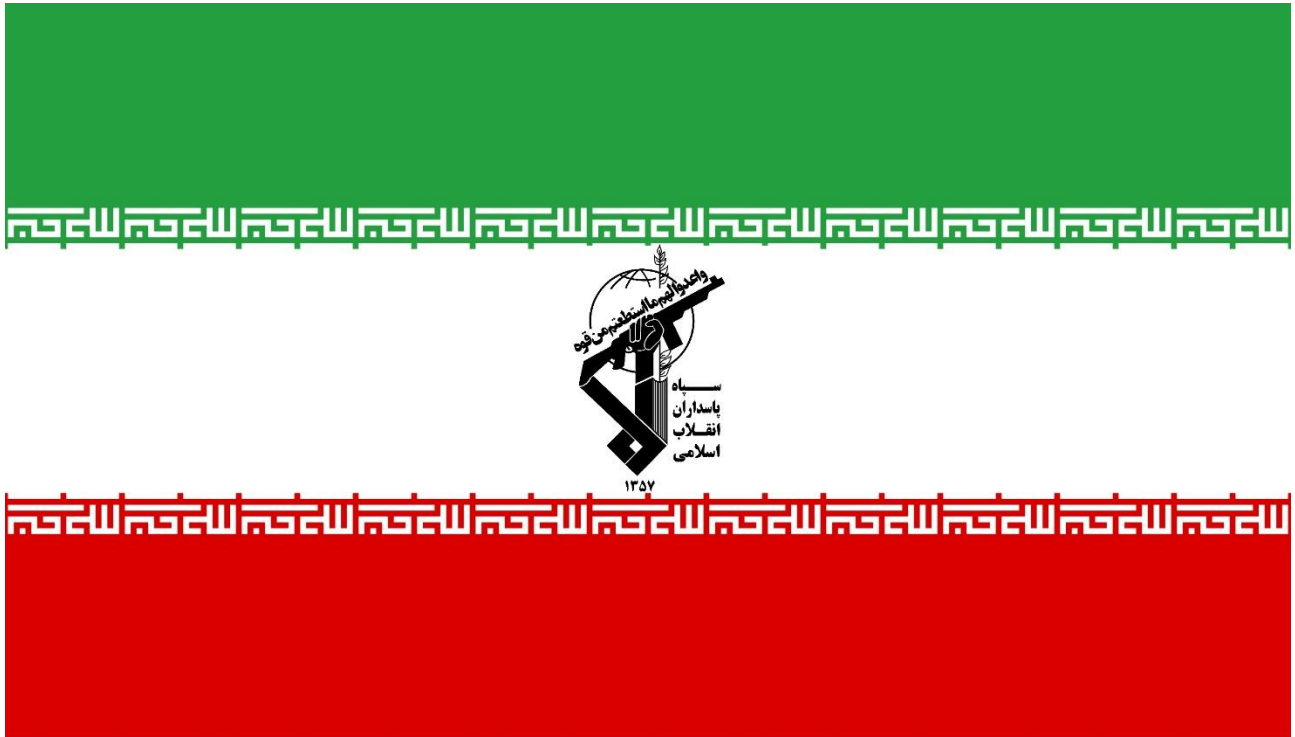


Neoclassical Realism and the Contemporary Foreign Policy of Iran



Morten Knøster

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Supervisor: Gorm Rye Olsen

Roskilde University, Global Studies

Department of Social Sciences and Business

Characters: 191.473

Student number: 52383



Roskilde University

Abstract

The project seeks to examine the Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy based on the hypothesis that four domestic factors of respectively leader images, strategic culture, state-society relations and domestic institutions bear a significant impact on the foreign policy conducted. The idea that structured the project and its hypothesis derives from the author's personal experiences from working at the Royal Danish Embassy in the Islamic Republic of Iran.

The project's theoretical framework consists of Norrin M. Ripsman, Jeffrey W. Taliaferro, and Steven E. Lobell's edition of neoclassical realism, Thomas Hobbes' social contract theory and Graham T. Allison's theory of bureaucratic interests. The methodological approach of deductive-theorizing is inspired by recommendations from scholars within neoclassical realism. The assessment methodology applied in the project is inspired by the Danish Defence Intelligence Service.

It finds that the four domestic factors each create the foundation for different parts of the foreign policy of Iran. The internal dynamics in the Islamic Republic necessitates the state to shift the foreign policy direction correspondingly to the individual domestic pressure that the factors which consequently cause Iran's foreign policy to seem inconsistent and two-sided.

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Executive Summary

This project studies the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran using qualitative methods and deductive-theorizing along with theories that associate internal dynamics with the external behavior of a state.

Its main supposition is that the Islamic Republic of Iran conducts a two-sided foreign policy owing to a conflictual domestic scene and this assumption has given rise to the hypothesis that four domestic factors comprise the source for this.

The first factor argues that the decision-making on the short term is affected by powerful, key individuals in the Iranian central administration. Their personal values, opinions and worldviews affects the direction of the foreign policy of Iran. It concludes that even the moderate decision-makers are supportive of the Islamic style of governance and Iran's Western-oriented foreign policy is solely used to reduce the internal and external pressures on the country with the intention to ensure that the clerical leadership maintains the power and control of Iran.

The second factor presumes that the strategic culture in Iran is the foundation for Iran's foreign policy on the medium to long term. The strategic culture is defined as a concrete, deeply entrenched understanding of security that affects how the general population perceives threats. It concludes that the strategic culture in Iran's revolves around the long history of the Persian Empire's independency and sovereignty, and a suspicion towards foreign powers' intentions.

