probably resonated with many among the reformist elite:

There is no rational strategic explanation for refusing to hold talks with America. The sooner Iran begins to hold public and official talks with America, the sooner it will be able to further its own interests. However, the longer Iran postpones the talks, the greater the losses it will incur.³⁵⁸

The dilemma over how to respond however soon took on preposterous dimensions when Tehran district's head of judiciary unilaterally decided to ban all talk about negotiations.³⁵⁹ As the archconservative Ayatollah Jannati later reminded the public, antagonism remained a key *raison d'être* of the Islamic Republic.³⁶⁰ A cautious Khatami merely noted that time still wasn't ripe for political negotiations, but limited security cooperation nonetheless resumed. Then following the Iraqi invasion, a member of Khatami's reformist coalition opined: 'Previously, America was far away. Now, unfortunately, America is Iran's neighbor in all directions....mak[ing] it necessary for Iran to reconsider its foreign and international policies'.³⁶¹ Former deputy foreign minister Abbas Maleki noted that Iran now had more border with the US than the latter did with Canada.³⁶² This growing unease and the fear that it might be next was compounded by the disclosure of two secret nuclear facilities, which persuaded Iran's decisionmakers to offer to cooperate with the US in Iraq as it had in Afghanistan, and to enter negotiations with Britain, France and Germany (the EU3) to dissipate nuclear tensions. Indeed, at the UN, Foreign Minister Kharrazi even wondered, perhaps only half-jokingly, whether the US ought not to be invited to cooperate in Iran's nuclear program.³⁶³ As nuclear talks progressed, the number of centrifuges operating non-stop actually increased from 150 to 500. 'If we wanted to increase this number to 1,000 centrifuges, we wouldn't have a problem,'

358 Ahmad Zeydabadi, cited in ISNA, 16 March 2002, BBC Monitoring Middle East Political.

359 'Judiciary will enforce ban on talks with United States', *Payvand News*, 27 May 2002 <http://www.payvand.com/news/02/may/1116.html>

360 *IRIB*, 8 November 2002, BBC Monitoring Middle East Political.

361 Hambastegi (Solidarity) Party, *Associated Press*, 6 May 2003, cited in Ehteshami, 'Fall of Baghdad', 181.

362 Scott Peterson, 'Hostile in public, Iran seeks quiet discourse with US', *CSM*, 25 September 2003 <http://www.csmonitor.com/2003/0925/p07s01-wome.html>

363 IRNA, 2 June 2003, BBC Monitoring Middle East Political.

Iran's lead negotiator Hassan Rouhani vaunted.³⁶⁴ Despite the breakdown of talks, he was afterwards also able to silence critics by pointing out that

While we were talking with the Europeans in Tehran, we were installing equipment in parts of the Esfahan facility....In fact, by creating a calm environment, we were able to complete the work in Esfahan. [*Al-Hamdulillah*] today, Esfahan is complete and we can convert yellowcake into UF4 and UF6.³⁶⁵

Washington's swelling hubris and rejection of Tehran's cooperation in Iraq had the unintended effect of further tilting Iran's domestic balance of power in favor of the hardliners. The neoconservative moment really began in reaction to the rise of the reformists in 1997 and acquired momentum as a means for the traditional conservatives to sideline the reformists. If the reformists dominated the municipal, parliamentary and presidential elections in 1999, 2000 and 2001 respectively, the hardliners themselves were soon on the ascendancy. In the 2003 council (municipal) elections, conservatives won a majority absent regular turnout on the part of pro-reformist voters disillusioned by Khatami's inability to deliver (especially in the economy) and reluctance to challenge the hardliners. A group known in shorthand as the Developers (*Abadgaran*) secured significant gains when 14 of the 15 candidates they backed won seats in Tehran.³⁶⁶ One of these, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, became Tehran's mayor. This momentum continued in the 2004 legislative elections, when hardliners secured around 200 of the parliament's 290 seats with Gholam-Ali Haddad-Adel as speaker. This time, they were aided not only by a reformist boycott especially in the larger cities, but by the Council of Guardians' disqualification of scores of reformist candidates, who only managed 40 seats in the end.³⁶⁷ The final straw that sealed the

364 Hassan Rouhani, '*Farasuye chalesh-haye Iran va azhans dar parvande-ye haste-i*' [Beyond the challenges facing Iran and the IAEA concerning the nuclear dossier], *Rahbord*, 8 Mehr 1384/30 September 2005 (Text of speech to the Supreme Cultural Revolution Council) 20.

365 Rouhani, '*Farasuye chalesh-ha*', 17.

366 Abbas William Samii, 'The changing landscape of party politics in Iran: a case study', *Vasete: The Journal of the European Society for Iranian Studies* 1.1 (Winter 2005) <http://www.payvand.com/news/06/apr/1014.html>

367 Masoud Kazemzadeh, 'Intra-elite factionalism and the 2004 Majles elections in Iran', *MES* 44 (2008) 203; Ali M. Ansari, *Confronting Iran: the failure of American foreign policy and the next great crisis in the Middle East* (New York: Basic Books, 2006) 210; besides new candidates, the Council of Guardians even vetted out 76 *incumbent* reformist parliamentarians including the president's brother Mohammad-Reza Khatami.

neoconservative/conservative takeover of all of elected officialdom, in addition to the unelected bodies already under conservative control since 1989,³⁶⁸ came when Ahmadinejad beat Rafsanjani twofold in an unexpected run-off in the 2005 presidential elections, shattering the latter's comeback ambitions and placing a non-cleric in the position for the first time since Abolhassan Banisadr and Mohammad-Ali Rajai in 1981. If IRGC-linked individuals formed about a third of parliament's seats from 2004, nearly half of the cabinet ministers (9 of 21) appointed by Ahmadinejad in 2005 were IRGC veterans and a third of his provincial governors boasted security backgrounds. And if much of the president's support base initially came from the IRGC and the Basij, it was also in part because Khamenei was willing to gamble on this obscure figure. This momentary unity of pan-conservative power encouraged a strategic consistency and clarity of purpose. Combined with Iran's rising relative power, the new administration henceforth no longer saw the need for the conciliatory reformist figleaf to forestall regime change.

Ahmadinejad officially countermanded Khatami's FNSP beginning with previous nuclear agreements with the EU3, which he saw as the West's attempt to deprive Iran of a fuel production capability and indeed of its nuclear program altogether.³⁶⁹ Conservative obstructionism against Khatami was hardly novel, but this had been mostly confined to domestic politics or instigated by allegedly 'rogue' elements.³⁷⁰ Even before Ahmadinejad's victory, mere months into the Tehran Declaration the hardline parliament inaugurated in 2004 had refused to ratify the Additional Protocol (AP). That same year, the shifting domestic balance was similarly manifest when the IRGC seized and briefly held eight British sailors allegedly trespassing Iran's maritime border. In Iraq, the IRGC and establishment hardliners' preference for a more muscular approach was tempered by the leadership's decision to let the situation stabilize first. Only after 2005, and when the Ahmadinejad administration peaked in power towards 2006-7, did Iran seek to readjust

368 The exception was the Expediency Council and from 2007-11, the Assembly of Experts, both of which remained under Rafsanjani's control (who nonetheless arguably still belonged to the broader conservative camp despite his tactical alliance with the reformists).

369 Amir M. Haji-Yousefi, 'Iran's foreign policy during Ahmadinejad: from confrontation to accommodation', paper presented at the Annual Conference of the Canadian Political Science Association at Concordia University, Montreal, 2-3 June 2010, 10.

370 In addition, just after ground operations ended in Iraq, al-Qaeda operatives based in eastern Iran allegedly blew up a complex of Western residences in Riyadh, with traces reportedly leading back to Tehran, see Pollack, *Persian puzzle*, 358-61.

the terms of the debate and thereby project influence by sponsoring Shi'ite rejectionist fringe groups against the US. Raising the ante, Ahmadinejad personally issued a stream of monologues threatening to erase Israel 'from the pages of [historical] time' and questioning the veracity of the Holocaust.³⁷¹ Ahmadinejad's statements were unprecedented only in their vehemence, not their vintage. Nor was he entirely alone. Supreme Leader Khamenei openly stated that 'We can by no means accept the behavior associated with the system of domination...and we consider the criterion for our diplomacy to be confrontation with the system of domination that presently prevails'.³⁷² That this was aimed specifically at the US was made clear by then SNSC secretary and chief nuclear negotiator Saeed Jalili: 'regional and global developments have created new situations in Iran's favour which are not undeniable', and that these also prove 'that the era of unipolarism of [the] US is now over'.³⁷³

A sense of betrayal, first by the US and then by the EU owing to the breakdown in negotiations produced predictable results for the Islamic Republic turned away from the West. Even the relatively moderate Rouhani mused that while the Europeans resisted Washington's efforts to refer Iran to the UNSC with Britain unprecedentedly 'going face-to-face against the US',³⁷⁴ they 'were clearly not genuine friends of ours nor did they have good relations with Islam, but were instead unwilling to lose Iran owing to Iran's strategic position'. Indeed, he added, 'in the current circumstances [of 2005], Europe's only breathing space in this region is Iran',³⁷⁵ and so Iran would do well to exploit this wedge.³⁷⁶ Once in power, Ahmadinejad's neo-

371 On remarks made during the 'World without Zionism' Conference in Tehran, and international responses, see 'Ez'harat-e Ahmadinezhad darbare-ye rezhim-e sahyounisti, khashm-e hamiyan-e sahyounism ra barangikht' [Ahmadinejad's statements concerning the Zionist regime provoke the ire of Zionism's defenders], *Fars News*, 5 Aban 1384/27 October 2005, <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=8408040372>; for Ahmadinejad's Zahedan speech in which he questioned the Holocaust, see 'Ahmadinezhad: koshtar-e yahudiyan afsane ast' [Ahmadinejad: the slaughter of the Jews is a myth], *BBC Persian*, 23 Azar 1384/14 December 2005 http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/story/2005/12/051214_mf_ahmadinejad_myth.shtml

372 *Ruzname Iran*, 10 Khordad 1386/31 May 2007.

373 *IRNA*, 15 October 2008 (English), BBC Monitoring Middle East Political, 15 October 2008.

374 Rouhani, '*Farasuye chalesh-ha*', 14.

375 *Ibid.*, 32.

376 *Ibid.*, 30: 'Mikham beguyam ke inha hatta bar sar-e yek seri masa'el-e sade ham ba yekdigar raghabat darand va ma ham mitavanim az in raghabat-ha estefade

revolutionary populism led his government straight to likeminded regimes in Latin America and to a lesser extent, Africa, even as his brand of Iranian ultranationalism found political expression in Central Asia (through the International Nowruz, or Persian New Year, Festival) and notably Tajikistan and Afghanistan (through the trilateral Persian-Speaking Union). Still, the more substantive and critical relations remained with the major powers, especially China. Again, in advocating Iran's participation in the EU3 talks, Rouhani before him noted that '[i]f we go to the UN Security Council because political negotiations have failed [as opposed to being referred for violating UN resolutions], then a strong country like China can argue that Iran was negotiating and must return to the path of negotiations'.³⁷⁷ Still in the nuclear context, Rouhani even hinted at the importance of the Chinese who were 'perhaps slightly easier to work with' since 'the Russians have certain sensitivities about us that the Chinese do not have to the same extent'.³⁷⁸

On the nuclear front, the Ahmadinejad administration viewed compromise in historical capitulatory terms, especially when the international community had done little to divest other non-P5 powers – e.g. Pakistan, India and especially Israel – of their arsenals. To be sure, Khatami had been no less ardent in his nuclear apologetics.³⁷⁹ Yet Ahmadinejad recast it as a symbol of Iranian nationalism and prestige, and the question of Iran's civil nuclear program quickly commanded widespread popular support even among the government's detractors, a point emphatically confirmed to me during discussions in Iran in 2013.³⁸⁰ 'Many Iranians believe that US pressure... is a conspiracy by the western powers to deny or prevent Iran from acquiring advanced technology and keep Iran backward and dependent on the West',

konim. Albatte ijad-e shekaf beyn-e inha asan nist' [I want to say that these countries compete with each other even on simple matters and we too can exploit these rivalries. Naturally, the creation of schisms among them isn't a simple matter].

377 Ibid., 27.

378 Ibid., 25.

379 See for instance Khatami's speech, *IRNA*, 30 Shahrivar 1383/20 September 2004.

380 That the average Iranian strongly supported a *peaceful* nuclear program as a function of Iranian independence was emphatically affirmed to me by about 110 individuals from a wide cross-section of urban society (taxi drivers, learned museum curators, restaurant owners, policemen, *bazaaris*, businessmen, university students) in Tehran, Kashan and Esfahan, just after Rouhani became president in 2013. Interestingly, almost none of them regarded Israel or the Israeli-Palestinian issue as crucial to Iran's interests, though not all suspended judgment to the same degree concerning Israel's Palestinian policies.

Tehran University's Sadegh Zibakalam noted.³⁸¹ In terms of domestic politics, it meant that no faction could afford *not* to support the nuclear program, not even the most dovish reformist, and one-upmanship – as in the Israeli-Palestinian conflict and to an extent relations with the US – became normative. Morgenthau noted the power of prestige as a 'political weapon in an age in which the struggle for power is fought...in large measure as a struggle for the minds of men'.³⁸² Baktiari linked Iranian prestige overseas to legitimacy at home.³⁸³ Abulof, for his part, argued for the diversionary utility of Iran's nuclear program at a time of dwindling domestic legitimacy, notably after the disputed 2009 elections. Iran's leadership has 'consecrate[d] the nuclear project, rendering it an article of faith in the state's civil religion', he wrote.³⁸⁴ Consequently, all factions alike compete in the intensity of their adherence thereto.

However, with the reformist threat exorcised, it wasn't long before the neoconservatives broke ranks with their traditional counterparts. The Supreme Leader's gamble vis-à-vis Ahmadinejad, a peripheral figure in the Revolutionary narrative as one observer noted,³⁸⁵ was indicative of the conservatives' broader struggle against the reformist tide, but it was shortlived. The neoconservatives soon lost some ground to the traditional conservatives beginning as early as the December 2006 Assembly of Experts and Municipal elections. Over time, Ahmadinejad's arrogance vis-à-vis senior establishment figures reached unbearable heights and even prompted a series of high-profile resignations from government, especially in 2007.³⁸⁶ Their foreign policy hubris and in some cases anti-clerical Messianism

381 Sadegh Zibakalam, 'Iranian nationalism and the nuclear issue', *Bitter Lemons International*, 5 January 2006 <http://www.bitterlemons-international.org/inside.php?id=465>

382 Morgenthau, *Politics among nations*, 92.

383 Bahman Baktiari, 'Seeking international legitimacy: understanding the dynamics of nuclear nationalism in Iran', in Judith Yaphe, ed., *Nuclear politics in Iran* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press, 2010) 21.

384 Uriel Abulof, 'Nuclear diversion theory and legitimacy crisis: the case of Iran', *Politics and Policy* 41.5 (2013) 699; the historical example adduced here is India's Operation 'Smiling Buddha' in May 1974, the country's first test explosion which boosted Prime Minister Indira Gandhi and her Congress Party's flagging popularity.

385 Amin Tarzi, 'Iranian grand strategy under the Ayatollah', lecture delivered at the Middle East History Institute (Foreign Policy Research Institute), Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania, 3 November 2013.

386 Those of Ali Larijani as nuclear negotiator and SNSC secretary, Ebrahim Sheibani as Central Bank governor and Alireza Tahmasebi as minister of Industry and Mines come to mind.

not only threatened to undermine the traditional conservatives' hold on unelected power but also actually put at risk Iran's national security. Worse, despite his own campaign promises, Ahmadinejad failed to deliver in the economy and his populist demeanor struck some as alarmingly simplistic.³⁸⁷ Although oil prices rose, production stagnated and increasing domestic consumption – exacerbated by subsidies, which as a whole including non-oil subsidies approximated 27% of GDP in 2007/8 – ate into potential exports,³⁸⁸ which in turn diluted state revenue. Inflation and unemployment likewise remained high, and all this was in evidence before international sanctions even seriously kicked in. Yet, the solution required to temporarily salvage his government's legitimacy was already at hand, for Ahmadinejad's confrontational foreign policy – cynically sanctioned by the Supreme Leader – also aimed at silencing dissent at home and subsuming domestic debate under the diktat of national security imperatives. The following passage by Ansari was published in 2008 but may well have spoken for Ahmadinejad's subsequent years in government too:

With solutions proving elusive, ambitions increase and utopianism expands. Iran is no longer a sufficient platform for the spectacle which must unfold, and thus the international dimension is summoned in to serve the needs of a specifically domestic problem. Indeed, the continuation of a managed international crisis is central to the sustainability of this project.³⁸⁹

The dependent variable: strategic adjustments

a. Phase 1: diplomatic engagement, tactical cooperation in Afghanistan, and strategic anxiety

During and after Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan, Iran cooperated with the US by facilitating overflight rights, overland humanitarian access via Chabahar port, Taliban target intelligence, search-and-rescue support for distressed American personnel in or near Iranian territory, and coordination with the Iranian-backed Northern Alliance, the principal anti-Taliban force on the ground. During the UN-brokered Bonn conference in December 2001, Iranian influence helped seal Afghan consensus over

387 Bahman Baktiari, 'Iran's conservative revival', *Current History* 106.696 (January 2007).

388 IMF figures cited in Juneau, *Squandered opportunity*, 67.

389 Ali M. Ansari, 'Iran under Ahmadinejad: populism and its malcontents', *International Affairs* 84.4 (July 2008) 699.

Hamid Karzai's compromise presidency and the problematic question of the interim government's distribution of ministries. Furthermore, it was the Iranian representative, Mohammad Javad Zarif who pointed out that the draft declaration lacked references to 'democracy', 'elections' or 'international terrorism'.³⁹⁰ 'America hadn't only won the war,' one observer wrote, 'but, thanks to Iran, it had also won the peace'.³⁹¹ Iranian officials continued to pass messages to their US counterparts affirming their desire to cooperate, even to partially rebuild Afghanistan's army under US leadership, though no response came from up the hierarchy especially at a time when Iraq had become the Bush administration's all-consuming priority.³⁹² At the Tokyo donor conference in January 2002, Iran pledged \$540 million to rehabilitate Afghanistan – 12% of total pledged assistance and nearly twice as much as the US' \$290 million.

This emerging convergence of interests and the resulting security dialogue had no doubt been made easier by Khatami's conciliatory groundwork. Standing to gain from the fall of the Taliban, Iran was supportive of a military response (remarkable among the Six-plus-Two countries involved in pre-9/11 Afghanistan negotiations),³⁹³ and had reacted positively to the White House's request for assistance, continued afterwards in the so-called Geneva Contact Group from Nov 2001 to May 2003 (following public disclosure).³⁹⁴ Moreover, the Bush administration's close links with the oil industry initially suggested the possibility of friendlier relations with oil-rich Iran.³⁹⁵ According to a senior Iranian diplomat, the unprecedented trauma of 9/11 on the American psyche persuaded Tehran to cooperate without 'qualify[ing it] on Afghanistan or mak[ing] it contingent upon a change in U.S. policy'.³⁹⁶ In practical terms, cooperation held out the hope of stabilizing

390 James Dobbins, 'Negotiating with Iran: reflections from personal experience', *TWQ* (January 2010) 151-2; Iran's participation was lauded as 'constructive' by Richard Haas, director of the Office of Policy Planning Staff at the US Department of State, see Bill Samii, 'Tehran welcomes Afghan accords and interim chief', Iran Report 4.47, *RFE/RL*, 17 December 2001 <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1342858.html>

391 Trita Parsi, *Treacherous alliance: the secret dealings of Israel, Iran, and the U.S.* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 2007) 229.

392 Dobbins, 'Negotiating with Iran', 155; Pollack, *Persian puzzle*, 343-4, 350.

393 These comprised Afghanistan's six immediate neighbors – Pakistan, Iran, Tajikistan, Uzbekistan, Turkmenistan, China – and the US and Russia.

394 Pollack, *Persian puzzle*, 346.

395 As previous chief of oil giant Halliburton, Vice-president Dick Cheney had even reportedly called for the easing of US sanctions on Iran.

396 Barbara Slavin, 'A broken engagement', *TNI* 92 (November/December 2007) 39.

Iran's chronically unruly eastern border, allowing the repatriation of some 2.5 million Afghan refugees, protecting transnational water resources, and gaining the upper hand in a narcotics war that had created some 1.2 million heroin addicts in Iran.³⁹⁷

This temporary boost to Iran's own role conception was however cut short by developments that led the US to reverse its conciliatory stance. Reports surfaced that Al-Qaeda operatives had fled into Iran and although some were apparently in custody, Tehran was reluctant to extradite them for various reasons, possibly including fear of retaliation. In January 2002, Israeli authorities seized a ship carrying weapons with Persian lettering allegedly destined, from Iran's Kish Island, for the Palestinian Authority in Gaza. These events marked the turning point. That same month, during his State of the Union address, Bush included Iran along with Iraq and North Korea in an 'Axis of Evil'.³⁹⁸ Even thornier was the August 2002 nuclear revelations (see below). These appeared to reconfirm the US' earlier characterizations of Iranian behavior, discredited Khatami's efforts in the international arena, and created yet another opening for his domestic opponents to delegitimize his administration. On the cusp of seeming rapprochement with its superpower adversary, Iran suddenly found itself in its crosshairs again and the coming candidate for regime change. If the US sought containment in the 1990s, it now appeared to lust after confrontation.³⁹⁹

As US forces geared up for Operation Iraqi Freedom, Tehran again signaled its willingness to cooperate.⁴⁰⁰ Until then, Iran had remained in contact with the US via the Geneva Contact Group.⁴⁰¹ Tehran was aware of Washington's intention to go as far as decapitate the Saddam regime and assessed that subsequent democratic pluralism would bolster the Shi'a (who were, if

397 For a summary, see Mohsen M. Milani, 'Iran's policy towards Afghanistan', *MEJ* 60.2 (Spring 2006): 235-56.

398 The reasons behind Iran's inclusion, according to Pollack, may also have been esthetic since they 'needed to fill out the Axis', *Persian puzzle*, 352; despite the shock in Iran, the Geneva Contact Group only temporarily ceased meeting, continuing afterwards, and weeks later Iran offered to train 20,000 Afghan troops under US leadership.

399 Ansari, *Confronting Iran*, 3.

400 On the eve of the Iraq invasion, Expediency Council chairman Rafsanjani offered to cooperate with the US as before in Afghanistan, on condition that Iran be treated on equal terms, 'Iran: Rafsanjani says Tehran ready to cooperate if there is change in US policy', *Voice of the IRI*, 21 June 2002, via BBC Monitoring Middle East Political, 22 June 2002.