The third factor concerns the relation between the Iranian state and its society and how this impacts the foreign policy on the short to medium term. The relation is assessed through the degree of harmony and concludes that the Islamic Republic is gradually experiencing a low degree of harmony, as the population increasingly demands less ideological and religious policies. The resolution necessitates moderate policies and a progressively rapprochement to the West.

The fourth factor concerns the institutional own-interests of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and assumes that the IRGC impacts the foreign policy of Iran on the short to long term. It concludes that the IRGC possesses a tremendous amount of power and influence which allows it to direct the national interests of the Islamic Republic and dictate the decision-making and policy-implementation in both domestic and foreign affairs.

Problem formulation

This project's main supposition is that the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran is conducting an inconsistent and two-sided foreign policy rooted in the domestic environment of Iran. This presumption has given rise to the establishment of one hypothesis:

The source of the inconsistency in the contemporary Iranian foreign policy is a manifestation of a conflicting domestic scene, which necessitates the state to respond to various domestic pressures. It is presumed that the domestic pressures consist of the following four different factors.

The first factor concerns key Iranian high-level officials' individual perceptions of national and international security. As these foreign policy executives direct the Iranian foreign and security policy, their personalized worldviews and perceptions bias the decision-making in the central administration.

The second is the strategic culture which states that entrenched beliefs and principles make a joint way of thinking that shapes decision-makers', the public's and societal elites' array of acceptable policies and their collective understanding of security, constraining the menu of foreign policy options.

The third factor is the degree of harmony between the state and the society. This factor presumes that the relation between a state and its society affects the decision-making and policy-formulation of the state. Specifically, the relations can be assessed as a degree of harmony between the two units, where a low degree urges the state to respond to domestic needs and a high degree gives the state a freer hand to respond to systemic needs.

The last factor concerns the impact of domestic institutions. It argues that governmental institutions influence and bias the decision-making and policy implementation to that of the institution's own interests, thus making a certain policy choice root in the satisfaction of institutional interests rather than the concrete needs of the state.

Theory

This part concerns the theoretical foundation for the project and seeks to outline the structure for the analysis. The theoretical approach is inspired by Steven Lobell, Norrin Ripsman and Jeffrey Taliaferro's 2016 publication of neoclassical realism and is applied as the framework for the analysis. Hereto, the project's author's own experiences from living in Iran has greatly strengthened the understanding that the domestic scene has the greatest impact on the foreign policy conducted in the Islamic Republic. For this reason, along with the necessity that the project conducts a delimitation of its area of analysis, the project has chosen to exclude an examination of the international system and solely focus on how the domestic scene affects the foreign policy.

Additionally, the theoretical framework's explanatory power is sought deepened with the implementation of the social contract theory by Thomas Hobbes and the theory of bureaucratic politics by Graham Allison and they respectively seek to complement the factors of the state-society relations and the domestic institutions.

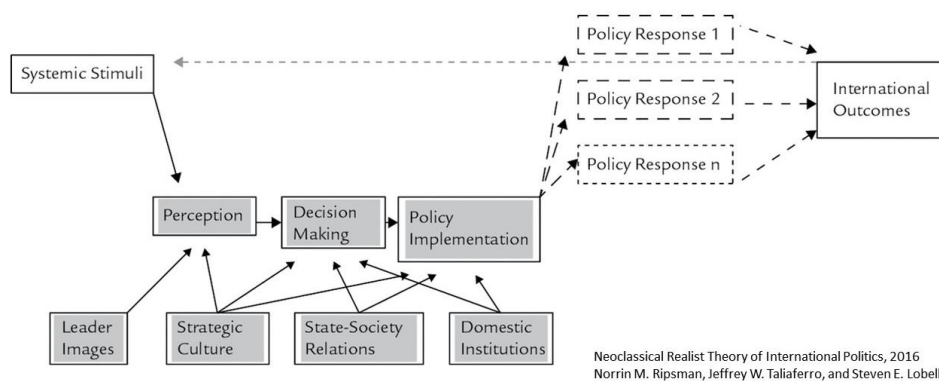
The neoclassical realist approach identifies perception, decision-making and policy-implementation as being the domestic processes which have the potential to be distort a state's foreign policy creation and its responses to systemic stimuli. Hereto, the four intervening variables, as seen in figure 1, all have a direct influence on one or more of the domestic processes and have various influence capabilities. For example, on the short term, the perception of the leaders can have a dominant impact on foreign and security policy decision-making e.g. during crisis situations. In situations where a state's response time is limited, and a decision must be made urgently, the foreign policy executives (FPEs) take up an executive role and are under these circumstances separated from the core of central administration, the society and the domestic institutions (Lobell et al. 2016: 59f).

The crisis decision-making has the logical consequence of constraining the influence from the other intervening factors like state-society relations and domestic institutions. However, the strategic culture, state-society relations and the domestic institutions factors are likely to have a higher influence in the short to medium term and the medium to long term, where a state's

institutions, society and culture constrain and form the construction of policy planning and grand strategy (ibid.: 60).

The Neoclassical Realist Model of Foreign Policy

Figure 1. Source: Lobell et al. 2016: 59.



Leader images

The first factor concerns the views of an individual decision-maker who is high positioned in the central administration of a

state. These persons are each labelled a foreign policy executive and are understood as key decision-makers who are specifically charged with the conduct of foreign and security policies. This variable can have a significant influence on the foreign policy of a state as it is able to impact one of the three critical intervening processes: the perception of systemic stimuli.