401 According to Pollack, the prospect of a US invasion of Iraq likely ensured Iran's ongoing participation in the group, *Persian puzzle*, 398.

not beholden, at least not inimical to Iran) and was therefore the optimal outcome for Iran.⁴⁰² If the Afghan invasion prompted Iranian cooperation, Iraq's regime change convinced elements within Iran's leadership, with reformists still dominating official government then, that this was their final chance to forestall a similar fate. In May 2003, a facsimile was reportedly hand-delivered to the US Department of State via the Swiss Ambassador to the US, Tim Guldemann. Purportedly approved by Khamenei, the 'grand bargain' proposed negotiating all outstanding key issues of concern to the US, including Iran's nuclear program, an end to Iranian support for terrorism and anti-Israel groups, acceptance of the Saudi peace initiative, and cooperation in Iraq.⁴⁰³ This unusual *démarche* raised questions regarding its authenticity and authority. Those who mattered in the Bush administration rejected or ignored it, suspecting Guldemann of freelancing.⁴⁰⁴ Nonetheless, had any such 'grand bargain' worked out at the time, it would have represented a very significant adjustment in post-revolutionary Iran's grand strategic trajectory.⁴⁰⁵

Against this backdrop, Iranian threat perceptions peaked. The US was inebriated in its 'neocon moment' and was dangerously eyeing Iran next.⁴⁰⁶ Once in Iraq, the US also refused to extradite or expel members of the Mojahedin-e Khalgh (MEK) – Saddam had offered refuge to Tehran's most persistent domestic opponent – which the US itself had designated

402 Ibid., 354.

403 For one version of the full text, see http://www.nytimes.com/packages/pdf/opinion/20070429_iran-memo-expurgated.pdf; The proposal itself was reportedly drafted by Sadeq Kharrazi, the then Iranian ambassador to France and the nephew of the foreign minister Kamal Kharrazi, and edited by Deputy Foreign Minister Zarif, see Glenn Kessler, '2003 memo says Iranian leaders backed talks', *WP*, 14 February 2007 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2007/02/13/AR2007021301363.html>

404 According to Richard Haas, then Head of Policy Planning at State Department, the Bush administration in its singular obsession with regime change rejected the overture, Glenn Kessler, 'In 2003, U.S. spurned Iran's offer of dialogue', *WP*, 18 June 2006 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2006/06/17/AR2006061700727.html>

405 For different reactions within the US and Iran, see 'The "Grand Bargain" fax: a missed opportunity?', *PBS Frontline* <http://www.pbs.org/wgbh/pages/frontline/showdown/themes/grandbargain.html>

406 As the saying went around among neoconservatives then, 'everyone wants to go to Baghdad; real men want to go to Tehran', see David Hastings Dunn, "'Real men want to go to Tehran': Bush, pre-emption and the Iranian nuclear challenge', *International Affairs* 83.1 (2007) 19; Furthermore, the 2002 Nuclear Posture Review, leaked to the media, included Iran as a possible next military target.

a foreign terrorist organization in 1997. Iran's growing strategic anxiety during this period was greatly exacerbated by the recent nuclear revelations by the political wing of the MEK, which was now fast developing into another *casus belli* for the US and its partners. The revelation concerned the construction of a heavy-water reactor at Arak and a centrifuge facility in Natanz – one to reprocess plutonium from spent fuel, the other to enrich uranium, separate paths to fuel a nuclear weapon if desired. Following inspections, the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) cited Iran for violating its Safeguards Agreement obligations, though not the NPT itself. In order to avoid being referred by the IAEA's 35-member Board of Governors to the Security Council for punitive measures and (so Rouhani later disclosed in his memoirs) to sustain Iran's ongoing nuclear fuel production efforts, Iran's decisionmakers accepted in the fall of 2003 the proposal to negotiate with the EU3 who were keen to avert a crisis.⁴⁰⁷ The IAEA essentially demanded 'objective guarantees' concerning the peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear program, which included suspending all enrichment activity (assessed to be inconsistent with Iran's existing reactor needs whose fuelstock was supposed to be supplied by Russia anyway) and adopting the Additional Protocol. The latter commits signatories to the NPT, which Iran ratified in 1970, to disclose the activities and thus existence of *all* sites of nuclear concern, not just those they have declared, and permits intrusive 'anytime/anywhere' inspections.⁴⁰⁸ Iran agreed to temporarily and voluntarily halt enrichment and reprocessing activities, and to sign (and ratify) the AP, as enshrined in the October 2003 Tehran Declaration and emphasized in the November 2004 Paris Agreement.⁴⁰⁹ The eventual letdown notwithstanding,⁴¹⁰

407 Hassan Rouhani, *Amniyat-e melli va diplomasi-ye haste-i* [National security and nuclear diplomacy] 2nd ed. (Tehran: CSR, 1391/2012) 456, 'hefz-e tavana va tadavom-e barname-ye toolid-e sukht-e haste'i'; this was also partly due to European threats to downgrade trade with Iran.

408 The NPT's original safeguards are limited to the verification of the non-diversion of *declared* fissile materials in *declared* nuclear facilities ('correctness'). What it cannot do is verify the absence of *undeclared* facilities and fissile materials, and that therefore, a state's nuclear program is for exclusively peaceful purposes ('completeness'). The AP seeks to reinforce this by subjecting the signatory state to a far more comprehensive verifications regime in terms of scope and thoroughness.

409 For the IAEA's timeline and relevant documentation, see 'IAEA and Iran: chronology of key events', <https://www.iaea.org/newscenter/focus/iran/chronology-of-key-events>

410 Part of it was attributed to both parties' differing interpretations of the terms of reference, particularly 'suspension'. For the IAEA report that followed from the failure of negotiations, see 'Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement

the point is that this first round of nuclear negotiations took place only when Iran, caught *flagrante delicto*, felt the heat of systemic pressures increase. Consequently, Iran also halted its nuclear weapons program in autumn 2003, according to the 2007 National Intelligence Estimate.⁴¹¹

In Afghanistan and again in Iraq, systemic opportunities and pressures rendered Iran ‘both thankful and fearful’, as James Dobbins put it.⁴¹² If 9/11 provided the perfect opportunity for the reformist government to push for dialogue against a loathed enemy, recall that Khatami’s conservative critics – including Khamenei – controlled national security,⁴¹³ so that the fact of a *security* dialogue also signaled genuine adjustments in attitude at least, if not in longer term strategy. Consider, furthermore, that ‘unelected hands’ had by late 2001 succeeded in pulling the carpet from under Khatami’s domestic and foreign policies and that hardliners were allegedly responsible for the Karine-A affair which occurred weeks after the Afghan invasion.⁴¹⁴ In other words, while the hardliners clearly had the upper hand in domestic politics by this time, *they nevertheless backed the idea of cooperation with the US*. Still, the evidence also suggests that Khamenei’s approval of cooperation was opportunistic and aimed at securing Iran’s grand strategic position by ‘steering Washington in a direction that was not harmful to [Tehran’s] own interests’,⁴¹⁵ rather than any genuine intention to renounce a major pillar of regime legitimacy: opposition to the ‘Great Satan’. Additional evidence also lay in Tehran’s subsequent refusal to brook compromises when its star was on the rise.

Phase 2: Iran’s strategic position strengthens vis-à-vis the US

By about 2004-2005, Iran’s security environment improved considerably, eliminating the sense of alarm that had pervaded Iran’s leadership two years earlier. Saddam and the Taliban were no more, and though they were replaced

in the Islamic Republic of Iran’, GOV/2006/15, 27 February 2006 <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/gov2006-15.pdf>

411 ‘Iran: nuclear intentions and capabilities’, Office of the Director of National Intelligence, November 2007

http://www.dni.gov/files/documents/Newsroom/Reports%20and%20Pubs/20071203_release.pdf; it should be noted that while an authoritative assessment by the US intelligence community, the NIE represents an aggregate view and is therefore subject to the compromises of bureaucratic politics.

412 Dobbins, *Negotiating with Iran*, 158.

413 See Menashri, *Post-revolutionary politics*, 205-20.

414 The term was used in Albright’s 17 March 2000 speech and created controversy in Tehran.

415 Pollack, *Persian puzzle*, 353.

by another hostile presence, the US was increasingly bogged down in an insurgency war in both relatively small countries to contemplate invading the much larger Iran. Furthermore, the US' credibility and the perceived 'justness' of its cause plunged, unaided by Washington's failure to locate Saddam's WMD and revelations of the Abu Ghraib abuses.⁴¹⁶ The US' increasing legitimacy problem in the Middle East also boosted the appeal of rejectionists. Indeed, the Ahmadinejad government viewed the US predicament in terms of a terminal decline, which further emboldened it.⁴¹⁷

The 2000s similarly saw Iran's allies making strategic gains and waxing in power particularly at a time when the peace process lay dormant.⁴¹⁸ In May 2000, Ehud Barak's shortlived Labor government withdrew from southern Lebanon, inadvertently boosting Hezbollah's perceived standing and facilitating Iranian entrenchment on Israel's northern front. The al-Aqsa Intifada that kicked off later that year after Likud leader Ariel Sharon's controversial visit to the Temple Mount, followed by another wave of suicide bombings in Israel enhanced Iranian traction among rejectionists. In 2005, Sharon, then in government, unilaterally withdrew from Gush Katif and the Gaza Strip, and Hamas's electoral victory in the following year eventually led to its de facto takeover of the Mediterranean enclave in mid-2007. As Hamas' international isolation increased, Iran stepped into the breach. Syria may have been expelled from Lebanon following Rafiq al-Hariri's assassination in February 2005, but when war once again broke out across the Litani River in summer 2006, Hezbollah managed to resist Israeli firepower to a standstill, signaling to onlookers that the Shi'ite Arab militia and its Iranian (and Syrian) patrons were a force to reckon with.

From around 2001 until the economic crisis of 2007-8, skyrocketing oil prices inflated Iran's state revenues and enlarged its palette of options,

416 America's post-9/11 unpopularity in the Middle East, including among its own allies, was predicted before the Iraq war by a number of Iranian analysts despite obvious ideological biases, certainly with the neoconservatives' growing reliance on 'hard power'. See for instance Asghar Eftekhary, 'Ta'asir-e amniyati-ye rokhddad-e 11 septambr: didgah-ha va tahlil-ha' [The security repercussions of 9/11: perspectives and analyses], *Faslname-ye Motala'at-e Rahbordi* 17-18 (Autumn/Winter 1381/2002-3) 649.

417 This view was repeated during his tenure, see for instance 'Rais-e Jomhour dar Kashan: dore-ye amrika tamam shod va nezam-e in keshvar saghet mishavad' [The President in Kashan: America's era is over and its regime is crashing], *Khabar Online*, 19 Ordibehesht 1389/9 May 2010.

418 Chubin, 'Iran's power in context', 171.

enabling greater ambition.⁴¹⁹ According to one source, Ahmadinejad's government earned more oil revenue in its first two years than Rafsanjani's did in eight;⁴²⁰ in 2011, oil revenues amounted to a staggering \$100 billion.⁴²¹ During Ahmadinejad's neoconservative administration, greater means and relative power translated into more assertive behavior in three areas in particular: in Iraq (and Afghanistan, not examined here),⁴²² Iran's nuclear program, and the consolidation of a series of alliances in the 'non-West' to buttress its balancing strategy. Unlike the 1990s, Tehran now possessed growing means to pursue state interests and attain its ends, which as a result appeared increasingly maximalist to observers.

b. Projecting influence and containing the US: post-Saddam Iraq

With the ruling Ba'ath elite decapitated and the US increasingly mired in a sectarian war exacerbated by the absence of a post-invasion stabilization program, Iraq became the forward staging area for Iran's 21st century grand strategy, notably given the conjunction between Tehran's irreducible interests and growing power. Both countries' cultures and geopolitical histories are deeply intertwined. Iraq – Mesopotamia – historically fell within the Persian imperial sphere, and the pre-Islamic Parthians and Sassanians maintained a royal capital at Ctesiphon near Baghdad. Until the late 20th century, Najaf (and Kerbala) in southern Iraq remained the undisputed epicenter of world Shi'ism, not Qom. Despite the Iranian Plateau's near-bespoke mountainous defenses, Saddam Hussein nonetheless secured a bridgehead for invasion via the oil-rich flatlands of Iran's southwestern Khuzestan province (home to a significant proportion of the country's Arabs), and in the new circumstances, Iraq had to be tamed to prevent the rise of another Saddam. Despite intensifying its intelligence activities, Iran initially refrained from stirring trouble in an increasingly chaotic Iraq,⁴²³ and even backed the US-

419 Fareed Mohamedi, 'Oil and gas charts', *The Iran Primer* (USIP), 2010 <http://iranprimer.usip.org/resource/oil-gas-charts>

420 'Namayande-ye dowlat: dashtim va kharj kardim!', *Baztab*, 10 Tir 1386/1 July 2007, cited in Ansari, *Iran under Ahmadinejad*, 45-6.

421 Marcus George, 'Iran oil development fund could reach \$55 billion: Ahmedinejad', *Reuters*, 7 April 2012 <https://goo.gl/w28Ogy>

422 I do not discuss in detail Iran's strategy in Afghanistan since it has twice taken second place vis-à-vis contemporaneous crises in Iraq (1980s and 2000s). Moreover, similarities suffice for the focus to remain on Iran's Iraq strategy. For a recent overview, see Alireza Nader et al., *Iran's influence in Afghanistan*, (Santa Monica, CA: RAND Corporation, 2014).

423 Pollack, *Persian puzzle*, 355-7.

sponsored democratic political process which would empower Iraq's (60 percent) Shi'a majority and bring them into the political mainstream. Yet from 2005, Iranian influence and assertiveness waxed amid a worsening insurgency, peaking towards 2006 especially following the fateful February bombing of the al-Askari Shi'ite mosque in Samarra, the first Iraqi religious site targeted since 2003.⁴²⁴

The first order of the day was to preserve Iraq's territorial integrity and federal structure, stabilize yet enfeeble its post-Saddam central state organs to prevent Iraq from posing a threat again, and thwart the US from entrenching its political influence. To this end, Iran (re)activated its longstanding Shi'ite networks via the Supreme Council for Islamic Revolution in Iraq (SCIRI, later renamed the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq or ISCI) and its armed wing the Badr Brigade,⁴²⁵ the Da'wa Party,⁴²⁶ and later, the controversial Sadr Movement, transforming them into the vehicle to reshape Iraq's domestic politics, even as it maintained good relations with the two main Kurdish parties in northern Iraq.⁴²⁷ According to a US embassy cable published by Wikileaks, Iran was thought to be financing its 'Iraqi surrogates' \$100-200 million annually, 'with [\$]70 million going to ISCI/Badr coffers' alone.⁴²⁸ To carry the elections, Iran needed the Shi'ites to unite into a coherent bloc which eventually took the shape of the United Iraqi Alliance (UIA) with

424 Juneau, *Squandered opportunity*, 129.

425 SCIRI was originally founded in 1982 by the al-Hakim brothers in Tehran. In 2007, it adopted its current name, the Islamic Supreme Council of Iraq (ISCI), ostensibly to dilute associations with Iran's Islamic revolutionary government. Its armed wing the Badr Brigade (later renamed Badr Organization, headed by Hadi al-Ameri) underwent integration with the Iraqi Security Forces in 2005-6 and into the political process starting 2007, even as ISCI underwent its leadership transitions, although it remained closer to Tehran than did its political counterpart. ISCI also maintained a socioreligious wing known as the Shahid al-Mihrab Foundation.

426 The (Islamic) Da'wa Party for its part was established by Mohammad Baqr al-Sadr (a prominent cleric and cousin to Moqtada) in 1957, but with Saddam's coming to power went into exile in Iran where its standing was later eclipsed by that of SCIRI owing to tensions with the Iranian government. Until 2010, Da'wa sought the spiritual tutelage of a Lebanese, rather than an Iranian Ayatollah (Mohammad Hossein Fadlallah).

427 Mas'oud Barzani's Kurdish Democratic Party and especially Jalal Talabani's Patriotic Union of Kurdistan, which Iran backed against the KDP during the 1990s Kurdish civil war.

428 United States Department of State, memo, via 'US embassy cables: Iran attempts to manipulate Iraq elections', *The Guardian*, 4 December 2010 <http://www.theguardian.com/world/us-embassy-cables-documents/234583>

the indispensable and exceedingly rare blessing of Iraq's Shi'ite potentate, Grand Ayatollah Ali Sistani. In the January 2005 interim legislative elections, the UIA won nearly half of the seats (140 of 275), and Ibrahim al-Ja'afari of Da'wa became prime minister, sidelining the pro-US Iyad Allawi's Iraqi National Accord-led Iraqi List which had until then headed the Interim Government. In the December elections that year, the UIA won a plurality of parliamentary seats (128 of 275) with a new entrant, Moqtada al-Sadr's Movement, playing kingmaker.⁴²⁹ Again, another Da'wa member, Nouri al-Maliki, was nominated as a compromise – because initially weak – figure to lead the coalition government.⁴³⁰ In this way, Iran also exercised influence on the drafting of Iraq's new constitution.

As instability peaked in 2006-7, even as it supported Shi'ite political integration and unity, Tehran also hedged its bets with radicals and particularly breakaways known by the US as 'special groups'.⁴³¹ The increasingly divergent interests of its main Shi'ite allies was one reason: SCIRI and Da'wa were undergoing integration within the political process with more to lose by toeing Iran's rejectionist line, while the Sadrist from which these 'special groups' mainly broke away and who exemplified the pan-Iraqi tendency towards nationalism (*mellat*) rather than Islamic unity (*ommat*) were not always reliable.⁴³² The nimbler and deadlier armed fringe factions included Asa'eb Ahl al-Haqq (AAH),⁴³³

429 The Sadr Movement won 30 of the UIA's 128 seats, making it the largest subgroup within the largest electoral bloc.

430 The coalition government included the Kurds in second place (53 seats) and the Sunni Tawaffuq party in third place (44 seats).

431 Michael Eisenstadt, Michael Knights & Ahmed Ali, 'Iran's influence in Iraq: countering Tehran's whole-of-government approach', Policy Focus 111 (Washington, D.C.: WINEP, April 2011) 8, 11.

432 Juneau, *Squandered opportunity*, 121. Moqtada al-Sadr opted to join the political process and disbanded his Mahdi Army following a ceasefire in 2007. In June 2008 however, he revived a leaner and better controlled version of it in the form of the Promised Day Brigade.

433 The 'League of the Righteous', led by a Sadr's former spokesperson Qais al-Khazali, was founded in 2006 as a breakaway from the Sadr Movement after Sadr agreed to the 2004 ceasefire with the US. It was known particularly for a daring January 2007 attack on the Karbala Provincial Joint Communications Center when it killed 5 US servicemen. Al-Khazali was captured by coalition forces in March 2007 but then released in January 2010 in a hostage exchange. Despite the split, cooperation between AAH and the Sadr movement continued. In January 2012, AAH reportedly joined the political process with Maliki's approval.

Kata'eb Hezbollah,⁴³⁴ the Sheibani Network,⁴³⁵ and Sadr's reconstituted Promised Day Brigade (previously the Mahdi Army). Armed with Iranian-designed weaponry such as armor-piercing roadside bombs called explosively formed penetrators (EFPs) and improvised rocket-assisted munitions (IRAMs) powered by 107mm rockets, these groups were more materially dependent on Iran and constituted the latter's asymmetric offensive vanguard aimed at distracting, deterring (from an attack on Iran's nuclear facilities) and eventually disgorging the US from Iraq, all the while avoiding a direct US-Iran military confrontation.⁴³⁶ Iranian-supported 'special groups' were similarly a means to pressure recalcitrant Iraqi politicians, thereby keeping them in line.

Over the decade, the prime mover of Iran's military *and* grand strategy in Iraq would be the IRGC-QF (via the Ramazan Corps) and its commander, Maj.-Gen. Ghassem Soleimani.⁴³⁷ As Chubin noted, the QF is 'not just the executor of regional foreign policy but also its formulator, subject to no civilian institutional control'.⁴³⁸ Where Shi'ite political unity could not be achieved, Soleimani's arbitration proved critical, such as in the run-up towards the 2005 elections.⁴³⁹ 'By stoking violence and then mediating the conflict', the *New York Times* argued, '[Soleimani] could make himself indispensable and keep the Iraqis off balance'.⁴⁴⁰ Iran's Iraq strategy was

434 Abu Mahdi al-Muhandis, who founded KH in 2007, was previously affiliated with ISCI-Badr and has been directly involved in a number of terrorist operations, most notably against western and Kuwaiti targets during the Iran-Iraq war. Besides AAH, KH was thought to be the closest faction to the Qods Force.

435 Abu Mostafa (Hamid) al-Sheibani was originally a member of the Badr Brigade until Saddam's toppling. The Network was known primarily for funneling arms from Iran's Qods Force to its Iraqi allies.

436 Cf. Hezbollah's pattern of operations against the IDF until Israel's 2000 withdrawal from Lebanon.

437 Soleimani made it known in no uncertain terms to the commander of US forces in Iraq Gen. David Petraeus that he 'control[s] policy for Iran with respect to Iraq, Lebanon, Gaza, and Afghanistan', Ian Black & Saeed Kamali Dehghan, 'Qassem Suleimani: commander of Quds force, puppeteer of the Middle East', *The Guardian* 16 June 2014 <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/jun/16/qassim-suleimani-iraq-iran-syria>; indeed, Iran's post-Saddam ambassadors to Iraq, Hassan Kazemi-Ghomi and Hassan Danaie-Far, were both IRGC-QF veterans.

438 Shahram Chubin, 'Iran and the Arab Spring: ascendancy frustrated', Gulf Research Center Gulf Papers, September 2012, 12.

439 Eisenstadt et al., 'Iran's influence in Iraq', 7.

440 Michael R. Gordon, 'Iran's master of Iraq chaos still vexes U.S.', *NYT*, 2 October 2012 <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/10/03/world/middleeast/qassim-suleimani->

thus one of ‘controlled chaos’ to progressively tip the balance back in its favor.⁴⁴¹ Whatever happened, Iran would step in as arbitrator and ultimately as power broker. More broadly, securing an alliance with Iraq under the Maliki government allowed Tehran direct territorial continuity and hence improved communication and logistics vectors with Bashar al-Assad’s Syria and Hezbollah in Lebanon for the first time – the ‘Shi’ite crescent’ so often bandied about in the press.⁴⁴²

In parallel, Iranian soft power – i.e. influence – extended to Iraq’s economy, Shi’ite seminaries, and mass media. Bilateral trade, heavily protectionist in Iran’s favor, increased from just \$184 million in 2003 to \$7 billion in 2008-9 according to one source,⁴⁴³ comprising mainly fresh produce, lower-end consumer goods, construction materials and Iranian-assembled Peugeot. This made Iran Iraq’s largest trading partner alongside Turkey. By 2010 Iran was supplying and thus rendering Iraq dependent on 750 megawatts or 10% of Iraq’s electricity supply,⁴⁴⁴ of which the hydrocarbons sector was the largest consumer. In March 2008, Ahmadinejad became the first Iranian president since 1979 (and reportedly the first head of any regional state since 2003) to visit Iraq, where he announced \$1 billion in credits to finance Iranian exports to Iraq. Similarly, Iranian subsidies assisted Iraqis travelling to Iran for medical treatment, pilgrimage and education. Iran also supported the construction of an airport in Najaf accommodating 20,000 pilgrims per month which opened in 2008, and provided \$20 million a year towards Najaf’s religious tourism infrastructure,⁴⁴⁵ uninterrupted access for Iranian pilgrims itself being a longstanding priority. Simultaneously, Iran vigorously promoted the theological preeminence of Qom as the institutional repository of Khomeini’s *Velayat* over the political quietism of Najaf’s newly

irans-master-of-iraq-chaos-still-vexes-the-us.html?_r=0

441 Vakil, ‘Tehran gambles’, 415.

442 First used by Jordan’s King Abdullah in the mid-2000s, the term however implies deliberate sectarianism on Iran’s part, which is inaccurate since Shi’ites only make up 10% of Islamdom and post-revolutionary Iran has consistently sought to bridge the sectarian gap, along with popular Iranophobia, rather than exacerbate it (hence my term ‘unitive Islam’ in an earlier chapter).

443 Mohsen M. Milani, ‘Meet Me in Baghdad’, *Foreign Affairs*, 20 September 2010; a different figure, \$4 billion, is cited by Iraq’s trade minister, in Kenneth Katzman, ‘Iran-Iraq relations’, (Washington, D.C.: CRS, 13 August 2010) 11.

444 Sam Dagher, ‘Iran’s ambassador to Iraq promises closer trade ties’, *WSJ*, 11 August 2010, <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424052748703435104575421520747000364>

445 Edward Wong, ‘Iran is playing a growing role in Iraq economy’, *NYT*, 17 March 2007 http://www.nytimes.com/2007/03/17/world/middleeast/17iran.html?_r=0

resurgent but historically paramount seminaries, where the likes of Grand Ayatollahs Ali Sistani and Hussein Fadlallah threatened Iran's political legitimacy and standing among the world's Shi'a. At one point in 2012, Tehran even angled to replace Iranian-born Sistani with one of its own, Iraqi-born Ayatollah Mahmoud Shahroudi.⁴⁴⁶ Finally, through the Arabic-language Al-Alam channel established in 2003, Iran sought to shape Iraqi public opinion in its favor.

Iran's Iraq strategy wasn't problem-free. In March 2008, an increasingly authoritarian and freewheeling Prime Minister Maliki with the aid of Badr fighters cracked down on the Sadrists in Basra to bring them into line. This came in the wake of an already palpable military 'surge' led by the top US military commander in Iraq, General David Petraeus. Tehran's political influence also failed to prevent Baghdad and Washington from signing the Strategic Framework Agreement and Status of Forces Agreement in November 2008, although it made do with clauses stipulating US withdrawal by December 2011 and prohibiting the use of Iraqi territory as a launchpad for military operations in the neighborhood (i.e. Iran).⁴⁴⁷ During the January 2009 governorate elections, the veneer of Shi'ite unity gave way to competition among the UIA's individual components, with Maliki breaking away to form the Da'wa-led State of Law coalition and ostensibly distancing himself from ISCI, the Sadrists – and Iran.⁴⁴⁸ Nonetheless, Iran was again able to influence government-formation following the 2010 parliamentary elections. Outside of politics, Iranian competition displaced Iraqi producers, especially in agriculture and manufacturing, in turn compounding existing resentment among segments of the local population. In addition, an uptick in Iraqi oil production threatened Iran's OPEC position. And not least was the resistance that Iran's politically maximalist brand of Shi'ism ran up against in Iraq: the aforementioned US embassy cable spelt out Sistani's 'domineering authority and religious credibility' as Iran's 'greatest political roadblock'.⁴⁴⁹ Throughout the decade, Iran's Iraq strategy, especially that aspect involving the 'special

446 Kevjn Lim, 'Tehran's man in Baghdad', *TNI*, 8 June 2012 <http://nationalinterest.org/commentary/tehrans-man-baghdad-7029>

447 For an analysis of both agreements, see Anthony H. Cordesman et al., 'The outcome of invasion: US and Iranian strategic competition in Iraq', *CSIS*, 8 March 2012, 23-4.

448 For a portrait of Maliki's problematic history with Iran and SCIRI, see Larry Kaplow, 'Maliki's Iran years', *Newsweek*, 6 June 2009 <http://www.newsweek.com/malikis-iran-years-80645>

449 State Department memo, 'Iran attempts to manipulate'.

groups', was also often intertwined with external developments concerning its nuclear program.

c. Maximizing power, security, and influence: Iran's nuclear ambiguity

As Iran's influence waxed in inverse proportion to that of the US, the newly inaugurated government in Tehran decided to openly gamble on the ultimate repository of hard power. Until then, as former negotiator Rouhani explained, the secrecy shrouding Iran's nuclear program was calculated to force a *fait accompli* (*amal-e anjam shode*) the world would have no choice but to accept once Iran mastered the fuel cycle.⁴⁵⁰ Its rising power notwithstanding, Iran remained militarily weaker than the US and its allies especially in conventional terms.⁴⁵¹ Developing a nuclear deterrent capability would bolster elements of its national identity, improve the ruling establishment's domestic standing, redeem Iran's status aspirations vis-à-vis the nuclear and international order, assuage its security concerns (at least until an arms race kicked in), and extend its regional influence. But was Iran willing to bear the cost? Judging by official policy, Tehran certainly seemed willing to test the boundaries. The domestic institutional dominance of the far right prefaced a turn towards confrontation over Iran's nuclear program.

Yet Tehran's nuclear thinking also unquestionably drew upon recent precedent. In 1998, India and Pakistan – both non-NPT signatories – successfully test-exploded a series of nuclear devices each (India for the second time since 1974). Notwithstanding ensuing economic sanctions and diplomatic isolation, the international community soon reverted to 'business as usual' and in the interests of prosecuting the Bush administration's War on Terror, all significant sanctions were removed by late 2001.⁴⁵² Then from November 2002, following American accusations that it had violated the 1994 Agreed Framework, North Korea expelled IAEA inspectors from the country, resumed plutonium reprocessing, and afterwards withdrew from the NPT.⁴⁵³ Instead of a military response, Pyongyang found willing negotiators in Washington, even if Kim Jong-Il would only test a plutonium-fueled

450 Rouhani, '*Farasuye chalesh-ha*', 32.

451 Juneau, *Squandered opportunity*, 174.

452 Michael Krepon, 'Looking back: the 1998 Indian and Pakistani nuclear tests', *Arms Control Association*, 2008 http://www.armscontrol.org/act/2008_05/lookingback; conversely, the nuclearization of the Indian sub-continent appears to have had less of an effect on Iran's threat perceptions.

453 Scott D. Sagan, 'How to keep the bomb from Iran', *Foreign Affairs* 85.5 (September-October 2006); recall that incoming US President George W. Bush had also included North Korean in the 'Axis of Evil'.

nuclear device, not even miniaturized to fit a warhead, for the first time four years later.⁴⁵⁴ On the other hand, Iraq had no nuclear weapons at the time of its invasion, and hence the message as interpreted by Iran was unambiguous (and reinforced still further by Moammar Ghaddafi's fall later in 2011).

Hence, Iran announced in August 2005 its intention to resume uranium conversion at the Esfahan facility, and in January 2006, that it would recommence nuclear research including uranium enrichment at Natanz, prompting the IAEA to finally refer Iran to the Security Council.⁴⁵⁵ After Iran's failure to heed Resolution 1696 (July 2006),⁴⁵⁶ the UNSC passed a series of resolutions, beginning with the unanimously adopted Resolution 1737 in December 2006 imposing nuclear proliferation-related sanctions in line with Article 41 (non-military measures) of the UN Charter.⁴⁵⁷ Russia and China, wary of another Iraq-style invasion, pointed to Iran's ongoing willingness to negotiate and played no small role in softening the letter if not the spirit of the resolutions, at least keeping them beyond the purview of Article 42 (military measures).⁴⁵⁸ In April 2006, Iran proudly announced that with just a cascade of 164 centrifuges it was able to enrich uranium to 3.5% – a level suited to electricity generation – and that it had thus joined the nuclear club.⁴⁵⁹ In 2010, enrichment levels reportedly reached 19.75%, theoretically required for medical purposes at the Tehran Research Reactor. Grandstanding and a modicum of exaggeration in respect of enrichment, the biggest hurdle in any nuclear program, may have intended to convey the

454 Of course, other factors militate against war. North Korean conventional-tipped missiles still held Seoul, a US ally, hostage and at any rate China firmly opposed the sort of destabilizing situation which would create a massive cross-border humanitarian crisis.

455 IAEA, 'Implementation of the NPT Safeguards Agreement in the Islamic Republic of Iran', GOV/2006/14, 4 February 2006 <https://www.iaea.org/sites/default/files/gov2006-14.pdf>

456 United Nations Security Council, Press release, 31 July 2006 <http://www.un.org/press/en/2006/sc8792.doc.htm>

457 United Nations Security Council, Press release, 23 December 2006 <http://www.un.org/press/en/2006/sc8928.doc.htm>

458 Dunn, 'Real men', 26.

459 'Ahmadinejad: Iran has joined nuclear club', *Iran Focus*, 11 April 2006 http://www.iranfocus.com/en/index.php?option=com_content&view=article&id=6716:ahmadinejad-iran-has-joined-nuclear-club&catid=8:nuclear&Itemid=113; the IAEA however first reported that Iran produced 3.5% enriched uranium in February 2008.

impression that Iran's nuclear program was now 'irreversible',⁴⁶⁰ for Iran certainly leveraged on this to demand tougher preconditions in successive negotiations.⁴⁶¹ During this time, Iran only barely cooperated with IAEA requests to ascertain the nature of its nuclear program, including interviews with Iranian officials and questions regarding past procurement and R&D activities.

Under the Ahmadinejad government, Iranian intransigence increased, as reflected in the pragmatic conservative Rouhani's replacement as lead nuclear negotiator (and SNSC secretary) by the traditional conservative Ali Larijani in August 2005, and subsequently by the hardline and resolutely doctrinaire Saeed Jalili in 2007. Encouraging this intransigence, hubris and Iranian threats to close the Straits of Hormuz were high oil prices, little global appetite for another armed conflict which would raise them further, and a US distracted by its wars.⁴⁶² However, to be sure, incoming IRGC commander-in-chief Mohammad Ja'afari (who replaced Maj.-Gen. Yahya Rahim Safavi in 2007) at the same time introduced a more robust 'mosaic' homeland defense posture based on dispersed command-and-control and insurgency-based interdiction operations, consonant with asymmetric warfare in the event of an invasion.⁴⁶³ Iran's geography may be a source of vulnerability, but its topography – another grand strategic resource – combined with such a doctrine posed a formidable challenge to any potential invader.

If Iran in the 1980 and 1990s viewed nuclear weapons as the ultimate bulwark against external security threats (especially against Iraq and later, the US), it now likely also regarded them, or at least the implied threat thereof, as a means to acquire status and satisfy domestic interests.⁴⁶⁴ In the present context, one would have been hardpressed to find a more apposite symbol of

460 David E. Sanger & Elaine Sciolino, 'Iran strategy: Cold War echo', *NYT*, 30 April 2006 http://www.nytimes.com/2006/04/30/world/middleeast/30iran.html?pagewanted=print&_r=0

461 Juneau, *Squandered opportunity*, 195, 197.

462 Dunn, 'Real men', 24; Roula Khalaf, 'Crude calculation: why oil-rich Iran believes the West will yield to nuclear brinkmanship', *FT*, 2 February 2006 <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/841220a8-9390-11da-a978-0000779e2340.html#axzz3XCIDSIs6>

463 Ali Alfoneh, 'What do structural changes in the Revolutionary Guards mean?', *Middle Eastern Outlook* 7, *AEI*, 23 September 2008 <https://www.aei.org/publication/what-do-structural-changes-in-the-revolutionary-guards-mean/>

464 Scott Sagan delineated these three motivations in 'Why do states build nuclear weapons?: three models in search of a bomb', *International Security* 21.3 (Winter 1996-97); in terms of international prestige, Rouhani appreciated the importance of having Iran's nuclear achievements stressed in the IAEA's report, see '*Farasuye chalesh-ha*', 28: 'Vali baraye ma az lehaz-e vajhe-ye beyn-ol-mellali besyar khub

nationalism and a potential crowning glory of Iran's longstanding historical record of scientific achievements with its soft power implications.⁴⁶⁵ In 1953, Mosaddegh had been deposed for trying to protect Iran's own oil endowment. In the mid-2000s, this drama would be transposed and replayed: the West would demand yet another capitulation, this time because of Tehran's insistence on protecting its 'sovereign right' to peaceful nuclear energy as a non-nuclear weapons state signatory to the NPT.⁴⁶⁶ In the domestic arena, the ascendancy of a hardline administration, many of whose appointees were senior figures in the security establishment with corresponding threat perceptions helped shape an environment that favored developing Iran's nuclear program. In the extreme, military nuclear programs advocated by the security-scientific-industrial complex may even be 'solutions looking for a problem to which to attach themselves so as to justify their existence', wrote Scott Sagan.⁴⁶⁷ The diversionary utility of such a program was already mentioned in an earlier section. 'Motivations for "going nuclear" are dynamic,' Abulof explained. 'A nuclear project might be born out of economic need, accumulate momentum due to bureaucratic pressures, be advanced to domestically bolster the regime, mature to deter foreign enemies, and persist due to hegemonic intentions'.⁴⁶⁸ But halting at the nuclear threshold, that is ensuring a 'breakout' deterrent capability only should the need arise, may allow Iran's leadership to optimally balance perceived security needs (including not alienating Russia and China), status aspirations and domestic political requirements – that is if Tehran's FPNSE reasoned likewise.⁴⁶⁹ Irrespective of previous experiments with weaponization, by separately developing ballistic delivery systems and fissile fuel production – the other two components of a putative nuclear weapon – Iran in effect turned nuclear ambiguity into a powerful source of pressure, leverage and influence, albeit at great cost.

ast va neshan midahad ke ma be har hal dar zamine-ye fanavari be pishraft o movaffaghiyat besyar khubi reside-im'.

465 Broadly speaking, many of Islamdom's more prominent scientific and philosophical minds in the pre-modern period were ethnic (or acculturated) Persians including Ibn Sina (Avicenna), Khwarizmi (whence the term Algorithm), Nasreddin Tusi, Omar Khayyam, Qotbeddin Shirazi and Molla Sadra.

466 Ansari, *Confronting Iran*, 230; for official analogies between both episodes, see for instance *Mehr News*, 29 Shahrivar 1384/20 September 2005.

467 Sagan, 'Why do states build', 65.

468 Abulof, 'Nuclear diversion', 701.

469 Note that this hypothetical threshold capacity differs little from the Shah's own nuclear 'surge' strategy – the ability to create a weapon at little notice if push came to shove.

According to neoclassical realists, a state's ambitions rise and fall with its relative capabilities. In the nuclear realm however, both merge and reinforce the other, which explains the gravity and suspicion with which the international community views Iran's nuclear program. For after all, the offense-defense balance implicit in a nuclear arsenal means that the defense of irreducible interests can no longer be distinguished from the pursuit of maximal gains.⁴⁷⁰ So while Tehran's decisionmakers may feel more secure with a nuclear (even threshold) option, the security dilemma this generates threatens Iran's longer-term security.

d. External balancing and regionalism: Iranian diplomacy in the East and peripheral states

US-led encirclement, the emerging nuclear controversy and the threat of war impressed upon Tehran the need for all-weather alliances, preferably with veto power.⁴⁷¹ In addition, the Ahmadinejad administration failed to see the utility of cooperation and ties with the EU, not least because of the failure of the EU3 negotiations and Brussels' perceived subservience to the US.⁴⁷² Hence, following Khomeini's 'neither east nor west' and the perceived pro-Western tilt advocated by both Rafsanjani and Khatami, Ahmadinejad now advocated 'looking East' (*negah be shargh*) particularly towards China, India and Russia,⁴⁷³ and to an extent towards a host of Latin American and African states. Ahmadinejad's former Foreign Minister Manouchehr Mottaki explained his government's thinking this way:

470 An example is Pakistan. Following its 1998 nuclear tests, Islamabad intensified rather than decelerated its conventional offensive against India by infiltrating troops dressed up as Kashmiri insurgents across the Line of Control in what became known as the Kargil war. One of the mistaken beliefs among Islamabad's military brass was that their 'nuclear capability would deter a significant Indian response', Navnita Chadha Behera, *Demystifying Kashmir* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press, 2006) 85.

471 Rouhani, '*Farasuye chalesh-ha*', 31.

472 Ansari, 'Politics of confrontation', 55; this position was found advocates in Iran. For English-language sources (fluency notwithstanding), see for instance Nasser Saghaei-Ameri, 'Iran and "Look to the East" policy', *CSR* (Department of Foreign Policy, Tehran), September 2006, 5; Fariborz Arghavani Pirsalami, 'The Look East policy and strategic relations between Iran and China', *Discourse: An Iranian Quarterly* 11.1-2 (Fall 2013-Winter 2014) 122-3; and Haji-Yousefi, 'Iran's foreign policy', 6, 10.

473 'Manafe'-ye Rusiye va Chin ba Iran gereh khorde ast [Russia and China's interests are bound with Iran's], *Mehr News*, 30 Mordad 1389/21 August 2010.

One of the axes of the ninth government's foreign policy... is diversification of Iran's international relations by stressing... confrontation with the present order of world domination and unilateralism and the preservation of the Islamic Republic's national interests and national security through the creation of an international coalition.⁴⁷⁴

The periphery proved the more memorable if cosmetic aspect of Ahmadinejad's foreign policy. Though poor, Venezuela, Cuba, Bolivia, Ecuador, Nicaragua were agreeably populist, anti-imperialist and located in the US' backyard, giving rise to the hope of an anti-Washington realignment Iran could exploit.⁴⁷⁵ Yet despite symbolic joint statements and some economic exchange (mainly Iranian investments and assistance), little of substantive value came of these alliances, including – most instructively – from Iran's staunchest and relatively best-endowed regional partner. Venezuela under Hugo Chavez since 1998 was a fellow oil producer, a co-target of US sanctions, and likewise deeply fond of anti-American tirades. Yet, the Iranian-Venezuelan relationship was driven by the personal chemistry between both presidents rather than sustainable strategic considerations.⁴⁷⁶ Iran's African forays into countries like Zimbabwe, Gambia and Senegal enjoyed still less traction since these were even more dependent on international and especially American development aid.⁴⁷⁷ As a whole however, these alliances arguably provided some strategic depth (including as platforms for covert operations) and sympathetic votes in the international arena, especially in support of Iran's nuclear rights.⁴⁷⁸ On the other hand, Tehran's multipolar alliances with Russia, China and India, among other lesser powers, rested on firmer ground.

474 Manouchehr Mottaki, *Siyasat-e khareji-e dolat-e nohom* [The ninth government's foreign policy] (Tehran: Markaz-e Tahghighat Estratèzhik-e Khavar-e Miyane, 2006/1385), cited in Dehghani Firooz-Abadi, 'Ideal international system', 55.

475 Hamid Molana & Manouchehr Mohammadi, 'Siyasat-e khareji-ye Jomhouriy-e Eslami-ye Iran dar dolat-e Ahmadinezhad [The IRI's foreign policy during Ahmadinejad's government]' (Tehran: Dadgostar, 1388/2008) 175.

476 Brandon Fite & Chloe Coughlin-Schulte, 'U.S. and Iranian strategic competition: the impact of Latin America, Africa, and the peripheral states', *CSIS*, 9 July 2013, 8-11 http://csis.org/files/publication/130709_Iran_Latinamerica_otherstates.pdf; besides, Venezuela trailed behind Brazil and Argentina in terms of bilateral trade with Iran (\$1.3 billion with Brazil in 2010).

477 Ibid., 23-4, 26-7.

478 Haji-Yousefi, 'Iran's foreign policy', 15.

Vladimir Putin's 2000 election to the presidency turned Russia into an assertive and ultranationalistic power vis-à-vis the US-led order, and therefore an even more attractive prospect for Iran compared to the 1990s.⁴⁷⁹ As relations between Moscow and Washington deteriorated over Iraq, NATO's eastward expansion, and the 'color revolutions' in Georgia, Ukraine and Kyrgyzstan,⁴⁸⁰ Russian-Iranian ties improved. Putin publicly annulled the Gore-Chernomyrdin Protocol and signed a framework agreement in October 2001 entailing military cooperation and equipment sales amounting to \$300 million per year over five years. In 2002, Russia's leader proposed a gas cartel à la OPEC to include Iran, globally second only to Russia in terms of estimated gas reserves then.⁴⁸¹ In 2007, on the occasion of the Second Caspian Summit, Putin became the only Russian president to visit Iran since Stalin during World War II. However, problems lingered, much of it coinciding with sporadic improvements in Moscow's own relations with Washington,⁴⁸² which shook Iran's already dim assessment of Moscow's reliability. In 2006-7, Russia exported \$1.2 billion worth of military hardware including 29 TOR-M1 (SA-15 Gauntlet) mid-range SAMS,⁴⁸³ but in 2009-10 reneged on its commitment to supply S-300 SAMs – systems critical for the aerial defense of Iran's nuclear facilities – with the incoming Obama administration's proposed US-Russia 'reset' (and possibly revelations concerning Iran's Fordow enrichment facility).⁴⁸⁴ While Russia has provided assistance to Iran's missile and space programs (both share the same technological basis),⁴⁸⁵ it sought limits on counter-proliferation grounds.⁴⁸⁶ Moscow also opposed

479 Elaheh Koulaei, 'Rusiye, Gharb va Iran' [Russia, the West and Iran], *Faslname-ye Motale'at-e Asia-ye Markazi va Ghafghaz* 12 (1376/1997): 78-93.