This variable underlines that an individual decision-maker possesses a set of core beliefs, images and values which guide his interaction with other states, the region and the international system. The core values, images and beliefs act as filters which determine how a leader would most likely view and assess information, hereunder what kind of information they deem worthy of attention and contrary, what they ignore. In a decision-making scenario, a FPE would determine another state's actions and the systemic stimuli through these personalized, psychological 'filters' which are likely to bias the FPE's decision. Lobell et al. elaborate and argue, that the leaders have a high tendency to hold on to images of their enemies and themselves, philosophical, ideological beliefs about politics, and instrumental beliefs about which strategies are most appropriate to achieve their interests (ibid.: 63f).

Strategic Culture

The second factor is strategic culture (also called collective expectations). Strategic culture concerns a set of inter-related beliefs, assumptions and norms and shapes the strategic understanding of the decision-makers, the public and societal elites. This common way of thinking defines what are suitable and unsuitable strategic choices and can be seen embedded in the state or society, in comparison to the leader images, which are more diverse and personal. These joint assumptions and expectations would become the collective way of thinking as an entrenched, strategic culture, thus possibly constraining a state's behavior and freedom of action, making the state likely to fail in adopting its foreign policy to respond appropriately to the systemic pressures.

The strategic culture of a country can also be constructed and reconstructed over the course of time due to major historical events like the imposition by foreign occupiers, wars or ideology. A country with a nationalist culture, which strongly supports and urges personal sacrifices for the nation and its people, can aid in resource mobilization and make it easier to recruit military personnel and convince people to do something they would not otherwise have done. Colin Dueck argues that a country's foreign policy can make more sense for the public if the policymakers refer to ideals shared by both the policymakers and the public. The goal is to make a certain policy choice more intelligible in terms of the beliefs, needs and culture the public has, as the public's understanding: *"(...) narrows down the range of acceptable policy options by specifying which policy courses are legitimate"* (Dueck 2006: 25).

For example, an overextension of a state's foreign policy for ideological reasons could spoil or ignore more important internal security concerns, thus threatening the state's survival. Overall, the strategic culture can limit and shape the state's policy choices, where culture, ideas, norms and ideology can influence and even determine whether a state properly responds to external imperatives and opportunities (Lobell et al. 2016: 66-70 & Kitchen 2010: 132).

State-Society Relations

The third factor concerns the relations between the state and its population and can influence how much power a decision-maker or a state possesses. The state-society relations are analyzed through two concepts: the degree of harmony and the dispute-resolving decision-making. The degree of harmony can be low (disharmony) and high (harmony) and revolves around popular demand. A high degree of harmony is seen when the public supports the central administration and agrees with the general direction of the country's foreign policy, giving the state a freer hand to conduct the foreign policy it deems most appropriate to reduce or adapt to the systemic pressures.

A low degree of harmony is seen as e.g. a lack of trust for the central administration and a lack of support for its domestic and foreign policies, which generates a risk that the policies conducted by the government respond to the domestic needs rather than the systemic needs, putting the state in a strategic disadvantage.

The dispute-resolving decision-making is understood as a response from the state to the society which seeks to affect the degree of harmony. Hereto, the dispute-resolving decision-making is deemed to be either positive or negative based on a subjective assessment of the concrete decision. As an example, if the relation between the state and the society is seen as disharmonious and the dispute-resolving decision-making is positive, it is likely to increase the harmony. However, this is not a guaranteed outcome: if a deep disharmonious relation exists, any kind of positive dispute-resolve decision-making might be seen with a significant suspicion from the society, thus lessening or negating the effect of the decision-making (Lobell et al. 2016: 61-71).

Additionally, the policy-making process would have a high degree of consultation and discussion if a country's domestic political scene is factionalized between two major camps and may end up in inconsistent foreign and domestic policies, as they are likely to be based on compromises and pragmatism. Lobell et al. notes that: *"(...) pursuing unpopular policies in such an environment could even threaten the security of both the regime and the state itself"* (ibid.: 72). It is thus understood that it is important for the FPE or the central administration of a state to bargain and create

compromises in the event of a discord between the state-society relations in order to ensure domestic stability and security, which would constrain the policy-making even more (ibid.: 72f).

Social Contract Theory

The project has chosen to implement the social contract theory by Thomas Hobbes to complement the state-society relations factor's explanatory power. The harmony between the state and society could be assessed through this concept as e.g. examining the society's level of influence on, or support of, the established contract and the policy conducted by the state that this might lead to. The decision to implement this theory is based on the hypothesis that domestic factors influence a central administration's decision-making, inspired by Randall Schweller's suggestion that underbalancing a foreign threat can occur for two domestic reasons. The first reason is that the preferences of the leaders are influenced by domestic instead of foreign concerns. The second reason argues that a concrete foreign policy decision bears too great a risk domestically to be realized (Schweller 2006: 11ff).

The classic version of the social contract theory refers to Plato's 'The Last Days of Socrates', in which it is described that the social contract is an unwritten contract between the state and the individual citizen. A citizen of a state enjoys the benefits the state gives to its people through their citizenship, e.g. security through paying taxes (Rowe 2010: 51ff). In Thomas Hobbes' modern version of the social contract theory, the logic of the social contract remains arguably the same: the rational individual citizen wants to enjoy the benefits of a state and the most prominent benefit being security and is willing to surrender some of its freedom and rights:

Right is layd aside, either by simply Renouncing it; or by Transferring it to another. (...) By Transferring; when he intendeth the benefit thereof to some certain person, or persons. And when a man hath in either manner abandoned, or granted away his Right; then is he said to be Obliged or Bound, not to hinder those, to whom such Right is granted (...) from the benefit of it: and that he *Ought*, and it is his Duty, not to make voyd that voluntary act of his own: and that such hindrance is Injustice (Tuck 1991: 92f).

Summarized, the individual wants to have a secure environment and is willing to exchange their

freedom for the establishment of a sovereign authority (the leviathan). The sovereign authority is then tasked with enforcing the social contract, ensuring security and stability on the basis of the citizen's guarantee of compliance with the laws of the established authority (Hashemi 2014 :194f).

Domestic Institutions

The last factor concerns the domestic governmental institutions, their respective power and their concrete, individual institutional own-interests, which seek to affect the policy-formulation and implementation within the central administration of a state to their advantage.

According to Lobell et al., these institutions: *"(...) determine who can contribute to policy formation, at what stage of the policy process, and who can act as veto players, using their power to block policy initiatives in order to reshape governmental policies"* (Lobell et al. 2016: 75). Additionally, it is understood that the domestic institutions determine the administration's authority and the degree to which the key decision-makers, the state leaders or the FPEs must consult and follow the requirements of key societal actors, which can be the military, clerical rule or powerful business elites (ibid.: 75f).

The project seeks to increase the domestic institution factor's explanatory power by implementing the theory of bureaucratic politics. The theory assumes that a state's policymaking process has many decision-makers with conflicting goals. The decision-makers each come from different branches of the government, e.g. the ministry of foreign affairs or a revolutionary guard. These individuals' preferences and beliefs are shaped by the governmental department they serve, and their policy analyses, recommendations and mindset are thus rooted in the specific bureaucratic interests of their organization or department (Bendor & Hammond 1992: 304).

In relation to this, Graham Allison argues that a certain decision does not necessarily revolve around what best serves the state's national interest, but a decision is based on the power and the concrete performance of the actors in a policy-making situation: *"(...) the chess pieces are moved (...) according to the power and performance of proponents and opponents of the action in question"* (Allison & Zelikow 1999: 256). The idea of governmental decision-making and policy creation thus comes down to idea of: *"where you stand depends on where you sit"* (Durbin 2018).

The actors in decision-making choose strategies and influence involved proponents and opponents based on different believes of which outcomes best serve their governmental department's interests, regardless of what best serves collective and national interests (ibid.).

Methodology

This section concerns the methodological foundation and considerations for the project. The project implicitly implements the author's personal experiences from living in the Islamic Republic of Iran. The author has consulted foreign and local governmental professionals and various Iranians with diverse socio-economic backgrounds, opinions and education throughout Tehran. Moreover, the author has visited key areas of political and historical interest like the former U.S. Embassy, the Museum of the Islamic Revolution and the Holy Defense, the royal Pahlavi family's former properties along with ancient Persian structures and small village societies. Owing to an objective mindset and neutral stance on the political environment in Iran throughout the various conversations and visits, the author intended to accumulate as many views, thoughts, ideas and information as possible in order to shape the direction and foundation for the project.

The qualitative research that has created the empirical foundation for the project has been executed through an extensive search on literature concerning Iran in order to determine which approaches and key questions the prominent scholars within the field encompasses. Additionally, the aforementioned experiences of the author have influenced the theoretical and methodological approach and likewise the selection of literature.

Qualitative research, deductive theorizing and epistemology

The qualitative research approach revolves around the use of case studies, where a small number of significant events or behavior of the Islamic Republic are selected. The methodological considerations behind this are inspired by Steven Lobell et. al, who state that since a neoclassical realist researcher is required to study a variety of factors, e.g. how policy choices are influenced by the role of idiosyncratic state institutions, the concrete researcher must lend himself to thoughtful, qualitative case studies rather than quantitative analyses with an extensive number of cases (Lobell et al. 2016: 131). Additionally, given that Iran is considered a closed state, the use of secondary sources and leading scholars and experts conducting state-of-the-art research within the field of contemporary Iran and its politics is considered a mean of understanding the casual logic behind Iranian decision-making and foreign policy:

Thus, for example, those studying contemporary China or Iran will have to rely on methods deemed appropriate by the leading scholars who study those states, including interviews with government officials, critical reading of government media and press statements, and the use of secondary sources (ibid.).

The methodological approach is additionally inspired by Thomas Juneau, who notes that the theory of neoclassical realism incorporates various marks along a spectrum, specifically generalizability/parsimony as opposed to accuracy/specificity. He adds that neoclassical realist research has two functions: explanatory and nomothetic. The first seeks to explain foreign policy outcomes and the latter contribute to theory building by propositioning and testing generalizable hypotheses. Juneau views case studies as adding to the development of more reliant, less parsimonious laws, where the explanatory function has greater weight (Juneau 2015: 20f). The project furthermore adopts a top-down approach which is recognized as deductive theorizing. Therefore, the project's underlying basis is the use of hypotheses, as the methodology and epistemology of neoclassical realism is considered competitive hypothesis testing using the aforementioned qualitative methods (Lobell et al. 2009: 20).

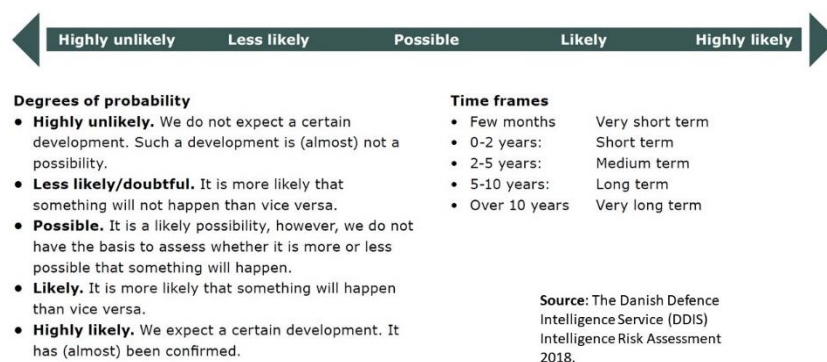
The epistemology of this project is inspired from Lobell et al.'s idea of soft positivism. They acknowledge that neoclassical realist analyses embrace key elements of positivism and based on this, they believe that theory testing is possible and essential. This epistemological direction accepts the idea that there is an objective world that a researcher can acquire knowledge of through the careful use of e.g. case studies, where the researcher can make contingent casual inferences about observable occurrences which can be verified through careful case examination (Lobell et al. 2016: 105).