480 Housman A. Sadri & Ari Litwin, 'The Russian-Iranian partnership: technology, trade, and a marriage of convenience', *RSPI* 76.4 (01/2009) 543.

481 The order has since been reversed, with Iran's reserves currently estimated to exceed those of Russia.

482 Thus, Putin's outreach to the Khatami administration sought to forestall an improvement in Tehran's relations with Washington.

483 Carina Solmirano & Pieter D. Wezeman, 'Military spending and arms procurement in the Gulf States', SIPRI Factsheet, October 2010, 4 <http://books.sipri.org/files/FS/SIPRIFS1010.pdf>

484 'Russia may not ship S-300 missile systems to Iran hoping to improve ties with USA', *Pravda*, 17 February 2009 http://english.pravda.ru/world/asia/17-02-2009/107115-russia_s300_iran-0/; Kozhanov, 'Russia's relations with Iran', 8.

485 Sebastian Abbot & Ali Akbar Dareini, 'Some fear Iran's space program is hostile', *AP*, 5 March 2007, http://www.nbcnews.com/id/17474069/ns/technology_and_science-space/t/some-fear-irans-space-program-hostile/#.VNr8gPmUeSo

486 Kozhanov, 'Russia's relations with Iran', 14.

uranium enrichment in Iran and counter-proposed a number of alternatives eventually rejected by Tehran.⁴⁸⁷ To add insult to injury, Tehran instead accepted an ultimately unsuccessful fuel swap deal proposed by Turkey and Brazil. Rather than completing the Bushehr reactor by 1999/2000, Russia postponed the deadline several times for technical reasons, only finally bringing the reactor to full capacity in August 2012.⁴⁸⁸ Moreover, Russia's bilateral trade with Iran stood at a paltry \$3.6 billion in 2010 (of which 93% represented exports to Iran) compared to \$25-6 billion with Turkey,⁴⁸⁹ and \$32 billion with the US.⁴⁹⁰ Moscow remains Iran's major energy competitor and has repeatedly attempted to reroute Iran's hydrocarbon exports to avoid competition in profitable European markets. Finally, to date, Moscow has yet to sign any strategic 'partnership', an abstention aimed at preserving its maneuvering room according to one scholar, who also argued that nuclear-related sanctions not only made it difficult for Tehran to go nuclear, they kept Iran and the West apart and benefited Russian businesses.⁴⁹¹

As in the 1990s, this again left China as the *least unreliable* keystone of Iran's alliance edifice. Despite the chill following China's 1997 decision to suspend nuclear and missile assistance to Iran,⁴⁹² ties picked up from early in the new millennium, facilitated by the US' allegedly accidental bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade in 1999. President Khatami visited China in June 2000 with a 170-person delegation, reciprocated by Jiang Zemin in April 2002 just after Bush's 'Axis of Evil' speech, the first ever visit to post-revolutionary Iran by a Chinese paramount leader, and relations steadily improved under President Hu Jintao and Premier Wen Jiabao. China, along with Russia, defended Iran's nuclear diplomacy and delayed (though not prevented) its 2006 referral to the UNSC. When sanctions became inevitable, China sought to prevent these from targeting Iran's energy exports,⁴⁹³ or

487 See *ibid.*, ch. 4.

488 'Rosatom ready to hand Bushehr nuclear plant to Iran', *RFE/RL*, 9 August 2013 <http://www.rferl.org/content/bushehr-russia-iran-nuclear-control/25070637.html>

489 Kozhanov, 'Russia's relations with Iran', 23.

490 United States Census Bureau, 'Trade in goods with Russia: 1992-2015' <https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c4621.html>

491 Kozhanov, 'Russia's relations with Iran', 26, 17.

492 This suspension notwithstanding, it appears Iran nonetheless had already acquired the necessary knowledge to construct a conversion facility to produce uranium hexafluoride, probably from previous years of association with Chinese experts, see Garver, *China and Iran*, 153.

493 John W. Garver, 'Is China playing a dual game in Iran?', *TWQ* 34.1 (2011) 75-6; this 'sanction first, dilute afterwards' approach has had its advocates in China.

watered them down significantly in UNSC deliberations. As one Iranian observer noted, 'China's emergence as an economic power created a strategic opening for Iran, enabling it to face Western pressure'.⁴⁹⁴

China's significance within the economic logic of 'looking East' cannot be overemphasized in view of the far-reaching compatibility of both economies, driven notably by China's vigorous quest for energy security and Iran's desperate search for demand stability. In 1999, Iran supplied China with \$519 million worth of oil. In 2000, the figure increased nearly threefold to \$1.4 billion, and by 2003, it was \$2.6 billion.⁴⁹⁵ In March 2004, Iran and China's state-owned Zhuhai Zhenrong Corporation inked a \$20 billion, 25-year contract for the supply of 2.5 million metric tons of LNG (liquefied natural gas) per year starting 2008.⁴⁹⁶ Longterm interdependency stepped up following an even larger \$70 (some put it at \$100) billion, 30-year gas deal that same year in exchange for Sinopec's investing in the development of the Yadavaran oil field among other things, thereby ensuring China's upstream involvement in Iran's energy industry.⁴⁹⁷ This was important since China's largest oil supplier, Saudi Arabia, did not allow foreign ownership of its upstream sector.⁴⁹⁸ In 2007, China became a net importer of gas. In 2009, as Chinese dependency on oil imports peaked at 50% and Iran's nuclear impasse deepened, the China National Petroleum Company (CNPC) was contracted on a buyback basis to help develop the giant north and south Azadegan fields.⁴⁹⁹ At the same time, Iran reportedly imported a third of its

See, for instance, Xue Jingjing, Yang Xingli & Liang Yantao, 中国—伊朗石油贸易风险与应对[China-Iran Oil Trade Risks and Responses], 对外经贸实务[Foreign Economic Relations and Trade Practices] No. 1 (2011) 29 <http://mall.cnki.net/magazine/Article/DWJW201101009.htm>

494 Mohsen Shariati-Nia, 'Avamel-e ta'ayin konande-ye ravabet-e Iran va Chin' [Determinants in Iran-China relations], *Faslname-ye Ravabet-e Khareji* 4.2 (Summer 1391/2012) 192 http://www.sid.ir/fa/VEWSSID/J_pdf/30813911406.pdf

495 Garver, *China and Iran*, 266 (table 9.5).

496 'Report: China, Iran sign US\$20 billion gas deal', *People's Daily*, 19 March 2004 http://en.people.cn/200403/19/eng20040319_137990.shtml

497 'China, Iran sign biggest oil and gas deal', *China.com*, 1 November 2004 http://english.china.com/zh_cn/news/china/11020307/20041101/11942873.html; Garver, *China and Iran*, 271.

498 Christina Lin, 'The new Silk Road: China's energy strategy in the Greater Middle East', Policy Focus 109 (Washington, D.C.: WINEP, April 2011) 9.

499 Xiao Wan, 'CNPC to develop Azadegan oilfield', *China Daily*, 16 January 2009 http://www.chinadaily.com.cn/bizchina/2009-01/16/content_7403699.htm; Theodore H. Moran, *China's strategy to secure natural resources: risks, dangers, and*

refined petroleum from China.⁵⁰⁰ By 2011, Iranian oil imports accounted for over 10% of China's consumption needs at 557,000 bpd (barrels per day), making Beijing Iran's largest oil customer.⁵⁰¹ China likewise supplanted the EU (mainly Germany) to become Iran's largest trading partner in 2007,⁵⁰² raising bilateral trade from \$2.3 billion in 2001 to \$30 billion in 2010,⁵⁰³ in contrast to Iran-Russia's \$3.6 billion trade that year. In terms of military relations, China was Iran's second most important source of arms;⁵⁰⁴ between 2005-9, China supplied 35%, and Russia 65%, of Iran's arms imports.⁵⁰⁵ Likewise, in that period, Iran was also China's second most important arms client after Pakistan.⁵⁰⁶

The apparent strength of Iran-China relations requires qualification however.⁵⁰⁷ While Iran consistently ranked among China's top three oil suppliers, Saudi Arabia maintained the lion's share: in 2010, this translated into a fifth of China's oil imports, nearly twice as much as Iran's.⁵⁰⁸ Bilateral energy contracts also proved more brittle than met the eye. Towards 2010, as the balance of world energy reserves shifted in favor of the US' 'shale

opportunities (Washington, D.C.: Peterson Institute for International Economics, 2010) 27.

500 This is because Iran's production capacity outstrips its aging refining infrastructure. 'China "selling petrol to Iran"', *Aljazeera*, 23 September 2009 <http://www.aljazeera.com/business/2009/09/2009923113235664683.html>

501 Shariati-Nia, 'Avamel', 196.

502 Harold & Nader, 'China and Iran', 5; other sources report that China only overtook the EU in 2000, see for instance Najmeh Bozorgmehr & Geoff Dyer, 'China overtakes EU as Iran's top trade partner', *FT*, 8 February 2010 <http://www.ft.com/cms/s/0/f220dfac-14d4-11df-8f1d-00144feab49a.html>; as the latter themselves point out, this discrepancy may have to do with the fact that a part of China-Iran trade also goes through the UAE.

503 Shariati-Nia, 'Avamel', 192.

504 SIPRI, 'Arms Transfer Database', cited in Garver, 'Dual game', 76.

505 Solmirano & Wezeman, 'Military spending', 3 (Table 3).

506 Shariati-Nia, 'Avamel', 194.

507 Thomas Erdbrink, 'Iranians wary of deeper ties with China', *NYT*, 14 April 2010 <http://www.washingtonpost.com/wp-dyn/content/article/2010/04/13/AR2010041304242.html>; for a dimmer take, see Shariati-Nia, 'Avamel', and his English-language 'Iran-China relations: an Iranian view', *Iran Review*, 27 September 2010, http://www.iranreview.org/content/Documents/Iran_China_Relations_An_Iranian_View.htm

508 'China energy data, statistics, and analysis: oil, gas, electricity, coal', US Energy Information Agency, May 2011 (taken offline), cited in Zhang Jian, 'China's energy security: prospects, challenges, and opportunities', The Brookings Institution Center for Northeast Asian Policy Studies, July 2011 <http://goo.gl/XJsyPN>

revolution', Chinese enthusiasm in politically difficult Iran waned so that Tehran for instance annulled contracts linked to the South Pars gas field (in 2012),⁵⁰⁹ and the South Azadegan field (in 2014) owing to 'unacceptable delays' on China's part.⁵¹⁰ Moreover, any sensible longterm Chinese energy strategy would include diversifying sources, resources and pathways.⁵¹¹ In other words, China had become Iran's major pillar of support, whereas Iran remained only one of China's many options, far eclipsed in importance by such partners as the US, the EU and Japan. In 2010 alone, China-US trade was valued at \$457 billion – fifteen times the value of Sino-Iranian trade.⁵¹² According to Feng Wang, China's developmental imperatives (foreign direct investment, advanced technologies etc) lay with developed countries,⁵¹³ so that it had little critical interests to pursue in Iran, and this was ultimately reflected in Beijing's support for UN resolutions concerning Iran's nuclear program.⁵¹⁴ Just as Iraqis resented the dumping of Iranian goods in their country, so Iranians, already internationally isolated, had little choice but to absorb cheap Chinese products, a necessary discomfiture when regime security was at stake.⁵¹⁵ As Iran's former ambassador to China Javad Mansouri put it, 'the Chinese don't think trade with Iran is going to get any higher than it is, and as such prefer to align themselves with the West's policies'.⁵¹⁶

509 Yeganeh Torbati, 'China pulls out of South Pars project: report', *Reuters*, 29 July 2012 <http://www.reuters.com/article/2012/07/29/iranchina-southpars-idUSL6E8IT0T020120729>

510 John Daly, 'Iran tears up Azadegan contract with China', *Oilprice*, 4 May 2014, <http://oilprice.com/Energy/Energy-General/Iran-Tears-Up-Azadegan-Contact-With-China.html>; 'Iran cancels CNPC contract in still undeveloped Azadegan oilfield', *South China Morning Post*, 1 May 2014 <http://www.scmp.com/news/world/article/1501261/iran-cancels-cnpc-contract-still-undeveloped-azadegan-oilfield>

511 See Information Office of the State Council of the PRC, 'Strategy and goals of energy development', 26 December 2007 <http://www.china.org.cn/english/whitepaper/energy/237114.htm>; Zhang Jian, 'China's energy security', 11-2.

512 United States Census Bureau, 'Trade in goods with China: 1985-2015' <https://www.census.gov/foreign-trade/balance/c5700.html>; cf. China's trade with the EU (\$436 billion) and Japan (\$330 billion).

513 See the PRC's white paper in this connection, esp. ch. IV, Information Office of the State Council of the PRC, 'China's peaceful development road', 22 December 2005 <http://www.china.org.cn/english/2005/Dec/152669.htm>

514 Feng Wang, 'China's ties with Iran', 54, 59.

515 Shariati-Nia, 'Avamel', 193.

516 'Tasvib-e ghatename elzaman be ma'ana-ye ejra-ye an nist' [Ratification of the resolution doesn't necessarily mean its implementation], *ILNA*, 23 Khordad 1389/13 June 2010.

To make matters worse, in 2010 China upgraded its bilateral relations with Iran's ally *and* competitor Turkey to the level of 'strategic cooperation',⁵¹⁷ whereas as late as 2014, exuberant Iranian media reports that China 'assumes Tehran as its strategic partner' met with embarrassing silence from Beijing.⁵¹⁸ Finally, like Russia, China has clearly learnt to manipulate sanctions as a means of increasing leverage over Iran while balancing against the US.⁵¹⁹

The 2000s saw Iran strengthen ties with a third emerging 'Eastern' power. During Khatami's 2003 visit on the occasion of India's 54th Republic Day celebrations (an invitation usually extended only to India's closest allies), he and his host Prime Minister Atal Bihari Vajpayee signed the landmark New Delhi Declaration. As with China and Russia, the buildup in Tehran's relations with India gained momentum in the 1990s, but bilateral rhetoric only came to bespeak 'strategic cooperation' during the visit. The symbolic significance was not lost on Iran, for India's embrace came amid the latter's improving post-9/11 strategic ties with Washington and Iran's virtual quarantine within the 'Axis of Evil'.⁵²⁰ The strategic aspects of the relationship revolved around three principle axes.

Firstly, as with China, Iran was keen to provide for the energy needs of the world's second most populous nation. In 2005, both countries signed a \$22 billion deal for the supply of 5 million tons of LNG per year over 25 years, which had however yet to materialize five years later largely owing to the complications of India building an LNG plant in Iran with American components under the sanctions regime.⁵²¹ Even the proposed alternative, a

517 'Turkey, China hail "strategic cooperation" amid protests', *Hurriyet*, 8 October 2010 <http://www.hurriyetaidailynews.com/default.aspx?pageid=438&n=china-turkey-target-milestone-50-billion-dollars-of-trade-2010-10-08>; 'China, Turkey to establish strategic cooperative relationship', *Xinhua*, 8 October 2010, http://news.xinhuanet.com/english2010/china/2010-10/08/c_13547712_2.htm

518 'Iranian, Chinese DMs stress expansion of defensive cooperation', *Fars News*, 5 May 2014 <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13930215000647>

519 This view has also been forwarded by other analysts. See for instance Michael Singh & Jacqueline Newmyer Deal, 'China's Iranian gambit', *Foreign Policy*, 31 October 2011, <http://goo.gl/GjuN4i>

520 C. Christine Fair, 'Indo-Iranian relations: prospects for bilateral cooperation post-9-11', in 'The "strategic partnership" between India and Iran', Woodrow Wilson International Center for Scholars, Asia Program Special Report, April 2004, 6, http://www.wilsoncenter.org/sites/default/files/asia_rpt_120rev_0.pdf

521 Harsh V. Pant, 'India's relations with Iran: much ado about nothing', *TWQ* 34.1 (2011) 63; 'Welcome LNG agreement', *The Hindu Business Line*, 15 June 2005 <http://www.thehindubusinessline.com/todays-paper/tp-opinion/article2180290.ece>

\$7 billion pipeline transporting Iranian gas through Pakistan to India (IPI) proved as fraught, again for reasons linked to American interference but also to Iran's tenuous gas export capacity and ongoing tensions between New Delhi and Islamabad.⁵²² Nevertheless, Iran still became India's second largest oil supplier (16% of India's oil imports before the 2012 sanctions, compared to 45% from the GCC) after Saudi Arabia,⁵²³ and both states cooperated to secure maritime transport routes.

Secondly, Iran and India's interests converged in post-invasion Afghanistan, on the one hand to counteract Pakistan and its support for the Wahhabi/Deobandi-inspired Taliban, and on the other for Iran to serve as gateway to Central Asia's markets without India having to traverse Pakistan (i.e. via Iran's Chabahar port and Afghanistan's Zaranj-Delaram transit route, completed in 2009). Thirdly, both countries increased military cooperation during the 2000s, including Indian technical assistance to Iran (such as the servicing of Iran's MiG-29s and the adaption of Iran's Russian-built Kilo-class submarine batteries for warm water use), joint naval exercises beginning in March 2003 when US presence was mounting in the Gulf, and discussions about India's possible use of Iranian bases in the event of war with Pakistan.⁵²⁴ This semblance of an 'axis' – if that is the correct term – served India's objective of deterring Pakistan with the threat of envelopment, but may additionally and more subtly have served to put other states on notice, including the US.⁵²⁵ Ultimately, India voted along with the other IAEA principals to refer Iran to the UNSC in 2006, even though it stressed Iran's right to civilian power and sought to deflect non-UN unilateral sanctions from Iran's energy sector.⁵²⁶ Moreover, India maintained robust multifaceted ties with other Arab governments, Israel, and in particular the US, with whom India's 2005 civil nuclear agreement played a significant role in moderating

522 The IPI also faced stiff competition from the TAPI (Turkmenistan-Afghanistan-Pakistan-India) alternative, which would circumvent Iran altogether.

523 Sara Vakhshouri, 'Iran-India energy ties may take off', *Al-Monitor*, 5 March 2014 <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/03/india-iran-energy-ties-nuclear-accord.html>

524 Fair, 'Indo-Iranian relations', 12.

525 Sanam Vakil, 'Iran: balancing east against west', *TWQ* 29.4 (2006) 59.

526 Sandeep Dikshit, 'Unilateral sanctions on Iran will hurt India: Nirupama Rao', *The Hindu*, 6 July 2010 <http://www.thehindu.com/news/unilateral-sanctions-on-iran-will-hurt-india-nirupama-rao/article501752.ece>

Indo-Iranian relations.⁵²⁷ Despite the ‘strategic partnership’ of the 2000s then, India’s proximity to Iran was, to quote one observer, ‘not too close, not too far, but just right’.⁵²⁸

Finally, in contrast to the birthing difficulties of a region-only Gulf security arrangement, Iran managed to semi-institutionalize its ‘look East’ policy in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO).⁵²⁹ The regional organization was originally established in 1996 as the ‘Shanghai Five’ by China, Russia, Kazakhstan, Kyrgyzstan and Tajikistan to resolve border disputes. In 2001, it embraced Uzbekistan, produced a written charter, and adopted its current name, expanding its ambit to include political, economic and regional security cooperation. The latter aimed at suppressing the famous ‘three evils’ of terrorism, separatism and extremism (often lumped together with internal dissent) as well as transborder organized crime and narcotics trade especially in connection with Afghanistan.⁵³⁰ In June 2005, Iran joined as observer along with India and Pakistan.⁵³¹ Collectively, the SCO’s members, observers and dialogue partners made up about half of the world’s population. The Caspian ‘energy club’ embodied in the SCO furthermore boasted 30% of the world’s proven gas reserves and 8% of its proven oil reserves; with Iran’s potential membership, these figures would rise to nearly 50% and 18% respectively.⁵³² Iran’s inclusion would also extend the SCO’s influence from the Caspian to the other energy super-region in the Persian Gulf, and boost Tehran’s leverage over energy markets owing to its existing OPEC

527 Sarang Shidore, ‘Collateral damage: Iran in a reconfigured Indian grand strategy’, in Kanti Bajpai, Saira Basit & V. Krishnappa, eds, *India’s grand strategy: history, theory, cases* (New Delhi: Routledge, 2014) 423-4, 429-33.

528 Tanvi Madan, ‘India’s relationship with Iran: it’s complicated’, *Brookings Institution*, 28 February 2014 <http://www.brookings.edu/blogs/markaz/posts/2014/02/28-iran-india-complicated-relationship-madan>

529 This is not to suggest that Iranian membership in other intergovernmental organizations such as the OIC, OPEC, NAM, ECO and CASCO meant little, but only that the SCO was relatively the most significant from the perspective of Iran’s grand strategy.

530 In 2003, in addition to the Secretariat in Beijing, the SCO established the Regional Anti-Terrorism Structure (RATS) in Tashkent amid the US’ own War on Terror.

531 Other than these three, Mongolia was the first to be admitted as observer state in 2004, and Afghanistan the latest (2012). Belarus, Sri Lanka and Turkey remained ‘dialogue partners’.