[Assessment probability, time frame and objectivity](#)

Concerning the objectivity and subjectivity issues encountered in social sciences, it is acknowledged that problems of human subjectivity and interpretation exist which, as a matter of course, further complicates fact-value distinction and causes difficulties in defining and measure experiences and occurrences in international relations objectively. Therefore, the project has had

a focus on balancing the subjectivity by seeking and critically reviewing primary or secondary sources in order to obtain the furthestmost diverse representation of a certain case or observation as possible. For example, it would be desirable to review original documents concerning the Iranian decision-making in order to ensure that one understands and assesses the decision-makers' perceptions and beliefs as accurate as possible. However, since project's author does not possess the capability to review primary sources in its original language, there has been an extra effort to rely on an assessment of the rationale behind the decision-making, as recommended by neoclassical realist scholars (ibid. 135).

Lastly, the project assesses various outcomes, rationales and thoughts based on the authors personal assessment of their likeliness, occasionally complemented by a time frame. The majority of the considerations and guidelines behind the concrete assessment have their inspirational foundation in the standardized formulations that Danish Defence Intelligence Service (DDIS)



utilizes in its risk assessments.

The DDIS considers risk assessment as always containing an element of uncertainty, where the level of probability needs to be made clear to

ensure that the different analysts' assessments are consistent, but also between the concrete analyst's intension and the reader's interpretation (DDIS 2018: 58).

However, as the authors does not possess the same access to information (as well as the vast capacity difference), there has been implemented an adjustment in the project's degrees of probability and time frames. Concretely, the understanding that something is not (almost) considered a possibility and vice-versa, that an outcome has (almost) been confirmed has been excluded and the project has omitted the use of the very short/long term time frames, where it regards short term as 0 – 5 years, medium term as 5 – 10 and long term as between 10 – 30 years or more.

Analysis

The analysis section seeks to examine the four factors and addresses the hypothesis that Iran's inconsistent foreign policy is rooted in the conflicting scene, represented by the four factors. The analysis is divided into four sections which respectively represent the factors of: leader images, strategic culture, state-society relations and domestic institutions. Additionally, where each section is complemented with a sub-conclusion, which serves to consolidate its main findings.

Leader Images

This section analyses the first factor of the hypothesis and concerns the foreign policy executives' (FPE) perceptions of systemic stimuli. The section revolves around the supposition that the top-ranked decision-makers, policy creators and high-representatives of the state has a substantial impact on foreign policy which is founded on their core values and personal beliefs. The FPEs individually possess biased assessments of the international system and subjective views on how to appropriately respond to the systemic pressure on the Islamic Republic and the FPEs' power as core decision-makers gives them a personal and unique impact on how the Islamic Republic of Iran should behave in international affairs.

Mohammad Javad Zarif

Foreign policy executive and minister of foreign affairs, Mohammad Javad Zarif, wrote an essay in relation to his confirmation process in 2013 concerning his vision for Iranian foreign policy under the Rouhani administration. Zarif's essay reveals that his beliefs are rooted in the Islamic Republic's constitution, the history of the Persian civilization, and the country's stability and strength in contrast to the neighboring countries. He sees Iran's international role as first and foremost driven by its Islamic ideals and style of governance and along with its independence from foreign power, he personally believes that Iran has a potential to take on a regional leadership with a greater role in the global scene (Zarif 2014: 49ff).

The foreign policy goals for the Rouhani administration, according to Zarif, consist of creating new, and enhancing old, relations with neighboring Muslim countries and expanding the foreign policy to nonaligned states. Additionally, he sees the United States as a declining world power, where its

failing foreign policy based zero-sum games has reluctantly turned the U.S. into coalition-building with global and regional actors in e.g. the Middle East. Mohammad Zarif furthermore believes that Iran and other nation-states now possess a more revisionist approach to foreign policy, where the moderate administration's pragmatic approach, based on a balance between Islamic ideals and revolutionary principles and moderate, cooperative ideals seeks to put Iran in a regional and global better position of power. Zarif mentions that this is done through the combating of Zionism and the liberation of Palestine, but also through a non-proliferation perspective and a nuclear-free Iranian military (Zarif 2014: 49-57, Zarif 2013 and Zarif on YouTube 2013). Mohammad Zarif is, although considered a moderate, an undoubted devotee to the Islamic style of governance, its revolutionary ideals and principles. He seeks to expand these national goals to similar Muslim countries through Iran's foreign policy in the region and this makes his core values seem more conservative and traditionalist Islamic than moderate.

However, his moderate perceptions of corporation with foreign powers, a less threatening stance (e.g. no nuclear weapons) and a rhetoric of a friendly engagement with the regional countries indicate a perceived need for a pragmatic approach to foreign policy if a successful accomplishment of reducing the systemic pressures on the country are to be realized. This perception is found to be based on his wide diplomatic and Western-educated background, being Iran's UN Ambassador under former president (and now Ayatollah) Khamenei and having a Ph.D. degree from Denver University. It is argued that Zarif's old and good relations to Khamenei are the reason he holds the position of foreign minister: they share the same core ideals and beliefs and Zarif has proved himself worthy of the Ayatollah's trust throughout the years (Dehghan November 2013). One could hereto add that Khamenei has deemed Zarif as being the best choice to obtain solutions to the contemporary issues and tensions towards the Islamic Republic: Iran needs a renowned decision-maker with a thorough experience with Western diplomacy in order to best reduce the systemic pressure on the country.

Hassan Rouhani

Looking at president Hassan Rouhani, the moderate clerical president perceives the systemic stimuli as requiring the Islamic Republic's foreign policy to engage in constructive diplomatic

relations and confidence-building positive-sum games in order to reduce the external pressures on Iran (Dehghan June 2013). However, his devotion to the Islamic regime is unmistakable by various scholars within the field of foreign policy analysis of the Islamic Republic (Shanahan 2015: 2, Akbarzadeh Conduit 2016: 12 & 30 and Monshipouri & Dorraj 2013: 137). Owing to his clerical background, Rouhani was, like his minister of foreign affairs, supported by Ayatollah Khamenei to conduct a proactive foreign policy with the goal of reducing the systemic and domestic pressures on Iran. This gave Rouhani the political capital to manifest his moderate perception of the international system and as an example; this political capital is considered the reason for the successful nuclear negotiations between the Islamic Republic and the P5+1 (Colleau 2016: 50). Due to his clerical background and his support from the Ayatollah and his moderate perceptions and Western background, the conflicting views on systemic stimuli make for a two-sided approach to foreign policy (Galpin 2013).

On the one side, Rouhani criticizes the U.S. led engagement in Iraq and Afghanistan, noting that unilateralism only serves to more instability and a lose-lose situation, where he has a collaborative approach to resolving the conflicts in the two countries along with Syria and Bahrain. Additionally, Rouhani is stating that the Iranian identity is important to understand its demands for a greater position of power in the world. The national identity and the country's history are perceived as an important rationale for its unsatisfied position in the region. The same rationale is used in relation to Iran's nuclear-power program, which, according to Rouhani, is a peaceful project that seeks to diversify its economy. Rouhani hereto argues that a state's independency is an essential part of the national identity, where he stresses that that the Iranian sovereignty should be respected and foreign meddling should be a priority to keep out (Rouhani September 2013 & Rouhani December 2013).

On the other side, the moderate aspect of Rouhani and Zarif's revisionist foreign policy could encompass the reason for Iran's acknowledgement of U.S. interests in stabilizing Iraq and Afghanistan - seen through the Islamic Republic's acceptance of U.S. troops close to its borders. The moderate leaders' main interests are to have the U.S. disengage from the region, and they understand that this could be done by letting the American army operate close to the border, and

could possibly lessen the tensions through the cooperation on a mutual interest. Additionally, a lesser role of the U.S. in the Middle East might translate into a weakened Saudi Arabia along with its allies and through this, increase the potential for Iran to strengthen its regional engagement and its position of power (Monshipouri & Dorraj 2013: 145 and Emery 2014). Rouhani and Zarif's perceptions of neighboring Iraq and the U.S. are most likely shaped by the Iraqi invasion of Iran in the 80s and the U.S. invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan. These make them skeptical about the intentions of the U.S., but their moderate perceptions make them seek solutions to cooperate with the U.S. as long as this helps the Americans retrieve from the region. One could argue that if the hardliner decision-makers were in charge of the solutions toward this issue, they would most likely view the U.S. as trying to conduct a containment strategy towards Iran, and their responses may be more confronting, risking igniting a conflict.

Rouhani and Zarif's moderate perceptions of the systemic stimuli do also make them seek solutions to reduce the systemic pressures through soft power. This is seen in their attempts to expand Iran's appeal to different ethnicities, religions and populations e.g. through the official show of support to Iran's Jewish community, which contrasts the former conservative president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's perceptions and rhetoric (The Economist 2014). Kenneth Katzman stresses that Iran has in some cases reduced its support to the Shiite-Muslims in Azerbaijan in favor of the Christian Armenians in an attempt to demonstrate its moderate and peaceful policies and appeal to a broader diversity of audience and reduce some of the systemic and domestic tensions (Katzman 2017: 3 & Riedel 2016).

Overall, Zarif and Rouhani's traditionalist-Islamic core values make them appear as conservative and not far from other regime-insiders and decision-makers at first glance, but a closer examination of how they perceive the systemic stimuli indicate moderate solutions. They perceive the systemic stimuli as requiring corporation with regional and Western powers, a rapprochement to the West and a broader appeal to different peoples in their neighboring countries.

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei

Ayatollah Ali Khamenei holds the position of Supreme Leader of Iran, and his decision-making power overrules every other governmental decision-maker and FPE. He is, as a matter of course, devoted to Islam and traditionally conservative, seeking to ensure the survival of his Islamic style of governance (Shanahan 2015: 5). However, the need for political and perceptive diversity in the foreign policy executives is highly needed by the Islamic Republic today. The Islamic leadership is dissatisfied with Iran's position in the Middle East and perceives the international system as denying the Islamic Republic's opportunities for growing in power, as the country's intentions are assessed through a zero-sum perception. An increase in power is thus perceived a threat, especially by the regional Arab states and this necessitates a new, pragmatic approach to the foreign policy and a different set of decision-makers than those of the former presidency (Tabatabai 2019 & Juneau 2015: 146). The pragmatic view of the Ayatollah manifests as an apparent two-sided perception of the systemic stimuli.