532 Matthew Brummer, ‘The Shanghai Cooperation Organization and Iran: a power-full union’, *Journal of International Affairs* 60.2 (Spring/Summer 2007) 187; on the ‘Energy Club’, see Maxim Krans, ‘SCO energy club: what will it be like?’, *InfoSCO*, 28 October 2009 <http://infoshos.ru/en/?idn=5040>

membership. The deeper, unspoken significance of the SCO, other than it being ‘an OPEC with [nuclear] bombs’,⁵³³ was its potential counterweight to NATO and the US’ growing presence in Central Asia.⁵³⁴ In this, the SCO was buttressed by such regional, Russian-dominated intergovernmental organizations as the Commonwealth of Independent States and its military outgrowth, the Collective Security Treaty Organization. At the same time, SCO defense cooperation morphed into ostentatiously large-scale joint military exercises with troops numbering in their thousands rehearsing, to be sure, counterterrorism operations.⁵³⁵ Whatever the SCO’s objectives, Tehran conceivably saw it as a security bulwark should Iran be attacked even if the SCO charter enshrined no such *de jure* mutual defense clause as was applicable in the case of NATO and CSTO.⁵³⁶ Besides, despite its own lackluster regional gambit in the 1990s, the potential now loomed for Iran to pursue relations with the Central Asian republics in the context of a truly influential bloc. Much of this same Euro-Asiatic heartland was famously referred to by Halford Mackinder as the ‘pivot area’ from which ‘a series of horse-riding peoples emerged’, control of which he believed facilitated influence over all of Europe, Asia and Africa and ultimately, the world.⁵³⁷

Tehran’s potential to tip the energy balance notwithstanding, its requests to be admitted as full member since 2008 have been repeatedly denied on the

533 David Wall, cited in ‘Central Asian bloc considering Iran for membership’, *The Washington Times*, 4 June 2006 <http://www.washingtontimes.com/news/2006/jun/4/20060604-103052-2402r/?page=all>

534 In July 2005, the SCO’s member states jointly and publicly called on the US to set a date for its withdrawal from the region; rather tellingly, the US application at about the same time to join as observer state was rejected by the secretariat, even taking into account its lack of territorial contiguity with any SCO member. See also John Daly, ‘Shanghai Cooperation Organization set to expand’, *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 14 August 2014 <http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13022-shanghai-cooperation-organization-set-to-expand.html>

535 Richard Weitz, ‘SCO military drills strengthen Russian-Chinese regional hegemony’, *The Central Asia-Caucasus Analyst*, 1 October 2014 <http://www.cacianalyst.org/publications/analytical-articles/item/13054-sco-military-drills-strengthen-russian-chinese-regional-hegemony.html>

536 The organization’s consensus principle may likewise make it complicated for such a measure to materialize.

537 Halford J. Mackinder, ‘The geographical pivot of history’, *The Geographical Journal* 23.4 (April 1904), 434-7; for a longer and more contemporary exposition, see Robert D. Kaplan, *The revenge of geography: what the map tells us about coming conflicts and the battle against fate* (New York: Random House, 2012).

grounds that states under UN sanctions forfeited eligibility,⁵³⁸ suggesting limits to the SCO's will or ability to face down the West.⁵³⁹ Against the backdrop of Iran's nuclear controversy, then SCO Secretary-General Bolat Nurgaliyev stated that new admissions 'should strengthen the organization, but not cause new problems'.⁵⁴⁰ Iran's diplomatic record, tarred by Ahmadinejad's anti-US diatribes during his SCO speeches,⁵⁴¹ risked dragging the organization into fights not of its choosing. In addition, scholars have questioned the scope of the strategic and military threat posed by the SCO to the West, with implications for Iran's own membership calculus.⁵⁴² Despite common stands on thorny issues such as Chechnya and Taiwan, relations between Moscow and Beijing appeared to be impeding the emergence of a truly strategic alliance, not least because China prioritized the underlying energy economics rather than the geopolitics, and both viewed the SCO as a restraint on the other's grand strategic ambitions, a dynamic presumably of some profit to junior members.⁵⁴³ The Central Asians, especially wealthier Kazakhstan, continued to court Western governments as well as China to mitigate Moscow's overweening dominance and proximity. Both Russia and China's attitudes towards their fellow members also diverged: 'China recognizes the right of Central Asian states to make their own decisions,' according to Frederick Starr, whereas 'Russia does not'.⁵⁴⁴ The absence of unequivocal SCO support

538 Joshua Kucera, 'India and Pakistan in, Iran out of SCO?', *Eurasianet*, 1 June 2010 <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/61195>

539 In February 2015, Russian Foreign Minister Sergey Lavrov said that Iran may finally be admitted should it resolve its nuclear dispute, Joshua Kucera, 'Russia: with progress on nuclear program, Iran could join SCO', *Eurasianet*, 28 February 2015 <http://www.eurasianet.org/node/72336>; while China supported its observer status, it too had opposed Iran's full membership, Shariati-Nia, *Avamel*, 190.

540 'Iran: too problematic for Shanghai Cooperation Organization', *Eurasianet*, 18 March 2009 <http://www.eurasianet.org/departments/news/articles/eav031909a.shtml>

541 Dilip Hiro, 'Shanghai surprise', *The Guardian*, 16 June 2006 <http://www.theguardian.com/commentisfree/2006/jun/16/shanghaisurprise>

542 See for instance Julie Boland, 'Ten years of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization: a lost decade? A partner for the U.S.?', 21st Century Defense Initiative Policy Paper, *Brookings Institution*, 20 June 2011 <http://goo.gl/Q2Gq0x>

543 For a different take on Sino-Russian relations, see Bobo Lo, *Axis of convenience: Moscow, Beijing, and the new geopolitics* (Washington, D.C.: Brookings Institution Press/Chatham House, 2008).

544 S. Frederick Starr, cited in Andrew Scheineson, 'Backgrounder: the Shanghai Cooperation Organization', *CFR*, 24 March 2009 <http://www.cfr.org/china/shanghai-cooperation-organization/p10883>

for Moscow's August 2008 invasion of Georgia even as Beijing was hosting the Olympics spoke volumes. This discordance has percolated downwards into other areas such as energy cooperation, where bilateral, rather than multilateral energy agreements have been the norm. The potential entry of Iran, already Russia's gas competitor, would threaten Moscow's near-monopoly of pipeline routes should geopolitical conditions favor increased export volumes through Iran's own western and southern corridors. On balance, despite its diplomatic initiatives, the foregoing discussion points to the challenges Tehran faced in cobbling together a truly substantive and not just symbolic anti-US/anti-Western coalition.

6. The third inflection point, 2011-15

The independent variable: systemic imperatives

A decade after 9/11, yet another series of events took place that would again prompt strategic adjustments in Tehran. The chain of uprisings in the Arab world beginning in Tunisia in December 2010 and proceeding in dramatic effect to overturn the status quo in Egypt, Libya and Yemen initially redounded to Iran's advantage. Khamenei heralded the uprisings as an 'Islamic Awakening' (*bidari-ye eslami*) belatedly inspired by Iran's own revolution, and the necessary condition towards a unified Islamic community.⁵⁴⁵ Iran's power and influence again seemed on the ascendant, not least because of the rising tide of political Islam and because some of the destabilized authoritarian regimes were friendly with the US and Israel.⁵⁴⁶

However, the socioeconomic, demographic and civic impetus behind the uprisings quickly saw their putative roots in anti-Western sentiment and notably in Iran's revolution debunked, a point wryly noted by a prominent Iranian scholar.⁵⁴⁷ Strategically, Iran also met with a number of setbacks. Majority Shi'ite anti-government protests that took hold in early 2011 in Bahrain – home of the US Fifth Fleet – were nipped in the bud when Saudi armor, among other GCC forces, thundered across the causeway.⁵⁴⁸ Worse, when unrest metastasized to Syria, the resulting civil war imperiled Iran's closest Arab ally along with Tehran's regional standing. And despite the

545 This was directed particularly at Egypt's Tahrir revolution, see Khamenei, First sermon on the occasion of the death anniversary of Ali bin Musa ol-Reza (the eighth Shi'a imam), Tehran Friday Mosque, 16 Bahman 1389/5 February 2011 <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=10955>; a 'World Assembly for the Islamic Awakening' was even created and chaired by Ali Akbar Velayati.

546 See IRGC political bureau head Yadollah Javani's remarks, *Sobh-e Sadeh*, 24 Mehr 1390/16 October 2011, <http://www.sobhesadeh.ir/1390/0521/M01.HTM>.

547 Sadeh Zibakalam, 'The landscape of the Arab Spring', in 'The Arab revolutions: strategic assessment III', *Bitter Lemons International* 16.10, 3 May 2012 <http://www.bitterlemons-international.org/previous.php?opt=1&id=378>

548 For an earlier survey of the Arab uprisings in the Gulf countries, see Mohammad-Reza Djalili & Thierry Kellner, 'Quand le vent du "printemps arabe" souffle sur le golfe Persique', *IFRI*, September 2011 <https://www.ifri.org/sites/default/files/atoms/files/notemommrddjalilitkellner.pdf>

initially encouraging Islamist turnover in Cairo, President Mohammad Morsi visited Tehran for a Non-Aligned Movement summit only to openly call for Assad's deposal.⁵⁴⁹ Not only were these Sunni rather than Shi'ite Islamist movements that entered political life, the Muslim Brotherhood, only the most 'venerable' of them (f. 1928), made Iran's Revolution look like 'a relative newcomer'.⁵⁵⁰

Entangled in the contradiction of abetting other Arab uprisings while quelling Syria's rebellion – a plot to weaken the 'Axis of Resistance' in Tehran and Damascus' telling – Khamenei's 'Islamic Awakening' now smacked of the 2009 Green Movement protests in Iran, tremors of which still posed a threat to regime legitimacy and security.⁵⁵¹ Iran and Hezbollah's persisting support for Damascus, though strategic in rationale, could not but be interpreted in sectarian terms, undermining Tehran's longstanding efforts to promote pan-Islamism to overcome its Shi'ite-minority handicap and pitting it against the Sunni majority. This set in motion a deepening sectarian rift that has cost Iran and its allies in terms of public opinion and political capital.⁵⁵² Then in mid-2014, an Al-Qaeda successor group overran the Iraqi city of Mosul and appended the northwestern third of Iraq to its de facto territory in northeastern Syria. The Sunni extremist and fervently anti-Shi'ite 'Islamic State' (IS) declared itself a caliphate and put the entire region on notice, and having pushed into the faultline bordering on Iraq's Shi'a majority it now threatened years of Iranian investments in and around Iraq.

Meanwhile, the nuclear standoff that had been simmering for a decade reached new heights of tension from 2011 onwards with escalating Israeli

549 'Selected excerpts from Morsi's speech', *NYT*, 30 August 2012 <http://www.nytimes.com/2012/08/31/world/middleeast/selected-excerpts-of-president-mohamed-morsis-speech.html>

550 Geneive Abdo, 'The new sectarianism: the Arab uprisings and the rebirth of the Shi'a-Sunni divide', Analysis Paper 29, *Brookings Institution*, April 2013, 54 <http://www.brookings.edu/~media/research/files/papers/2013/04/sunni%20shia%20abdo/sunni%20shia%20abdo>

551 'Hadaf-e doshmanan-e Suriye taz'if-e khatt-e moghavamat ast' [The goal of Syria's enemies is to weaken the Axis of Resistance], *Hamshahri*, 5 Mordad 1391/26 July 2012 <http://hamshahronline.ir/details/178872/Iran/foreignpolicy>; 'Senior MP: Israel seeking to weaken Resistance through crisis in Syria', *Fars News*, 13 August 2014 <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13930522000778>; the Sunnis likewise contradictorily supported Syria's Sunni rebels but crushed Bahrain's Shi'ite protestors.

552 James Zogby, 'The rise and fall of Iran in Arab and Muslim public opinion,' *Huffington Post*, 9 March 2013 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/james-zogby/the-rise-and-fall-of-iran_b_2843538.html

and American threats to strike Iran's nuclear facilities. Accompanying these was a shadow campaign incorporating a cocktail of cyber attacks,⁵⁵³ assassinations and economic sanctions targeting Iran's nuclear program. The combination of adverse regional changes and nuclear-related pressures, set against the already chronic threat of domestic instability both civic and to a lesser extent ethno-sectarian, all came to a head in 2013 with the election of Rouhani.⁵⁵⁴ If US encirclement and potential invasion shaped Iran's threat perceptions in the 2000s, the current period included threats directly posed by Israel and Saudi Arabia vis-à-vis its nuclear program and the wider regional intra-Islamic contention for influence.

Intervening variable: ideational-constitutive aspects

With US forces in Afghanistan, Iraq, Bahrain, Qatar and Kuwait, carrier strike groups patrolling the Gulf, alleged foreign support for Iranian opposition groups, sanctions isolating Iran from the global economy, sabotage aimed at its nuclear program, and talk of war constantly in the air, Iran's leadership understandably viewed its threat environment in existential terms.⁵⁵⁵ As we saw, the nationalist and especially pre-Islamic component of Iranian identity acquired unprecedented prominence under Ahmadinejad even though this invited pointed criticism from the clergy. The nuclear standoff also helped transmute Iranian nationalism into a fiery rallying point for anti-Western discourse. Later, during nuclear negotiations, Khamenei himself repeatedly emphasized respecting Iran's 'national interests' (*manafe'ye melli*),⁵⁵⁶ just as he had praised the self-sufficiency of Iran's 'resistance economy'.⁵⁵⁷ Along with nationalism, regime ideology and rejectionism too reached a peak

553 David Albright, Paul Brannan & Christina Walrond, 'Did Stuxnet take out 1,000 centrifuges at the Natanz enrichment plant?', *ISIS*, 22 December 2010 <http://isis-online.org/isis-reports/detail/did-stuxnet-take-out-1000-centrifuges-at-the-natanz-enrichment-plant/>; the increasing weaponization of cyberspace adds another layer of strategic vulnerability, but space constraints preclude a substantive discussion here. For an overview of Iran's cyber activities, see for instance Kevjn Lim, 'Iran's cyber posture', *Open Briefing*, 18 November 2013 <http://www.openbriefing.org/regionaldesks/middleeast/irans-cyber-posture/>

554 For an overview of Iran's challenges, see Mohammad-Reza Djalili, 'Iran: la spirale infernale de l'isolement', *Le Temps*, 21 February 2012 http://www.letemps.ch/Page/Uuid/166ab7b6-5bf5-11e1-a6df-c1b0c8547d10/Iran_la_spirale_infernale_de_lisolement

555 Mohsen M. Milani, 'Tehran's take', *Foreign Affairs* 88.4 (July/August 2009).

556 *BBC Persian radio*, 20 Bahman 1393/9 February 2015.

557 See his speech, reported in 'Iran leader calls for "economy of resistance"', *AFP*, 23 August 2012.

under Ahmadinejad before being moderated by the Rouhani administration. Following the Arab uprisings and increasing regional sectarianism, Tehran had little choice but to adopt policies that inevitably strengthened the Shi'ite element of its identity.

But if the deepening Sunni-Shi'ite schism diminished Iran's claims to regional leadership, nuclear revisionism had by then largely permeated its status aspirations, boosted by a declared ability to enrich uranium to 19.75% – the threshold for military applications. In addition, the specter of Sunni Jihadism embodied in IS accentuated Iran's indispensability as a strategic, if not exactly ideological counterweight and possibly even military partner, just as it has driven Iraq's embattled Shi'a – previously famously unreceptive to the principle of *Velayat* – towards Iran.⁵⁵⁸ In terms of irreducible interests, Iran's focus shifted heavily to protecting its investments in Syria, Lebanon and Iraq – the latter openly described as the 'third child of Iran's Islamic revolution' –⁵⁵⁹ and securing its western flank against possible crossborder penetration by IS. Some in Iran believed the Sunni extremist group 'was created in order to destroy the [largely Shi'ite-led] Islamic resistance in the region',⁵⁶⁰ and indeed Khamenei himself appeared to hold IS to be a creation of the West and Israel.⁵⁶¹ More importantly, state and regime interests aligned with each other as sanctions and other external pressures took their toll and threatened regime survival, so that negotiations eventually became *de rigueur*.

558 Afshon Ostovar, Rebecca Edelston & Michael Connell, 'On shifting sands: Iranian strategy in a changing Middle East', Center for Naval Analyses Strategic Studies, October 2013, 81 https://www.cna.org/CNA_files/PDF/DRM-2013-U-006026-Final.pdf

559 'Sardar Hamedani: 10 hezar nafar az afradi ke ba nezam-e Suriye mijangidand emruz basiji shode-and' [Commander Hamedani: ten thousand individuals who used to fight with the Syrian regime have today been mobilized], *Khabar Online*, 6 Tir 1393/27 June 2014 <http://www.khabaronline.ir/detail/362392/Politics/4310>

560 This quote ('baraye az bayn bordan-e moghavemat-e eslami dar mantaghe, ejad shod') is also by BG Hossein Hamedani, a top IRGC commander who is presently also a leading Iranian advisor in Syria, *BBC Persian radio*, 19 Bahman 1393/8 February 2015.

561 'U.S., "wicked" Britain created ISIS: Iran's Khamenei', *Reuters via Al Arabiya*, 13 October 2014 <http://english.alarabiya.net/en/News/middle-east/2014/10/13/U-S-wicked-Britain-created-ISIS-Iran-s-Khamenei.html>; 'Supreme Leader says Iran will counter extremism' (originally in Persian), *Khamenei.ir*, 25 November 2014 via BBC Monitoring Trans Caucasus, 25 November 2014.

Intervening variable: institutional-competitive aspects

When the Arab uprisings erupted, Tehran's ruling hardliners were quick to head off parallels with Iran's own disputed 2009 presidential elections and instead declaimed the advent of an 'Islamic Awakening'. This also implicitly targeted the hardliners' domestic adversaries, whose Green Movement led by the radical-turned-reformists Mir-Hossein Mousavi and Mehdi Karroubi was accused of being a product of the West's soft war and cultural onslaught against Iran.⁵⁶² The domestic wrangling notwithstanding, the different factions appeared in agreement when it came to Iran's deeper connection with the 'Islamic Awakening'.⁵⁶³ As if anticipating regional neglect of the Palestinian issue, Khamenei announced that 'we will support and help everyone who opposes the Zionist regime' after stressing Iran's role in the 2006 (Lebanon) and 2009 (Gaza) wars against Israel.⁵⁶⁴ As the full effects of the uprisings took shape, Iran became even more aggressive. At the same time, domestic elites exhibited greater consensus including in the battle for Assad's Syria, despite earlier top-level calls on Assad to end violent crackdowns and facilitate political reform⁵⁶⁵ and even one apparently retracted statement by Expediency Council head Rafsanjani reproaching Damascus for using chemical weapons against its citizens.⁵⁶⁶ Underscoring the country's place within Iran's hierarchy of priorities, Mehdi Ta'eb, the head of the Ammar base established after the 2009 protests to counter the 'soft war', openly declared Syria Iran's '35th province'. 'If the adversary attacks us and wants to seize Syria or Khuzestan [province in Iran], the priority lies with keeping

562 Payam Mohseni, 'The Islamic Awakening: Iran's grand narrative of the Arab uprisings', Middle East Brief 71, CCMES, April 2013 <http://www.brandeis.edu/crown/publications/meb/meb71.html>

563 Ibid., 7; 'Ayatollah Hashemi Rafsanjani: sahyounistha az mouj-e bidari-ye eslami negran-and/tawte'cha bisharmanetar shode-and' [Rafsanjani: the Zionists are worried about the wave of Islamic Awakening/the conspiracies have become even more brazen], *Khabar Online*, 25 Shahrivar 1391/15 September 2012 <http://www.khabaronline.ir/detail/243309/politics/parties>

564 'Lebanon's key movements renew alliance with Iran', *ABNA*, 20 February 2012 <http://fa.abna24.com/297633/print.html>; Najmeh Bozorgmehr & James Blitz, 'Khamenei dismisses pressure on Iran', *FT*, 3 February 2012 <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/31c0fc74-4e5c-11e1-8670-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3f6yRabgb>

565 Neil MacFarquhar, 'In shift, Iran's president calls for end to Syrian crackdown', *NYT*, 8 September 2011 http://www.nytimes.com/2011/09/09/world/middleeast/09iran.html?_r=1

566 'Iran denies ex-president said Assad's forces used poison gas', *Reuters*, 2 September 2013 <http://www.reuters.com/article/2013/09/02/us-syria-crisis-iran-rafsanjani-idUSBRE98107V20130902>

Syria', he said. 'If we keep Syria, we can also recover Khuzestan, but if we lose Syria, we won't even be able to keep Tehran'.⁵⁶⁷

Similarly, concerning Iraq, a statement by Rouhani's special advisor for ethnic and religious minorities put on record a thread of thinking current among Iran's decisionmaking elites, if not the wider society. 'Iraq is not only part of our civilizational sphere of influence, it is our identity, culture, center and capital, now as always. Since Iran and Iraq are geographically and culturally inseparable, we must either fight each other, or be united with each other,' according to Hojjat-ol-Eslam Ali Younesi, who was also a former intelligence minister. 'Without taking into account our area of influence,' which he said extended from China's borders north of the Indian subcontinent, the Caucasus, the Persian Gulf and even Oman, 'we cannot preserve our interests and security'.⁵⁶⁸ Younesi's remarks invited sharp criticism from every direction including Iraq's government,⁵⁶⁹ but it affirmed Iran's central role in Iraq's defense. Little after IS seized Mosul, Qom-based Grand Ayatollah Naser Makarem Shirazi called for a Jihad to 'defend Iraq's territorial integrity and especially its holy shrines', echoing Grand Ayatollah Sistani's own unprecedented fatwa, which however exclusively addressed *Iraqis*.⁵⁷⁰ This latest struggle in Iraq, Khamenei explained, was between 'terrorism and lovers of the west' (*takfiris* or infidels) on the one hand, and the 'opponents of terrorism and supporters of the independence of nations' (the 'Islamic Awakening') on the other, even as he denounced the West's

567 'Rais-e gharargah-e Ammar: olaviyyat-e ma negahdari-ye Suriye be-jaye Khuzestan ast' [Head of the Ammar base: our priority is preserving Syria instead of Khuzestan], *BBC Persian*, 26 Bahman 1391/14 February 2013 http://www.bbc.co.uk/persian/iran/2013/02/130214_nm_tayeb_syria_basij.shtml

568 'Marz'haye-ma masnu'-ist va nofuz-e farhangi-ye Iran bozorgtar az in marz'ha-st' [Our borders are artificial and Iran's cultural influence go beyond them], *Mehr News*, 18 Esfand 1393/9 March 2015 <http://goo.gl/aexYAT>

569 'Al-Ja'afari li"Asharq al-Awsat": lan nasmah li Iran yamas siyadatna', *Asharq al-Awsat*, 11 March 2015 <http://goo.gl/TwidiOm>; Michael Morell, 'Iran's grand strategy is to become a regional powerhouse', *WP*, 3 April 2015 http://www.washingtonpost.com/opinions/irans-grand-strategy/2015/04/03/415ec8a8-d8a3-11e4-ba28-f2a685dc7f89_story.html

570 'Bayaniye ghat'ane-ye ayatollah Makarem Shirazi darbare-ye havades akhir-e Aragh' [Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi's decisive statements on recent events in Iraq], *Tabnak*, 2 Tir 1393/23 June 2014 <http://goo.gl/pi1QAR>; Luay Al Khatteeb & Abbas Kadhim, 'What do you know about Sistani's fatwa?', *Huffington Post*, 10 July 2014 http://www.huffingtonpost.com/luay-al-khatteeb/what-do-you-know-about-si_b_5576244.html

attempts to sow dissent between Shi'ites and Sunnis.⁵⁷¹ The Islamic State's backers weren't just the West and Israel, they also included the 'Wahhabis' (Saudi Arabia) and the 'neo-Ottomans' (Turkey), other establishment figures charged.⁵⁷² IS' potential incursion into Shi'a Iraq cut to the heart of Iran's irreducible interests and thus paved the way for comparably coherent policy decisions little beset by factional bickering.

When the Houthis' advance in Yemen met with Saudi aerial retaliation in March 2015, Iran's domestic anti-Saudi rhetoric soared to new heights since the 1987 Hajj incident. Khamenei charged that 'several inexperienced youngsters took over the affairs of [Saudi Arabia] and chose barbarism over decency' which 'will certainly cost them', likely also referring to newly appointed Defense Minister Prince Muhammad bin Salman, who was still under 30. Khamenei's chief-of-staff Mohammad Mohammadi Golpayegani added that the 'innocent people of Yemen are dying by Saudi bombs.... Certainly by God's grace, the House of Saud will fall soon'. Mojtaba Zolnour, the Supreme Leader's deputy representative to the IRGC, declared that 'the Islamic Republic's victory in Yemen will open the gates to conquer Saudi Arabia,' while the hardline editor of *Kayhan* newspaper Hossein Shariatmadari spoke of 'the incarnated body of corruption and decay called the House of Saud' and judged that 'after the barbarous Saudi attack on Yemen, it is the legal and religious right of Yemeni Muslims to attack Saudi Arabia's borders'.⁵⁷³ Even a reformist newspaper like *Etemad* noted Saudi Arabia's abandonment of its 'conservative, second-hand role' in the region for an aggressive posture beginning with Yemen – the region's 'weakest link'.⁵⁷⁴

The ambivalence of the nuclear issue, however, created space for greater domestic disagreement although Khamenei later intervened as arbiter. The election of a centrist president in stark contrast to his hardline predecessor

571 'Iran Supreme Leader warns of enemy bid to incite Shia-Sunni conflict', *ABNA*, 29 June 2014 <http://en.abna24.com/service/iran/archive/2014/06/29/619798/story.html>; it is noteworthy that Iran's leaders – Khamenei at least – usually refer to the 'Islamic State' as infidels (*takfiri*) rather than 'Sunni'.

572 'Marz'hay-e-ma masnu'-ist', *Mehr News*.

573 All preceding quotes in this paragraph are cited in Mehdi Khalaji, 'Yemen war heats up Iran's anti-Saudi rhetoric', Policywatch 2423, *WINEP*, 18 May 2015 <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/yemen-war-heats-up-irans-anti-saudi-rhetoric>; as an interesting aside, Khomeini in his last will singled out Wahhabi Saudi Arabia for his harshest criticism, and not Israel or the US.

574 'Bohran-e yaman; nazariye baziha va rah-hall-e miyane' [The Yemen crisis; some theories and the middle solution], *Etemad*, 16 Ordibehesht 1394/6 May 2015 http://etemadnewspaper.ir/?News_Id=14430

signaled a broader mandate for adjustments in Iran's grand strategic calculus. Rouhani may have been the last resort of Iran's more moderate constituencies in the absence of truly reformist candidates (and indeed, for the hardliners too, who preferred Saeed Jalili and Mohammad Bagher Ghalibaf), but for Iran's leadership, he doubled as safety valve for popular disaffection. Crucially, he was also a leading figure in Iran's national security establishment and its most prominent former nuclear negotiator, and his new role would appropriately be reparative, even redemptive, by renegotiating the delicate balance between its nuclear ambitions (and national symbol), deteriorating economy, and domestic public opinion. As Rouhani noted during his electoral campaign, spinning centrifuges were good only if people could have their livelihoods as well.⁵⁷⁵

In a speech to Iran's most powerful organization and likely the greatest advocate of the nuclear program, Rouhani praised the IRGC and entreated it to exercise its economic muscle in a few large national projects (i.e. rather than in the more lucrative private sector), even as it ought to stay out of politics.⁵⁷⁶ A day later, Khamenei echoed Rouhani by hinting that the IRGC need not necessarily intervene in factional politicking although it needed to guard against political threats. In that same speech, Iran's Supreme Leader codified nuclear negotiations as 'heroic flexibility' (*narmesh-e ghahremanane*), just as a 'wrestler also sometimes shows flexibility for technical reasons though he never forgets who his rival is and what his main goal is'.⁵⁷⁷ In this context, he stressed that Iran rejected nuclear weapons because of its beliefs and not because of the US' threats.⁵⁷⁸ Majles speaker Ali Larijani paralleled Khamenei's shift by welcoming 'logical' talks (i.e. without threats) while blaming the west for disrupting previous rounds of negotiations. Notably,

575 His exact words were 'Charkhidan-e dastgah-haye sontrifuzh baraye ghanisazi-ye uranium khub ast, ama be sharti ke charkh-e zendegi-ye mardom ham becharkhad', see 'Anche gozasht gofteha va shenideha'; 5 ruz ta entekhabat' [As it happened, what was said and heard: 5 days until the elections], *BBC*, 19 Khordad 1392/9 June 2013 http://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/2013/06/130609_ir92_5_daysto.shtml

576 'Sepah bayad az jariyanat-e seyasi be dur bashad' [The IRGC must distance itself from politics], *ILNA*, 25 Shahrivar 1392/16 September 2013 <http://goo.gl/kSd8UX>

577 'Yek koshtigir-e fanni niz barkhi mavaghe bedelil-e fanni narmesh neshan midahad amma faramush nemikonad ke harifash kist va hadaf-e asli-ye u chist', see Khamenei's website, 'Rahbar-e mo'zam-e enghelab dar didar-e fermandehan va personel-e sepah-e pasdaran' [The Supreme Leader of the Revolution visiting commanders and staff of the IRGC], 26 Shahrivar 1392/17 September 2013 <http://www.leader.ir/langs/fa/index.php?p=contentShow&id=11104>

578 Ibid. loc. cit.

heroic flexibility ‘doesn’t mean that our strategy has changed’, he stressed.⁵⁷⁹ According to dissident journalist Akbar Ganji, Khamenei’s was a signal ‘that rapprochement is possible, but not at the price of abandoning Iran’s resistance to Western hegemony’.⁵⁸⁰

Indeed, the thin line between nuclear negotiations and broader détente with the US became the focus of factional politicking. When Rouhani’s ally Rafsanjani alleged that Khomeini had in the 1980s privately endorsed an eventual end to the slogan ‘Death to America!’,⁵⁸¹ hardliners went on the offensive, ensuring that the chant would resonate during the coming 4 November anniversary of the US hostage affair.⁵⁸² While they cautiously supported the negotiating team, the IRGC’s top brass articulated reservations such as ‘we cannot be optimistic regarding the US’.⁵⁸³ When ‘Javad’ (Zarif) indulged in a lakeside stroll in Geneva with ‘John’ (Kerry) in February 2015, a chorus of protest arose in Iran with Basij commander Mohammad Reza Naghdi calling it a ‘show of intimacy with the enemy of humanity’.⁵⁸⁴ Even after the signing of a comprehensive nuclear agreement in July 2015, Khamenei made it clear that this did not entail, firstly, an improvement in bilateral relations especially in view of Washington’s support of Israel, and certainly no let-up in support for Iran’s regional allies (his list began with Palestine), remarks

579 ‘Speaker urges West to start logical interaction with Iran’, *Fars News*, 21 September 2013 <http://english.farsnews.com/newstext.aspx?nn=13920630001133>

580 Akbar Ganji, ‘Frenemies forever: the real meaning of Iran’s “heroic flexibility”’, *Foreign Affairs*, 24 September 2013 <https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/middle-east/2013-09-24/frenemies-forever>

581 ‘Imam movafagh-e hezf-e marg bar Emrika budand’ [Imam Khomeini agreed to the abolition of the ‘death to America’ chants], Rafsanjani’s website, 8 Mehr 1392/30 September 2013 <http://goo.gl/9f8Vc6>; Mehrdad Khadir, ‘Marg bar Emrika che mishavad?’ [What’s happening to ‘death to America’?], *Asr-e Iran*, 9 Mehr 1392/1 October 2013 <http://goo.gl/4YZf5v>

582 See BG Massoud Jazayeri’s remarks, ‘Tashkil-e setad-haye mardomi baraye ruz-e “marg bar Emrika” / Emrika bayad az Iran ozrkhahi konad’ [Establishment of popular commands for ‘Death to America’ day / America must apologize to Iran], *Fars News*, 13 Mehr 1392/5 October 2013 <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13920713001387>

583 ‘Pishbini az mozakerat-e fe’eli nadaram/dar mozakerat-e haste-i be moshkel mikhorem’ [I cannot predict the outcome of the ongoing negotiations/we expect problems in the nuclear talks], *Mehr News*, 30 Bahman 1392/19 February 2014 <http://goo.gl/r2vcH0>

584 Thomas Erdbrink, ‘Iran’s hard-liners show restraint on nuclear talks with U.S.’, *NYT*, 23 March 2015 http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/24/world/middleeast/irans-hard-liners-nuclear-talks.html?emc=edit_th_20150324&nl=todaysheadlines&nliid=65669776

certainly also intended to assure his hardline constituencies.⁵⁸⁵ Censuring the US negotiating team's post-agreement claims, Khamenei said 'they can only dream about making Iran surrender'.⁵⁸⁶

The rhetorical nuances underlying this critical chapter of inraelite competition aren't always easy to parse. After Rouhani's famous phone conversation with Obama, IRGC commander-in-chief Ja'afari commended Rouhani's diplomatic overture but noted the call as premature, echoing Khamenei's own veiled disapproval. At the same time however, Friday prayer leaders countrywide including hardliners, all of whom were appointed by Khamenei, praised Rouhani's New York performance.⁵⁸⁷ But when criticism persisted in both tone and scope, Khamenei stepped in, calling the negotiating team 'our children and the children of the Revolution' and suggesting Iran's representatives should be supported rather than 'weakened' despite his own pessimism regarding the talks.⁵⁸⁸ Recriminations continued however, until a further intervention six months later by Iran's top military official, the normally hardline Armed Forces Chief-of-Staff Hassan Firouzabadi, who chastised IRGC-affiliated media outlets for gratuitous criticism of the administration, threatening to take to task those who weakened the government.⁵⁸⁹ Opposition thereafter became mostly muted and redirected elsewhere such as sociocultural issues and censorship of social media and the internet.⁵⁹⁰

Rouhani's efforts to improve the economy meant that he also had to temper the IRGC's economic role somehow. According to Mehdi Khalaji, Rouhani may possibly have persuaded Khamenei that IRGC mismanagement

585 See Khamenei's second sermon on the occasion of Eid-e Ghorban 2015, *PressTV* (in Persian with simultaneous English interpretation) <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=0odFv4iB0FI>

586 Ibid. loc. cit.

587 Ali Reza Eshraghi, 'Iranian hardliners silent on Rouhani's US diplomacy', *Lobelog*, 28 September 2013 <http://www.lobelog.com/iranian-hardliners-silent-on-rouhanis-us-diplomacy/>

588 'Hichkas nabayad mozakere-konandegan-e ma ra sazeshtar bedanad: az in mozakerat zarar nemikonim' [No one should regard our negotiators as appeasers: we have nothing to lose in these talks], *ISNA*, 12 Aban 1392/3 November 2013 <http://goo.gl/M0mqL>

589 *Khabar Online*, 29 Ordibehesht 1393/19 May 2014 <http://www.khabaronline.ir/detail/355978/Politics/parties>; these outlets at the least likely included *Tasnim*, *Javan*, *Sobh-e Sadeh* and *Fars*.

590 Hossein Bastani, 'How powerful is Rouhani in the Islamic Republic?', *Chatham House*, November 2014 http://www.chathamhouse.org/sites/files/chathamhouse/field/field_document/20141124RouhaniislamicRepublicBastani.pdf

and sanctions targeting wideranging IRGC-affiliated commercial interests stood in the way of economic recovery.⁵⁹¹ The standoff extended to clerical hardline interests as well. In December 2014, parliament approved a bill sponsored by Rouhani requiring several parastatal organizations such as Khatam ol-Anbia, Bonyad-e Mostaz'afan and Setad-e Ferman-e Emam to pay taxes.⁵⁹² These internal reforms were crucial to offsetting dwindling oil prices and exports at a sensitive time. Unusually, the Iranian president even threatened recourse to a referendum to decide the issue should the hardliners not relent.⁵⁹³

However, after the signing of the Lausanne political framework in April 2015, greater support became forthcoming from hardliners, notably within the security establishment from such figures as Ja'afari, Firouzabadi and SNSC secretary Ali Shamkhani.⁵⁹⁴ Nuclear discourse by this stage was about preserving the national interest and the Supreme Leader's 'red lines', which boiled down to irrevocable recognition of Iran's civilian nuclear program, swift removal of all nuclear-related sanctions, and refusal to open up military bases to IAEA inspections.⁵⁹⁵ In a highly divisive domestic environment, Iran's hardliners may have preferred to torpedo any agreement that might strengthen the moderate administration's hand and popularity, let alone one that threatened to undermine the economic benefits accruing to them from lack of foreign competition (unless IRGC companies, for instance, were de-sanctioned, allowing partnerships with foreign firms). By eventually deferring to Khamenei's directive to support the talks, hardliners may be ensuring that in the event of failure, blame would fall squarely on the

591 Mehdi Khalaji, 'President Rouhani and the IRGC', Policywatch 2189, *WINEP*, 8 January 2014 <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/president-rouhani-and-the-irgc>

592 Ali Alfoneh, 'Iran's "reformist" president is shielding the Revolutionary Guards', *Business Insider*, 12 January 2015 <http://www.businessinsider.com/rouhani-is-shielding-the-powerful-revolutionary-guard-from-his-anti-corruption-campaign-2015-1>

593 Mardo Soghom, 'Rohani makes his move', *RFE/RL*, 20 July 2015 <http://www.rferl.org/content/iran-referendums-irgc-rouhani-reforms/26779709.html>

594 For the Persian-language references, see Akbar Ganji, 'Newsflash: Iran's Revolutionary Guards support the nuclear deal', *TNI*, 20 May 2015 <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/newsflash-irans-revolutionary-guards-support-the-nuclear-12928>

595 For his earlier red lines, see Khamenei's official Twitter account messages, 12 October 2014 https://twitter.com/khamenei_ir/status/521212555587383296, and 24 June 2015 https://twitter.com/khamenei_ir/status/613649656950718465; note the changes between both Tweets, especially with regards to 'impositions' and 'timeframes'.

west. Repeating a well-documented compensatory pattern, a day before the signing of the final deal in July 2015, Iran's hardline judiciary announced the imprisonment of five individuals including émigré returnees for alleged involvement in the 2009 unrest, and issued a warning against social media users likely aimed at stemming the tide against calls for greater sociocultural opening.⁵⁹⁶ At the same time, high-profile opposition and the real risk of 'involuntary defection' afforded the relatively moderate president and his negotiating team greater external bargaining leverage.⁵⁹⁷

It was mentioned in chapter 3 that Iran's presidents mainly affect the style rather than substance of foreign and especially national security policy (FNSP). They can however alter the course of factional politics by force of personality. A mere trimester into the incoming president's first term, an article on a website managed by Ahmad Tavakkoli called Rouhani 'a real diplomat' who 'is accurately familiar with the power relations in the Islamic Republic' and 'knows that his success lies in constructive engagement with...influential institutions'. Unlike Khatami or Ahmadinejad, Rouhani 'prefers to avoid conflict with these institutions'. In this way, 'these powerful institutions feel obliged to Rouhani'.⁵⁹⁸

The dependent variable: strategic adjustments

At the time of this writing, strategic adjustments were manifest in two areas. The first reflected Iran's attempts to preserve influence amid increasing sectarian tensions in the region. Rather than lead from behind via strictly covert action as has been its wont, Tehran now stepped out of the shadows and took greater ownership of regional developments, so to speak. At the same time, the confluence of internal and external pressures coincided with the election of a comparably moderate president, which has in turn prompted, or perhaps provided the opening for Tehran to restart nuclear negotiations.

a. Strategic contention: preserving influence amid growing Sunni-Shi'a sectarianism

The major regional conflict axes of the previous decades revolved around the Israeli-Arab/Israeli-Palestinian question, followed by the series of Gulf wars. With the 'Arab Spring' however, shifting alignments crystalized more

596 *Quds Online*, 22 Tir 1394/13 July 2015 <http://qudsonline.ir/detail/News/295675>

597 Putnam, 'Two-level', 440, 459.

598 'Sepah va tafavot-e kelidi Rouhani ba Khatami va Ahmadinezhad' [The IRGC and the key differences between Rouhani, and Khatami and Ahmadinezhad], *Alef*, 26 Shahrivar 1392/17 September 2013 <http://alef.ir/vdccxoqse2bqox8.ala2.html?199006>

clearly around a Shi'ite revisionist front and a Sunni status quo bloc led respectively by Iran and Saudi Arabia, with Syria lying at the heart of the Sunni-Shi'ite contention over reshaping the regional order.⁵⁹⁹

As Syria's unrest deteriorated into the region's bloodiest contemporary civil war, Iran found itself extending massive assistance to keep the Assad government afloat. The secular Ba'athist government under Hafez al-Assad was Tehran's only unswerving ally during its eight-year war against Iraq. The fruit of this union, the Lebanese Hezbollah, took shape in 1982 and Damascus has since been Tehran's lifeline and logistical link to Hezbollah's Mediterranean stronghold in the wider conflict against Israel and the US. If strategy was designed in Tehran and tactics in Lebanon's Shi'ite south, then the operational center of gravity of the 'Axis of Resistance' (*mehvar-e moghavamat*) – some call it post-revolutionary Iran's only major foreign policy success⁶⁰⁰ – literally lay in Syria.⁶⁰¹ Furthermore, having conceded Iran a foothold in the heart of the Arab world, these relations also softened the otherwise stark Persian-Arab dichotomy. While Syria's Alawite government may in theory be a remote (and heterodox) offshoot of Shi'ism,⁶⁰² the strategic rather than confessional aspects of the relationship ultimately took centerstage.⁶⁰³ Syria's dismemberment and the tightening of territory held by the ruling Alawite core suggests furthermore that Bashar al-Assad himself may not necessarily be irreplaceable.⁶⁰⁴ IRGC military strategists, reinforced by Lebanese Hezbollah, Iraqi and Afghan combatants, not only managed Assad's defenses but reportedly oversaw the creation of the National Defense Forces largely comprising Alawites.⁶⁰⁵ This was further rounded

599 Asher Susser, 'Tradition and modernity in the "Arab Spring"', *Strategic Assessment* 15.1 (April 2012) 36.

600 Djalili, 'Iran: la spirale infernale'.

601 See the epigraphic citation by Ali Akbar Velayati in Jubin Goodarzi, 'Iran, Syria, and the Arab Spring: wither the Tehran-Damascus nexus?', *Muftah*, 13 September 2012, <http://muftah.org/iran-syria-the-arab-spring-whither-the-tehran-damascus-nexus/#.VWxcZs-eDGc>

602 The Iranian-Lebanese Twelver Shi'ite cleric Musa al-Sadr expediently certified the Alawites as Shi'ites in the mid-1970s so that the Ba'athist Hafez al-Assad's self-proclaimed presidency would be constitutional.

603 Karim Sadjadpour, 'Iran's unwavering support to Assad's Syria', *CTC*, 27 August 2013 <https://www.ctc.usma.edu/posts/irans-unwavering-support-to-assads-syria>

604 Ibid. loc. cit.; Iran's pledges of support to Damascus notwithstanding, a former aide of President Rouhani opined that a 'Syrian Karzai' acceptable by all parties may offer a way out of the Syrian impasse.

605 Afshon Ostovar, 'Iran has a bigger problem than the West: its Sunni neighbors', *Lawfare*, 7 June 2015 <http://www.lawfareblog.com/iran-has-bigger-problem-west->

out by diplomatic backing from Russia, which maintained a warm water port at Tartus and arms transactions with Damascus worth at least \$3 billion, and appeared determined to prevent another round of Western intervention following the Libyan precedent.⁶⁰⁶

The ideological-sectarian character of the Syrian war unquestionably fanned the flames of Jihadist extremism, the organizational and military effectiveness of which contrasted against the other relatively effete rebel factions. Already controlling much of northeastern Syria, the group known as 'Islamic State' soon seized additional swathes of Arab-Sunni Iraq. Going beyond its policy of the previous period, Iran now broke the usual mold of military intervention by proxy, becoming even more directly and *visibly* involved.⁶⁰⁷ Iran's alacrity in organizing the defense of Baghdad, other Shi'a cities, and even the northern Sunni Kurdish areas contrasted with the prevaricating in Western and Gulf capitals. In an interesting shift, Iranian media started carrying panegyrics of IRGC officers, ostensibly advisors, slain in action in both Syria and Iraq, especially while protecting the holy shrine of Samarra.⁶⁰⁸ Most remarkably, QF commander Soleimani broke with precedent by stepping out of the shadows and unequivocally taking command, perhaps only half-inadvertently becoming a social media celebrity

its-sunni-neighbors

606 Charles Clover, Anna Fifield & Roula Khalaf, 'Russia sparks outrage over Syria veto at UN', *FT*, 5 October 2011 <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/2f488b00-ef71-11e0-941e-00144feab49a.html#axzz3cHOhrYQF>

607 Alex Vatanka, 'Iran's Iraq calculations', *Project Syndicate*, 16 September 2014 <http://www.project-syndicate.org/commentary/alex-vatanka-argues-that-iranian-leaders--effort-to-retain-influence-in-baghdad-could-backfire>

608 For a sample, see 'Teror-e "Emad" bazsazi-ye lobnan va Suriye dar salruz-e shahadat-e "Moghniye" [The assassination of the 'Pillar' of reconstruction in Lebanon and Syria on Moghniye's death anniversary], *Fars News*, 28 Bahman 1391/16 February 2013 <http://www.farsnews.com/printable.php?nn=13911128000043>; 'Fermende-ye pishin-e sepah-e pasdaran va az modafe'an-e haram dar Suriye koshte shod [Former IRGC commander and shrine defender killed]', *Radio Zamaneh*, 8 Khordad 1393/29 May 2014 <http://www.radiozamaneh.com/148582>; 'Tasavir: tashyii-e peykar-e shahid Mohammad Jamali' [In images: the funeral of martyred fighter Mohammad Jamali], *Mashregh News*, 14 Aban 1392/5 November 2013 <http://goo.gl/qhW9PT>; Sam Wilkin, 'Iran brings home body of top general killed in Syria', *Reuters*, 13 June 2015 <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/06/13/us-mideast-crisis-iran-general-idUSKBN0OT0BC20150613>; 'Death of a general', *The Economist*, 3 January 2015 <http://goo.gl/ki7Z1c>

overnight.⁶⁰⁹ In this, Iran likely sought to reassure its constituencies and demonstrate its commitment to putting actual ‘boots on the ground’, the only thing perceptibly preventing IS from prevailing.⁶¹⁰ As in Syria, Iran oversaw the creation of a popular, overwhelmingly Shi’ite militia known as the Popular Mobilization (*al-Hashd ash-Sha’abi*) that came to comprise the ‘special groups’ in order to reinforce and compensate for Iraq’s relatively weak armed forces.