On the one side, the Ayatollah perceives the external pressures as coming mainly from the Western countries. For example, Khamenei has heavily criticized Western countries like the U.K. for being the source of evil and misery and stating that: *"(...) the old British policy of 'divide and conquer' is seriously on the agenda of Islam's enemies"* (Mortimer 2016). Additionally, he has banned English from being taught in primary schools, rationalizing it as being the Western world's low-cost attempt of a colonialist expansion through the introduction of Western culture and thoughts to the youth (Oppenheim 2018). Concerning his perception of especially the U.S. and Israel, they are not considerably different. He has stated that the U.S. is the agent of international Zionism and blames the country for creating Sunni extremist groups like Islamic State. Hereto, he mentioned, in relation to the Islamic regime's 40 years anniversary, that: *"As long as America continues its wickedness, the Iranian nation will not abandon 'Death to America' (...) I recommend that one should not trust the Europeans just as the Americans"* (Reuters 2019 & Dehghan 2017). However, even though the Supreme Leader has stated that Israel would be destroyed within 25 years and has anti-Americanism as an entrenched core value and worldview, his standpoint towards the Western-backed nuclear deal was, on the other side, a bit different (Erdbrink 2018 & Dearden 2016).

His perceptions of the multilateral nuclear deal showed acknowledgements of Rouhani and Zarif's moderate efforts for a slightly increased Western rapprochement and some of his statements concerning the deal consisted of a promise that his country would keep its commitment (The Economist 2014, Akbarzadeh & Conduit 2016: 19 and Morgane Colleau: 49). However, as the nuclear deal was threatened by the Trump administration and the moderate efforts started to diminish, the Supreme Leader recalled his slight moderate views and returned to criticize the West, mentioning that he warned against trusting the U.S. from the first day of the nuclear negotiations and added: *"(...) in a televised speech that he did not trust Britain, France or Germany"* (Rahimpour 2018).

The Supreme Leader is thus seen as strongly opposing the Western world and perceives any kind of rapprochement with great doubt. His core values consist of Islamic principles and the negative perceptions of the West that have existed since the revolution in 1979. As they consist of a determined effort to continue an anti-Americanism narrative and the refusal to recognize the Israeli state, one could speculate that the Ayatollah seeks to export the Islamic style of governance its principles to the neighboring countries that share similar views and have experienced a Western-led invasion of their country. Additionally, when confronted with an opportunity to reintegrate Iran into the international system (in the arguably beneficial nuclear deal), he appears to maintain a two-sided position, possibly in order to remove the probability of him losing face should the opportunity and his trust towards the West be in vain and along with balancing the factional political scene, so that his Islamic Republic seems united to foreign and domestic actors.

[Qassem Soleimani](#)

Qassem Soleimani is the commander of the IRGC's Quds-Force, which is under the command of the IRGC and functions as a foreign engagement unit, actively operating in especially the regional countries of Iraq, Lebanon, Afghanistan and Syria. What is particularly interesting in examining this FPE is the reputation he holds. Qassem is known as a shadow commander, the most powerful general in the Middle East and a de-facto foreign minister, widely assumed to have the control of the regional foreign policy because of his direct, unprecedented access to the Supreme Leader as an advisor (Rubin 2017, Soufan 2018: 2 & Chulov 2011).

Soleimani has received praise from the Iraqi prime minister at the world economic forum in 2015, mentioning him personally as an ally of Iraq and moreover, the U.S. State Department has described Soleimani's power as: *"(...) the point man directing the formulation and implementation of [his country's] Iraq policy, with authority second only to [Supreme Leader Ali] Khamenei"* (Zhdannikov 2016 & Alfoneh July 2011). Inside the Islamic Republic, Qassem Soleimani has taken on an increasingly public role in Iran to legitimize the IRGC's expanding engagement in domestic and foreign affairs. Furthermore, his popularity among the population has brought many speculations about him as a potential presidential candidate (Soufan 2018: 1 & Naji 2015).

Soleimani has, exceptionally among other leaders, been titled a living martyr of the revolution by Ayatollah Khamenei, where he, as a matter of course, shares the same perceptions and core values as Khamenei and the other faithful conservatives and regime leaders (Alfoneh March 2011). He perceives Israel as an illegitimate Zionist regime, which conducts destabilizing and aggressive activities in the region. Qassem has hereto accused the U.S. of preserving the Islamic State in order for the Muslims in the Middle East to continuously relying on U.S. support and aid, where he has stated that U.S. is: *"(...) the chief propagator of injustice and oppression in the world"* (Karami 2015 (1), Segall 2014 & Tasim News 2018). Specifically, he has stated a clear opposition towards the U.S., regarding their Middle Eastern engagements in the past 20 years a failure and has even mentioned that his Quds-force is the match of the U.S. presence in the Red Sea (Dehghan & Wintour 2018).

Qassem Soleimani has a clear vision of his enemies and is, based on his conservative and anti-Western core values, determined to continue the fight against a perceived Western oppressor of the Muslims in the Middle East. This is seen in his different engagements throughout the Middle East. In the regional neighborhood, Qassem has had the responsibility to implement the values and principles of the Islamic Republic and Ayatollah Khamenei. For example, he is regarded as having enabled the Syrian president Bashar al-Assad to secure his regime, aiding Hezbollah in their fight against Israel and strongly influencing the Iraqi domestic scene to Iran's advantage through Shiite militias.

Qassem is also reckoned as supporting the Houthi rebels in Yemen and their fight against domestic control and their mutual ambition of diminishing Saudi-Arabia's regional influence (Dennis Ross 2018).