The Syrian conflict likewise politically weakened Hezbollah as a national Lebanese movement perceived to be taking orders from Tehran, while IS militarily occupied Hezbollah fighters and threatened to spill over into Lebanese territory. The perils of revived sectarianism for a compact country still frail from its own fifteen-year civil war appear to have prompted Iran to attempt courting Lebanon as a whole, rather than just Shi’ite Hezbollah.⁶¹¹ If IS didn’t yet pose an existential threat to Iran, its activity in these three countries certainly challenged the entire edifice of Tehran’s four decade-old regional strategy.

Iran may be playing animating force behind the region’s Shi’a, but not without ambivalence given the limited demographic weight of global Shi’ism and Iran’s professed pan-Islamism. Recall that it has crossed the confessional divide in backing Sunni Palestinian groups and Christian Armenia, the latter against Shi’ite Azerbaijan. This didn’t however prevent Iran capitalizing on the soft power aspects of Shi’ite politics. Moreover,

609 Farnaz Fassihi, Jay Solomon & Sam Dagher, ‘Iranians dial up presence in Syria’, *WSJ*, 16 September 2013 <http://www.wsj.com/articles/SB10001424127887323864604579067382861808984>; Siobhan O’Grady, ‘The Dark Knight rises’, *FP*, 15 October 2014 <http://foreignpolicy.com/2014/10/15/the-dark-knight-rises/>; Saeed Kamali Dehghan, ‘Qassem Suleimani photo makeover reveals Iran’s new publicity strategy’, *The Guardian*, 14 October 2014 <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2014/oct/14/suleimani-high-profile-to-publicise-irans-key-anti-isis-role>; for photo coverage of Soleimani’s field appearances, see on Twitter <https://goo.gl/BVMx3G>; <https://goo.gl/flkNzL>; <https://goo.gl/oFUFcf>; <https://goo.gl/C0kXVr>; and ‘Ghassem Soleimani fermende-ye sepah-e Qods va taranehay-e farsi va arabi’ [Qassem Soleimani Qods Force commander and Persian and Arabic songs], *BBC Persian*, 4 Esfand 1393/23 February 2015 http://www.bbc.com/persian/iran/2015/02/150223_112_iran_soleimani_farsi_arabic_bm?ocid=socialflow_twitter

610 See BG Yadollah Javani’s remarks concerning Iranian deployments in Syria and Iraq, ‘Naghsh-e sepah-e ghods-e Iran dar mobareze ba da’esh, cherayi va chegunegi hemayat az Aragh va Suriye’ [The Qods Force’s role in the fight against Islamic State: the whys and hows of defending Iraq and Syria], *ISNA*, 20 Mehr 1393/12 October 2014 <http://goo.gl/T9C48P>

611 Neil MacFarquhar, ‘Iran begins fervent courtship of Lebanon’, *IHT*, 25 May 2012.

Tehran clearly considered its activities in these countries legitimate, and with some justification viewed a significant Saudi role in nurturing Sunni extremism against Shi'ites.⁶¹² Kayhan Barzegar for instance wondered if IS' few thousand fighters could really advance into Iraq so quickly without state support.⁶¹³ Taken together, the weight of the evidence so far supports the view that Iran's regional gambit aimed at cutting losses from the fallout more than maximizing gains.⁶¹⁴ Given its waning position, Iran faced a choice 'between defection and raising the stakes by getting more directly involved' as Chubin has suggested.⁶¹⁵ The implicit anxiety also explains Iran's 'coming out' with respect to its support for Hezbollah and the IRGC-QF's visibility, since otherwise covert action and indoctrination have better suited Iran's campaign for power, influence and security.

However, the Sunnis especially in the Arabian Peninsula saw Iranian activity as premeditatedly sectarian in purpose and a challenge to their regional domination, especially in light of Iran's nuclear program. Despite a common enemy in IS, and although GCC-Iran trade leapt from \$1.7 billion in 2000 to \$8.7 billion in 2007,⁶¹⁶ the Gulf monarchies viewed each Iranian gain as their loss, which further damaged any near-term prospects of a regional security condominium. As soon as it lost Mubarak's Egypt, Saudi Arabia too mirrored Iran's strategic adjustment and went on the defensive, closing ranks with other conservative Sunni governments, particularly monarchies.⁶¹⁷ Relations thus improved between estranged neighbors Riyadh and Doha, even as the two non-Gulf monarchies Jordan and Morocco received invitations to join the GCC.⁶¹⁸ Previously close to Tehran, even Khartoum

612 Ostovar, 'Iran has a bigger problem'; conversely, the brazenly pro-Shi'ite central government under former PM Nouri al-Maliki has also exacerbated Sunni resentment, encouraging some to sympathize with IS.

613 'Kayhan Barzegar: janbe-ye zheopolitik-e jariyan-haye efrati, amniyat-e melli-ye Iran ra tahdid mikonad' [Kayhan Barzegar: the geopolitics of extremism threaten Iran's national security], *Shafaqna*, 2 Tir 1393/23 June 2014 <http://goo.gl/uqppPP>; Arash Khalilkhaneh, 'Da'ish and Arabic dreams', *Qods* (Mashhad), 2 June 2015 via BBC Monitoring Middle East Political, 3 June 2015.

614 For similar arguments, see for instance Thomas Juneau, 'Iran's failed foreign policy: dealing from a position of weakness', Policy Paper 2015-1, *MEI*, April 2015, 16.

615 Chubin, 'Ascendancy frustrated', 48.

616 Juneau, *Squandered opportunity*, 69

617 F. Gregory Gause III, 'Saudi Arabia in the new Middle East', Special Report 63, *CFR*, December 2011, 17-8.

618 Tensions prevailed elsewhere though, notably in Libya, where a proxy war was being fought out between Qatar, which backed the Islamist Libya Dawn government in

increasingly shifted towards Riyadh, likely to offset heavily truncated oil reserves following South Sudan's separation in 2011. Likewise, the politics of the Syrian conflict forced Hamas's politburo representatives to relocate from Damascus to Doha and Cairo,⁶¹⁹ just as it hastened the unravelling of Iran's relations with Turkey, which had improved considerably under the Islamist Justice and Equality Party (AKP).

Complicating matters were GCC-US relations. The Gulf monarchies appeared to view the US alliance as increasingly unreliable in light of American war weariness, the defense sequester, Obama's touted 'rebalance' to Asia, and the prospect of diminishing dependence on overseas oil owing to the US' shale revolution. Washington's apparent eagerness to deal with Iran, its failure to punish Assad's use of chemical weapons, and its reluctance to intervene first in Egypt, then in Syria, likewise alarmed them (and Israel).⁶²⁰ Consequently, the GCC states opted to hedge their bets rather than exclusively follow the US' lead.⁶²¹ During the 2015 annual Al-Jazeera Forum in Qatar's capital, the media network's former chief executive Wadah Khanfar called for greater Arab self-assertion now that Washington wasn't just withdrawing from the Middle East but was, according to him, in effect siding with the Shi'ite bloc.⁶²²

Some form of greater assertiveness was already in evidence. The Saudis had rejected their own Security Council seat in protest against Western compromises over Syria and Iran,⁶²³ and a freshly crowned King Salman opted to boycott the GCC Camp David meeting with Obama over Iran's role in the region's various crises.⁶²⁴ An Iranian response beyond the confines of Syria,

Tripoli, and the UAE, which with Egypt supported the internationally recognized government relocated in Tobruk.

619 Ehud Yaari, 'The agony of Hamas', *The Times of Israel*, 27 February 2012 <http://www.timesofisrael.com/the-agony-of-hamas/>; amid all this, Khaled Mesh'al also hinted that he was willing to advocate popular – i.e. unarmed – resistance against Israel contrary to Hamas' longstanding policy.

620 Anthony H. Cordesman, 'Saudi Arabia, Iran, and the "Clash within a Civilization"', *CSIS*, 3 February 2014 <http://csis.org/publication/saudi-arabia-iran-and-clash-within-civilization>

621 Djalili & Kellner, 'Printemps arabe', 20.

622 See Khanfar's keynote speech in Arabic, especially at 16"00 and from 19"00-22"20, <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=JEFgvHcf-v0>

623 Robert F. Worth, 'Saudi Arabia rejects U.N. Security Council seat in protest move', *NYT*, 18 October 2013 <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/10/19/world/middleeast/saudi-arabia-rejects-security-council-seat.html>

624 Ian Black & Dan Roberts, 'King Salman of Saudi Arabia pulls out of US talks on Iran', *The Guardian*, 11 May 2015 <http://www.theguardian.com/world/2015/>

Iraq and Lebanon hasn't been muted either. The QF reportedly ordered the assassination of a Saudi diplomat in Karachi and botched another attempt on the Saudi ambassador in Washington, in May and October 2011 respectively.⁶²⁵ These were hardly unprecedented, for Iranian affiliates (Saudi Hezbollah) had previously targeted Saudi diplomats in Ankara, Karachi and Bangkok in the late 1980s.⁶²⁶ In addition, as pressures simultaneously mounted vis-à-vis the nuclear dossier, Tehran accordingly increased its willingness to court risks, racking up a string of bungled assassination attempts targeting Israeli diplomats in countries such as Georgia, Azerbaijan, Kenya, India and Thailand.⁶²⁷

After Bahrain, events in Yemen underscored Riyadh's uncompromising resolve to stanch the perceived spread of Iranian influence. When Ansar Allah's Houthis took over a number of key cities including the capital San'a and forced President Abdrabbo Mansur Hadi into exile between late 2014 and early 2015, Riyadh led a ten-nation Sunni coalition air campaign against the group. Iran's influence on the Zaydi Shi'ite Houthis (and its support for southern Yemen's Sunni Hirak secessionists) remained tenuous,⁶²⁸ not least since Yemen's decade-long insurgency was fueled just as much, if not more, by fraught center-periphery relations alongside sectarianism.⁶²⁹ Still,

may/11/king-salman-saudi-arabia-pulls-out-us-talks-iran

625 United States Department of Justice, Office of Public Affairs, News release, 11 October 2011 <http://www.justice.gov/opa/pr/two-men-charged-alleged-plot-assassinate-saudi-arabian-ambassador-united-states>; David Ignatius, 'Intelligence links Iran to Saudi diplomat's murder', *WP*, 13 October 2011 http://www.washingtonpost.com/blogs/post-partisan/post/intelligence-links-iran-to-saudi-diplomats-murder/2011/10/13/gIQAfzCPiL_blog.html

626 Matthew Levitt, 'Iranian and Hezbollah threats to Saudi Arabia: past precedents', Policywatch 2426, *WINEP*, 19 May 2015 <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/iranian-and-hezbollah-threats-to-saudi-arabia-past-precedents>

627 Ostovar et al., 'On shifting sands', 34.

628 Ostovar, 'Iran has a bigger problem'; The Zaydis are also known as Fiver Shi'ites because they believe that the fifth Imam was Zayd rather than his brother Mohammad, who perpetuated the lineage that would lead to the Twelve (hence Twelver) Imams. Unlike the historically quiescent Twelvers who preferred to await the Mahdi's coming, the Fivers violently opposed Umayyad rule right from the offset. Revolutionary Iran's volte-face thus aligned Iran's politically active Shi'ism with that of the Zaydis, although Zaydi jurisprudence approximates more closely to that of Sunni schools. The Houthis get their name from Badr ad-Din al-Houthi, the revivalist ideologue who founded Ansar Allah in 1992.

629 According to US officials, Iran even discouraged the Houthis from seizing San'a, see Ali Watkins, Ryan Grim & Akbar Shahid Ahmed, 'Iran warned Houthis against Yemen takeover', *Huffington Post*, 20 April 2015 <http://www.huffingtonpost.com>.

Iran has supported them with matériel and weapons,⁶³⁰ and a leading Houthi cleric is known to have pledged allegiance to Iran's supreme leader.⁶³¹ Even if Tehran's pro-Houthi rhetoric were aimed at merely stoking its regional importance, it was now perceived to be enveloping Saudi Arabia from the south, with real strategic implications for Riyadh's rulers.

The Gulf's balance of power changed when Saddam's undoing henceforth pitted Iran directly against Saudi Arabia – the weakest of the three – with not only no third balancing power but Iraq now in thrall to Tehran.⁶³² Yet, joining Riyadh was the rest of the region's Sunni governments, including Turkey, as well as Israel if we factor in the nuclear standoff, which effectively pitted the other three significant regional powers against Shi'ite-Persian Iran. In the 1990s, Tehran managed to counter its diplomatic isolation amid the Peace Process by supporting Sunni extremists against Israel's left-of-center Labor government. This time, the key lay with another brand of Sunni extremism. The Islamic State's spectacular barbarism to an extent already revalidated Iran's self-perceived role conception – and thereby its status aspirations – as a relatively moderate and responsible power and an indispensable regional security provider.⁶³³ Without Iran, so the messaging went, no regional security arrangement could truly remain viable, and top-

com/2015/04/20/iran-houthis-yemen_n_7101456.html; Djalili & Kellner, 'Printemps arabe', 13; Zaydis comprise roughly a third or so of Yemen's population.

630 Yara Bayoumy & Mohammed Ghobari, 'Iranian support seen crucial for Yemen's Houthis', *Reuters*, 15 December 2014 <http://www.reuters.com/article/2014/12/15/us-yemen-houthis-iran-insight-idUSKBN0JT17A20141215>; Carole Landry, 'UN: Iran arming Houthi rebels in Yemen since 2009', *AFP via Times of Israel*, 1 May 2015 <http://www.timesofisrael.com/un-iran-arming-houthi-rebels-in-yemen-since-2009/>

631 'Yemeni Shi'ite cleric and Houthi disciple 'Issam Al-Imad: our leader Houthi is close to Khamenei; we are influenced religiously and ideologically by Iran', Special Dispatch 2627, *MEMRI*, 2 November 2009 <http://www.memri.org/report/en/0/0/0/0/0/3757.htm>

632 Chubin, 'Iran's power in context', 168-9.

633 As Iran's moderate foreign minister put it, 'the Islamic Republic's stability and quiet at a time of raging regional instability constitutes an unparalleled opportunity and responsibility...the future of the region will be fundamentally entwined with Iran's role, and no actor can ignore this', see Mohammad Javad Zarif, 'Ruykard-e seyasat-e khareji va barname-ye vezarat-e omur-e khareje' [The Ministry of Foreign Affairs' foreign policy strategy and program], *MFA website*, 21 Mordad 1392/12 August 2013 www.mfa.gov.ir/?siteid=1&siteid=1&pageid=128&newsview=5843; Mehdi Poursafa, 'America is seeking to resolve its problems in the Middle East before lifting Iran's sanctions', *Javan Online*, 30 April 2015, via BBC Monitoring Middle East Political, 4 May 2015; see also Khamenei's letter to western youth

level exchanges between Washington and Tehran regarding IS appeared to acknowledge this despite ostensible linkages with the nuclear issue.⁶³⁴ In the same vein, IS' utility as pressure point on Saudi Arabia and the other Sunni moderate powers would not have been amiss in Tehran. As deputy chief of Iran's Armed Forces General Command Headquarters Gen. Ali Shadmani suggested, 'Tomorrow, [Islamic State] might appear in Saudi Arabia. They are not controllable'.⁶³⁵

b. Reparative diplomacy: 'heroic flexibility' over Iran's nuclear program

The resumption of nuclear talks under President Rouhani was arguably the clearest indicator of a grand strategic about-face in this period. Putting aside the shadow war between Iran and the US and Israel, the impact of international economic sanctions on Iran's already mismanaged economy coincided with the turnaround in the nuclear dossier, evidence of which was clear – at the declarative level at least – in both Rouhani's electoral campaign and Tehran's subsequent bottom-line emphasis on the *lifting of all sanctions* (and not merely its agreement to revive negotiations).⁶³⁶ An accurate assessment of the impact of sanctions is tricky and in any case beyond the scope of this work,⁶³⁷ although the precipitous decline of the Rial by 56% throughout all of 2012-13 and a 5% contraction in Iran's GDP in 2013 alone provide

counselling an 'unbiased understanding of Islam', 21 January 2015 <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/ndata/news/28731/index.html#en>

634 Jay Solomon & Carol Lee, 'Obama wrote secret letter to Iran's Khamenei about fighting Islamic State', *WSJ*, 6 November 2014 <http://www.wsj.com/articles/obama-wrote-secret-letter-to-irans-khamenei-about-fighting-islamic-state-1415295291>; As Vali Nasr has also noted, 'the U.S. strategy in Iraq has been successful so far largely because of Iran', cited in Helene Cooper, 'U.S. strategy in Iraq increasingly relies on Iran', *NYT*, 5 March 2015 http://www.nytimes.com/2015/03/06/world/middleeast/us-strategy-in-iraq-increasingly-relies-on-iran.html?emc=edit_th_20150306&nl=todaysheadlines&nliid=65669776&_r=0

635 'Iranian commander elaborates on country's military power, regional developments' (originally in Persian), 25 April 2015, *Fars News* via BBC Monitoring Trans Caucasus, 25 April 2015.

636 Thomas Edbrink and Mark Landler, 'Iran said to seek a nuclear accord to end sanctions', *NYT*, 19 September 2013 <http://www.nytimes.com/2013/09/20/world/middleeast/iran-said-to-seek-a-nuclear-accord-to-end-sanctions.html>; 'Iran admits that oil sanctions are having a brutal effect', *AFP*, 7 January 2013 <http://www.businessinsider.com/irans-oil-exports-have-dropped-by-forty-percent-in-the-last-nine-months-2013-1>

637 For one assessment, see Kenneth Katzman, 'Iran sanctions' (Washington, D.C.: CRS, 21 April 2015), especially 47-59 <https://www.fas.org/sgp/crs/mideast/RS20871.pdf>

telling indicators.⁶³⁸ What is nevertheless certain is that the connection between failing socioeconomic performance and regime instability in Egypt, Tunisia and elsewhere, and inversely the relative political stability in the more affluent Gulf states could not have gone unnoticed in Tehran. Worse for Iran, oil prices spiraled downwards after June 2014 and halved at a six-year nadir of about \$50 per barrel in January 2015,⁶³⁹ artificially suppressed by Saudi Arabia's refusal to reduce supply in order to both maintain market share and pressure Iran. While Iran has managed in recent years to balance out its revenue basket by increasing non-oil exports (cars, petrochemicals, carpets, food stuffs), this nonetheless forced the government to revise its 2015 budget by slashing oil price projections from \$72 to \$40 per barrel, and accordingly, projected gross oil revenues from approximately \$34 billion to \$19 billion.⁶⁴⁰ Additionally, the Rouhani administration had to backtrack on a number of fiscal policies such as development spending, public sector salary hikes as well as tax breaks for the various state enterprises and foundations (including bonyads) to forestall significant budget shortfalls.⁶⁴¹

In November 2013, Iran and the P5+1 in Geneva signed the landmark Joint Plan of Action (JPOA), an interim agreement paving the way for a longer-term comprehensive deal aimed for within approximately 12 months.⁶⁴² The JPOA in effect reversed Washington's previous insistence that Iran be completely divested of an enrichment capacity. In April 2015, the negotiating parties in Lausanne reached a political framework towards a final deal.⁶⁴³ Finally, on 14 July 2015, after 12 years of negotiations (including 20 months in this round),

638 Ibid., 50.

639 For price movements, see Nasdaq, crude oil index, <http://www.nasdaq.com/markets/crude-oil.aspx?timeframe=1y>

640 'Vazir-e eghtesad: budje ra ba naft 40 dolari eslah mikonim' [Minister of economy: we are revising the budget to \$40 in light of oil prices], *Salam Khabar*, 25 Dey 1393/15 January 2015 <http://goo.gl/FzyBTR>; The \$34 million oil figure is calculated as follows: 72 (price per barrel) X 1.3 million (known barrels exported per day) X 365 (number of days per year); 'Outlines of 2015-16 budget approved', *IRNA*, 20 January 2015 <http://www.irna.ir/en/News/81472618/>

641 'Iran's government has few options to compensate for reduced oil income, increasing motivation for nuclear deal', *IHS Jane's Intelligence Weekly*, 5 February 2015 <https://www.ihs.com/country-industry-forecasting.html?ID=1065997806>

642 Full text of the JPOA, 24 November 2014, available at http://eeas.europa.eu/statements/docs/2013/131124_03_en.pdf

643 For the text of the Lausanne framework, see United States Department of State, 'Parameters for a Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action regarding the Islamic Republic of Iran's nuclear program', 2 April 2015 <http://www.state.gov/r/pa/prs/ps/2015/04/240170.htm>; note that Iran disputed this version of the text.

Iran and the P5+1 in Vienna inked the 159-page Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) which would effectively enhance detection efforts by pushing back the time required for Iran to produce a functioning bomb from about 3 months to a year. The JCPOA entailed decreasing Iran's stockpile of low-enriched uranium (LEU) by 98% to 300kg; reducing the number of operational centrifuges in Natanz by two-thirds to 5,060 first generation IR-1s; repurposing the additional 1,044 centrifuges at the Fordow facility purely for research; limiting enrichment to 3.67%; and neutering the Arak heavy water facility's capacity to produce plutonium – and all this for 15 years, although the reinforced verification regime would remain permanently.⁶⁴⁴

Iran's gains however stood out compared to the earlier baseline, itself having shifted from zero program to zero *indigenous* enrichment. Other than the phased lifting of sanctions (albeit only those related to its nuclear program) and the unlocking of some \$100 billion in frozen assets, the deal most importantly legitimized Iran's nuclear program thereby preserving its national dignity, and virtually guaranteed its status as a nuclear threshold state. Head Iranian negotiator and foreign minister Zarif noted that for the first time ever, the UNSC 'will give official recognition to a developing country's enrichment program'.⁶⁴⁵ A shrewd compromise allowed Iran to preserve all its physical facilities, that is the most visible aspects of its nuclear program, in exchange for *temporary* concessions in less visible fissile material and equipment components.⁶⁴⁶ Furthermore, instead of 'anytime/anywhere' inspections, the IAEA could only *request* inspection of highly sensitive military sites suspected of proliferation violations, which Iran in turn would have 24 days to consider and could challenge and even refuse. In addition, a late-hour concession facilitated by Russian and Chinese lobbying capped the existing UN embargo on the sales of conventional arms and ballistic missile technology to Iran at respectively five and eight years. Finally, the controversial question of Iran's past nuclear weapons research would still require a full reckoning from Tehran going forward, but would not impede a sanctions-removal deal at this pivotal point in time.

644 'Iran nuclear deal: key details', *BBC*, 14 July 2015 <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33521655>

645 'Iran nuclear deal: "99% of world agrees" says Obama', *BBC*, 15 July 2015 <http://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-33537634>

646 As the *NYT* put it, the US sought 'offers that kept the shell of Iran's nuclear program in place while seeking to gut its interior', David E. Sanger & Michael R. Gordon, 'Clearing hurdles to Iran nuclear deal with standoffs, shouts and compromise', *NYT*, 15 July 2015 <http://www.nytimes.com/2015/07/16/world/middleeast/clearing-hurdles-to-iran-nuclear-deal-with-standoffs-shouts-and-compromise.html>

By successfully negotiating the JCPOA, the Rouhani government temporarily traded a full-fledged nuclear program for the momentarily far more critical rehabilitation of its domestic economy. By securing a presumably binding deal with the UNSC's Permanent Five including the US, Iran relinquished maximal deterrence – assuming the veracity of its widely imputed military nuclear intentions – yet nonetheless staved off the encroaching threat of war and invasion and rendered any potential strike by Israel – whose prime minister called the deal a ‘historic mistake’⁶⁴⁷ – much costlier given the veneer of international legitimization. With the ‘nuclear front’ now more manageable for the foreseeable future assuming all-round adherence to the agreement, Tehran would be able to focus on regional developments of equally immediate consequence to its national security, if still greater import to its regional standing, even as it capitalized on improved domestic public opinion to roll back internal threats to regime legitimacy and survival.

One way to ascertain if Iran's recourse to nuclear negotiations wasn't merely *tactical maneuvering* is to examine the objectives they were meant to serve and their outcomes. As we saw, Tehran's shift aimed primarily at undoing the damage wrought to Iran's economy and by extension its capacity to match means with ends, and heading off the threats a deteriorating economy posed to regime security and legitimacy.⁶⁴⁸ Secondly, through negotiations, Tehran secured the retention of a core enrichment program, thereby locking in the country's status as a threshold state and potential tenth nuclear power – if one assumes this to be in step with its preferences. As we saw in an earlier chapter, halting at the nuclear threshold may well be the ‘Pareto optimum’ for Tehran in the delicate trade-off between security, power and influence. Recall that Iran's nuclear program had been two decades coming and in light of the efforts, far more sluggish than any nuclear-weapon state's documented path to the bomb. According to the program outline published by the Ministry of Foreign Affairs after Rouhani's electoral victory, Iran sought the ‘normalization’ and ‘gradual and intelligent resolution of the nuclear issue

647 Itamar Eichner, ‘Netanyahu al heskem ha-gar'in: ta'ut historit la'olam' [Netanyahu on the nuclear accord: a historic mistake for the world], *Yedi'ot Acharonot*, 14 July 2015 <http://www.ynet.co.il/articles/0,7340,L-4679671,00.html>

648 Some observers do not agree with this assessment, arguing that negotiations do not change Iran's nuclear objectives. See for instance Dennis Ross, ‘Iran will cheat. Then what?’, *Time*, 15 July 2015 <http://time.com/3960110/iran-will-cheat-then-what/>; Emily Landau, ‘The Iranian nuclear agreement is done. Now what?’, *The Globe and Mail*, 16 July 2015 <http://www.theglobeandmail.com/globe-debate/the-iranian-nuclear-deal-is-done-now-what/article25519272/>

while preserving the country's rights and scientific achievements'.⁶⁴⁹ Thirdly, at a time when the Sunni-Shi'a contention demanded no less attention and resources, negotiations would enable Tehran to better manage multiple conflict fronts, and even fragment enemy alliances. The MFA program quoted earlier sought 'a change in the global security environment by disrupting major power coordination and neutralizing Zionist-American efforts at building an international consensus against Iran', echoing Rouhani's own diplomatic stratagem between 2003-5.⁶⁵⁰ At the same time, Tehran's reportedly undented financing and material support to regional allies (prominently Damascus) not only underscored the importance of the sectarian struggle but strongly suggested the importance of economic rehabilitation to at least sustain this effort without prejudicing Iran's domestic economy.⁶⁵¹ At a time of little expected economic growth and a downward revision of oil revenues, Hooshang Amirahmadi noted that Iran's defense budget was to be *boosted* by 33% (of which two-thirds were earmarked for the IRGC and the Basij) while the intelligence budget would be increased by 40%,⁶⁵² even though this may also have been to mollify hardliners vis-à-vis a future nuclear agreement.

These three objectives, one might imagine, not only transcended tactical maneuvering but also constituted first order priorities if we define regime survival and preservation of regional influence as irreducible interests; a civilian nuclear program as a central element in Iranian identity, regime ideology and status aspirations; or as the case may be, an eventual military nuclear program as maximal deterrent against destruction of revolution and regime. Another incentive for negotiations was the anticipated tonic effect on China and Russia's backing for Tehran since the latest round of UNSC sanctions were enabled by both governments' non-vetos. Indeed, following

649 'Peygiri adi-sazi...hal o fasl-e tadrîji va hushmandane-ye mozu'e haste-i ba hefz-e hoghugh va dastavardhayê elmi-ye keshvar', Dr. Javad Zarif, 'Ruykard-e seyasat-e khareji' (emphasis added).

650 'Taghyir-e faza-ye amniyati jahani, shekistan-e hamahangi-ye ghodrathaye bozorg va khonsa-sazi talash-e sahyounisti-amrikayi baraye ijad-e ejma-e beynolmellali aleyhi keshvar', *ibid.* loc. cit.

651 Katzman, 'Iran sanctions', 48-9; Iran's financial support to regional allies amounts only to a low single-digit percentage point of its GDP or even its yearly budget. For one reckoning, see Patrick Clawson, 'How Iran's economic gain from a nuclear deal might affect its foreign policy', Policywatch 2452, *WINEP*, 10 July 2015 <http://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/view/how-irans-economic-gain-from-a-nuclear-deal-might-affect-its-foreign-policy>

652 Hooshang Amirahmadi, 'Rouhani's new budget offers pain without hope', *TNI*, 14 February 2015 <http://nationalinterest.org/feature/rouhanis-new-budget-offers-pain-without-hope-12249?page=show>

the April interim framework, Russia's President Putin citing progress in the talks announced he would unfreeze deliveries to Iran of five S-300 SAM squadrons originally contracted for 2009,⁶⁵³ although this also took place against the backdrop of an already year-long conflict in eastern Ukraine between Moscow and the West.⁶⁵⁴ On balance, as one commentator noted with perhaps little exaggeration, 'the Obama administration got what it needed' while 'Iran, however, got what it wanted'.⁶⁵⁵ Another, more wryly though with perhaps some truth, called the JCPOA 'a strategy paper that maps Iran's emergence as a regional power, with the full blessing – even support – of the United States and the international community'.⁶⁵⁶

653 Denis Pinchuk & Gabriela Baczynska, 'Putin says S-300 sale to Iran prompted by progress in nuclear talks', *Reuters*, 16 April 2015 <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/04/16/us-russia-putin-iran-idUSKBN0N72AF20150416>; 'Obama downplays Russia S-300 supply to Iran, 'jaws drop' in Israel', *Russia Today*, 18 April 2015 <http://rt.com/news/250833-obama-s300-iran-controversy/>

654 Gabriela Baczynska, 'Russia opens way to missile deliveries to Iran, starts oil-for-goods swap', *Reuters*, 14 April 2015 <http://www.reuters.com/article/2015/04/14/us-iran-nuclear-russia-idUSKBN0N40YX20150414>

655 Aaron David Miller, 'How Iran got what it wanted from the nuclear deal', *WSJ*, 18 July 2015 <http://blogs.wsj.com/washwire/2015/07/18/how-iran-got-what-it-wanted-from-the-nuclear-deal/>

656 Robert Satloff, 'What's really wrong with the Iran nuclear deal: crafted after major concessions, the agreement still has huge and potentially dangerous gaps', *New York Daily News*, 14 July 2015 <http://www.nydailynews.com/opinion/robert-satloff-wrong-iran-nuclear-deal-article-1.2292264>

7. Conclusion: discerning an Iranian grand strategy

The foregoing chapters constituted an attempt to sketch out post-revolutionary Iran's grand strategic trajectory. Because of the inherent epistemic challenges arising from an at best ambiguous reckoning of intentions and capabilities, I did this by instead examining grand strategic adjustments at clearly identified inflection points. Adopting neoclassical realism as a conceptual framework, I posited that these occurred in response to systemic imperatives (independent variable) but that an imposing complex of 'ideational-constitutive' and 'institutional-competitive' factors encompassing national identity, regime ideology, status aspirations, state interests, threat perceptions and elite interfactional bargaining (intervening variable) decisively, if perhaps not exclusively shaped and determined the substance and style of grand strategic choices (dependent variable). The empirical record, we saw, bore out our first two postulates.

At the first inflection point (chapter 4), exhaustion following the Iran-Iraq war, a domestic power transition upon Khomeini's death, and particularly the end of the Cold War order as well as the First Gulf War compelled Iran to reassess its uncompromising revolutionary ardor in favor of a more balanced calibration of ends and means. The rise of Rafsanjani the pragmatic conservative, arguably Iran's most capable figure then, shaped the nature of the rationalization process and signaled Iran's greater willingness to play by the rules of the international system. The rehabilitation and modernization of the economy topped the list of priorities and its implementation demanded cooperation with most industrialized nations, creating a form of pay-offs allowing Iran to an extent to drive a wedge between them and the US. Iran's internal balancing likewise required stability in its immediate environment, the Persian Gulf, which also meant détente with the oil-exporting GCC states and particularly Saudi Arabia. However, residual rejectionism and factional politics increasingly favoring the traditional conservatives led by Khamenei prevented the technocratic government from mending fences with the US, whose persisting regional military presence after the Gulf War became perceived as a threat. Rather than the gladiatorial approach embodied in

the human waves of the 1980s, Tehran shifted towards more ‘Byzantine’ means to secure its national objectives. Disavowing Khomeini’s absolute non-alignment policy, Tehran courted Russia and China as major power counterweights to the US, even as both collectively underwrote and bolstered its critical defense, nuclear and energy sectors. Rather than prioritizing resources towards a conventional military, Tehran invested in high-leverage and self-sufficient asymmetric capabilities including ballistic missiles, a nuclear program and a network of non-state regional allies, making up in deterrent capability for what it lacked in truly coercive capacity. Yet while it adopted a physical ‘line of least expectation’, it maintained an ideological ‘line of greatest resistance’ with respect to the US and particularly Israel, opposition to which remained inextricably embedded in its vision of an alternative regional, if not international order. Strategically costly as this was, the alternative – *détente* – would have proven politically anathema, thus setting a pattern for subsequent grand strategy making. Ideology, however, only played second fiddle to pragmatic cooperation in Muslim Central Asia, where Iran’s ambitions and influence were ultimately constrained despite the obvious systemic incentives.

At the second inflection point (chapter 5), September 11 and the subsequent Afghanistan and Iraq wars reshaped Iran’s entire strategic environment, creating both existential threats but also important opportunities. The initial symmetry of interests with Washington, especially in the wake of diplomatic outreach efforts by the reformist Khatami government facilitated unprecedented security cooperation in Afghanistan. But with a growing body of evidence suggesting Iranian support for terrorism and more crucially, state efforts to secretly enrich uranium and possibly develop nuclear weapons, Washington reversed course, amplifying Iranian fears of an imminent invasion. To defuse tensions, Tehran agreed to negotiations with the EU. Yet, as the US became increasingly bogged down in Afghanistan and Iraq, Iran’s own influence waxed in tandem with that of its regional rejectionist allies and from revenue windfalls accruing from rising oil prices. Having discredited the miscarried diplomacy of its predecessor, Ahmadinejad’s neoconservative administration presided over the country’s most assertive and confrontational FNSP since the revolutionary radicalism of the 1980s. In Iraq, irreducible Iranian security interests demanded the projection of influence and power and prompted a complex, multilayered strategy simultaneously bolstering the political process which favored the Shi’a majority, and hedging by means of fringe renegade groups pursuing a campaign of attrition against US forces. By pinning down and distracting US forces there, Iranian strategists eroded the prospects of a

concurrent US or Israeli airstrike on Iran's controversial nuclear infrastructure. During Ahmadinejad's presidency, the nuclear program transformed into *the* inviolate symbol of Iranian nationalism and independence, and held out the promise of maximizing Iranian power, influence and security at the same time. The unprecedented political influence of the IRGC moreover helped shape an environment favorable to the nuclear program. Tehran's nuclear ambiguity – developing two of the three technological components required for a bomb *and* insisting on the program's peaceful purposes – was a powerful source of leverage; yet, post-disclosure continuance ultimately incurred excessive costs, even to the point of jeopardizing Iran's national security. Finally, a perceived snub first by the US and then the EU pushed Iran closer towards Russia, China and India as well as a handful of likeminded but relatively inconsequential governments in Latin America and Africa, even if the rabidly anti-Western outlook of Khatami's successor also propelled this shift in alignment. The broad front that resulted tilted the diplomatic playing field more in Iran's favor especially vis-à-vis the nuclear standoff. Despite obstacles, ties with energy-insecure China in particular lay at the crux of Tehran's overseas economic logic, just as partial membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Council allowed Iran to set its external balancing strategy into a wider institutional context with a potential security dimension, even as it brought Central Asia back into Iran's strategic calculus.

At the third inflection point (chapter 6), the Arab uprisings which initially appeared to be an opportunity quickly deteriorated into bloody sectarianism with Syria's civil war, forcing Iran's deeper and more direct involvement in order to decelerate and reverse the erosion of its regional influence. The attendant rise of the 'Islamic State' and its spread into Iraq and surrounding countries exacerbated Tehran's threat environment, prompting a more visible Iranian (battle)field presence. Conversely, IS' highly graphic brutality placed Iran in a comparably favorable light, leading to debate over whether the US and the west shouldn't cooperate with Tehran. Amid all this, there was relative domestic consensus regarding Iran's external threats and the need to assert Iranian power and influence in the strategic contention with the majority Sunni powers, notably Saudi Arabia. During this period, the buildup in tensions over Iran's nuclear ambitions mirrored an escalation in cyber and kinetic attacks aimed at slowing down its nuclear program, as well as unprecedented economic sanctions targeting its critical oil and finance sectors in particular, forcing Iran to eventually address western demands that it demonstrate the purely peaceful nature of its program. In the course of the resulting negotiations, the incoming administration under Hassan Rouhani,

who as presidential candidate had pledged to resolve the nuclear standoff along with the sanctions, found itself confronted with growing hardline resistance, moderated only with the direct intervention of the Supreme Leader and other key establishment figures. Despite stringent material and procedural restrictions even in contravention of the Supreme Leader's earlier 'red lines', Iran ultimately secured the longterm legitimization of its enrichment program (along with its ballistic missile program) and its virtual status as nuclear threshold state. In the immediate term, Tehran's negotiations staved off the prospect of impending war, economic collapse and spiraling regime legitimacy in time to refocus its attention on the ongoing regional intra-Islamic struggle for power and influence – all of which cut right to the core of Iran's security and irreducible interests.

Do these empirical data then corroborate our third postulate, that there have been efforts to achieve greater strategic consistency of purpose, and that Iran's grand strategic adjustments ultimately reflect a relatively rational calculus of ends and means despite apparent inconsistencies at various junctures? Based on an exogenous reading that turns solely upon its irreducible interests, Khomeini's Revolution lives on after 36 years, the ruling establishment is still intact, and Iran's territorial integrity has not been violated since the 1980s. If we extrapolate the pursuit of maximal interests from Iranian rhetoric, the picture becomes murkier: Iran's ideological model has not yet found replication elsewhere at state-level; it is not a clearcut hegemon in its own backyard; and it certainly hasn't been recognized as leader of a pan-Islamic community of nations, let alone of a post-American global order. That said, it has come to be regarded as an indispensable actor both in the region and beyond, for better or worse, a fact reflected in the volume of work dedicated to understanding the country's international conduct.

From the late 1980s, Iran's strategic adjustments exhibited more conscious cognizance of its limited means in relation to its original totalizing ends, reflected in its recourse to a comparably more nuanced toolkit encompassing diplomacy, major power alliances, trade and economic (energy) leverage and pay-offs, foreign assistance, and cultural-religious outreach, alongside military force posture.⁶⁵⁷ In the bid to maximize its precarious security, Iran focused on expanding its influence and soft power in order to counter its isolation,

⁶⁵⁷ In studying strategic adjustments, Colin Dueck has suggested that these should include shifts in five specific areas: military force posture, alliances, foreign aid and assistance, and diplomatic engagement or disengagement. See his 'Realism, culture and grand strategy: explaining America's peculiar path to world power', *Security Studies* 14.2 (2005) 199.

increase its palette of options, and seek ‘situations of strength’.⁶⁵⁸ What little hard power it maintained it converted into deterrence – which Schelling called the ‘skillful *nonuse* of military forces’⁶⁵⁹ – comprising asymmetric and unconventional military instruments to hold adversaries hostage against the threat of regime change and invasion. Beyond reconciling ends and means, grand strategy requires identifying threats and opportunities, and here, Iran’s leaders have unquestionably proven responsive to systemic imperatives throughout the surveyed inflection points, pursuing self-preservation at the very minimum and probing avenues for self-aggrandizement where feasible. Part of this learning curve (even textually reflected in the decreasing number of strategic adjustments through the chapters) included deference to the overriding logic of ‘expediency’, and it is this internal ordering principle at critical junctures which attests to the flexibility imperative to the conduct of grand strategy.

On the other hand, there is much to be said about inconsistencies and seeming ‘irrationality’. Owing to domestic factors, Iran has been responsible for many of its own strategic conundrums. Ideational-constitutive elements including a rejectionism elevated to the level of state ideology, combined with the dominance of the traditional conservative establishment and a Supreme Leader whose fortunes have depended largely on hardline constituencies like the IRGC, have repeatedly provoked Iran’s own encirclement. If ideology has taken a backseat somewhat over time (consider that the Safavid dynasts took eight decades to tone down their zeal), intense factional struggles – often with recourse to ideology as proof of patriotism – still led to frequent internal contradictions, and not rarely has foreign policy been leveraged in apparently irrational ways to effect entirely rational changes in the domestic balance of power. The pull of path dependency then helps perpetuate this pattern of behavior. The result is that a perennial campaign to defend its legitimate interests has instead aggravated others’ threat perceptions, thereby intensifying Iran’s own insecurity and paranoia. One only need recall Iranian animosity towards Israel, Saudi Arabia and the US, and how those three have in turn come to dominate Tehran’s national security thinking. Self-inflicted strategic challenges have their historical parallels. As we saw in chapter 2, the great wall perfected by Ming Dynasty China was not necessitated by nomadic aggression per se; rather, the Mongols only intensified their raids when desperately refused diplomatic and trade relations by Beijing, which in

658 The term is post-WWII US Secretary of State Dean Acheson’s, cited in Brands, *Promise and pitfalls*, 26.

659 Schelling, *Strategy of conflict*, 9.

turn forced the militarily enfeebled Chinese to focus on static defense.⁶⁶⁰ Were it not for theatrical antagonism and gratuitous rhetoric which undoubtedly served domestic needs, Iran might have long ago acquired a mature nuclear deterrent (like the more rhetorically ‘disciplined’ Pakistan), integrated into a Gulf regional security arrangement, and transformed into one of the Middle East’s most dynamic economies and a super-regional landbridge for pipelines, rail and roads. But these of course remain hypotheticals.

The trouble with contemporary Iran then isn’t necessarily sub-optimal reconciliation of ends and means or the incapacity to respond to threats and opportunities. Rather, it lies in Iran’s persisting inability to transcend the vicious circle of self-manufactured challenges. In other words, Tehran may deter against regime change and war, but it has set itself up in a way that confines grand strategic maneuvering to responding, however adequately, to its *own crises*. ‘Iran cannot shape an order’, mused Shahid Beheshti University’s Mahmood Sariolghalam, ‘but it does have the talent for exhausting counterplayers’.⁶⁶¹ As it happens, these same counterplayers are often themselves products of Iranian policy choices. The foregoing work showed how a revolutionary theocracy intent on molding the world in its image was compelled by the shock of temporal statecraft to instead iteratively adjust itself, if not always optimally, to the flow of historical contingency. More importantly, it also demonstrated how a non-great power like Iran has, despite a limited margin of maneuver, harnessed national resources to negotiate the delicate line between war and peace.

660 Arthur Waldron, *The Great Wall of China: from history to myth* (Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press, 1990) 172.

661 Mahmood Sariolghalam, ‘Transition in the Middle East: new Arab realities and Iran’, *MEP* XX.1 (Spring 2013) 130.

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ABSTRACT

The present monograph examines post-revolutionary Iran's grand strategy by way of its adjustments at three key inflection points. The first spans the end of the Iran-Iraq war, the collapse of the bipolar order and the First Gulf War, along with internal structural changes following Ayatollah Khomeini's death (1988-91). The second inflection point encompasses the events of 11 September and the US invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq (2001-3). The third corresponds to the more recent Arab uprisings and the increasing internal and external pressures Iran faced over its nuclear program (2011-15). Given the epistemic challenges inherent in any reckoning of intentions or ends, as opposed to capabilities or means, a strict focus on the notion of 'grand strategic adjustments' instead permits an empirically-grounded analysis of grand strategy as opposed to a more sweeping but potentially speculative reading. In examining these inflection points, the author adopts Neoclassical Realism as a theoretical framework to structure the narrative, furnishing a systematic account linking systemic pressures and incentives (independent variable), via domestic filters (intervening variables), to final outcomes or grand strategic adjustments (dependent variable). Given the prominence and predominance of ideas and the structure of rule in the Islamic Republic, the focus of domestic factors specifically falls on the 'ideational-constitutive' (national identity, regime ideology, status aspirations and state interests) and 'institutional-competitive' (elite interfactional bargaining) aspects. The author concludes that while Iran's leaders have over the decades proven the capacity to both reconcile ends and means, and identify and respond to grand strategic threats and opportunities, they have ultimately yet to transcend the vicious circle of self-manufactured challenges.

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