This active regional engagement is seen as the manifestation of his and the Islamic Republic's core values and principles of anti-Americanism, anti-Israel and to promote the regime's appeal by showing that Iran and its allies are undefeatable and strong. This also seeks to promote the attractiveness of its style of governance through supporting countries and Shia minorities that share similar values, which is likely to have a return on investment in the likes of e.g. economical or military support in the medium to long run (ibid.).

Mohammad Ali Jafari

Mohammad Ali Jafari is the chief of the IRGC and Qassem Solemani's superior and holds the responsibility for the security of the Islamic Republic. With the vast amount of military and economic power the IRGC holds (examined in detail in the domestic institutions chapter), he is seen as being a key regime-insider and FPE whose core values and perceptions of international stimuli quite possibly direct a large amount of the Islamic Republic's policies internally and externally.

As for his worldviews, Jafari is considered a conservative hardliner, unrelentingly faithful to the Islamic Republic and its revolution. He is profoundly against any kind of reformation of the Islamic Republic, where he has even threatened the reformist president Khatami in 1999 with a military coup, should the president attempt to carry on with his reformist policies and agenda (Mehr News 2019 & Nader 2013). Jafari shares the same traditionalist-conservative core values as Khamenei and Soleimani and especially towards Israel, where he has declared that the Islamic Republic and its supporters are going to fight to the end to destroy Israel. In addition, his rhetoric towards the Israel has been exceptionally degrading, calling the country a shameful and cancerous tumor, where he threateningly adds that a war between the countries seems ever more likely to occur: *"This [war] will eventually happen as the [Islamic] revolution is moving rapidly towards its goals, and they cannot tolerate this"* (Naji 2015, Hurriyet 2012 & Mehr 2019).

The critical perceptions towards the West bias Jafari's perception of the external and internal stimuli in the direction of a traditionalist-Islamic and conservative view. This perception is also very likely to be rooted in the institutional interests of the IRGC and is analyzed in the domestic institutions section. An example of his biased worldview is his statement concerning the terrorist attack that killed 11 IRGC commanders, where he with great confidence blamed Western actors: *"Behind this scene are the American and British intelligence apparatus, and there will have to be retaliatory measures to punish them"* (Slackman 2009). Additionally, his traditionalist-conservative perceptions are seen in his dedication for the Iranian foreign policy to revolve around an export of the Islamic revolution to the neighboring countries, mentioning that this also prevents the expansion of the Zionist regime regionally (Fars News Agency 2014). His perception of the regional dynamics is influenced by his faith to Islam and the Islamic republic, where he has stated that: *"With all of our ability, we will properly guard the principles, values and achievements of the Islamic Revolution, and we will never allow those opposed to this divine path to pave the way for the enemy"* (Karami 2015 (2)).

The perceived images of his core enemies, the U.S.A. and Israel, make him unwilling to hold diplomatic talks with the U.S. (mentioned as 'the great Satan') and prepared to take concrete action that affects their allies, e.g. blocking the strategic Strait of Hormuz (PressTV 2018 & Sharafedin 2018). One could speculate how far Jafari is willing to go, should the opportunity to block the important Strait appear, as the opposition from the regional Sunni Muslim states along with their Western allies could threaten the Islamic Republic excessively.

Overall, it seems evident that Jafari, as the commander of the strongest army in Iran, is biased against the Western world and assessments rooted in these anti-Western perceptions of the international system might help explain the Islamic Republic's active engagement in conflicts where the Arab/Sunni neighbors and their Western allies are on the opposing side. Jafari's extremely confrontational rhetoric and critical view of the Western world might also explain why Khamenei seeks moderate decision-makers with less confrontational rhetoric and perceptions.

Sub-conclusion

This section sought to examine the first factor of the hypothesis and how high-ranked decision-makers' values and personal beliefs shape their perceptions of the international system along with what they consider the ideal approach to diminish the systemic pressures on Iran. The section has one main finding in relation to this:

The core, high-ranked decision-makers' values and personal beliefs are found to have an impact on the direction of the Iranian foreign policy in relation to e.g. the nuclear deal and Iran's regional engagement. However, the considerable different perceptions of systemic stimuli and the diverse assessments of how to appropriately diminish the systemic pressure on Iran makes for a disunity among the leaders and consequently leads to an inconsistent foreign policy.

Specifically, Hassan Rouhani and Mohammad Zarif share a significant portion of the same core values as conservative decision-makers like Khamenei, but despite this, they perceive the appropriate response to the pressuring systemic stimuli as requiring the Islamic Republic to engage in a rapprochement to the West together with a less confrontational foreign policy and rhetoric. This is disputed by the conservatives' perception of the systemic pressure. They perceive the appropriate response as consisting of a more confrontational foreign policy and rhetoric along with an active engagement in the neighboring countries.

Further adding to the incoherent foreign policy is the Supreme Leaders' two-sided approach to the foreign policy in order to lessen the systemic pressures on the Islamic Republic. Even though his core values consist of conservative anti-Western views, he initially supported the moderate-endorsed nuclear deal and bestowed trust upon their Western rapprochement. However, his endorsement vanished after the U.S. withdrew from the deal and his perception of the international system and the West receded to the conservative's confrontational approach and anti-Western rhetoric.

Strategic Culture

This section concerns the second factor of the hypothesis, which presupposes that the strategic culture of a state impacts its foreign policy. This section thus examines how the Iranian societal and governmental actors' inter-related beliefs and common understandings of international security, their historical experiences and ideology shape the strategic culture of the Islamic Republic and its various impacts on the foreign policy of Iran. The section is hereto divided into three parts.

The first part concerns the strategic culture around the time of the Shah's rule and the revolution in 1979 and seeks to examine how the collective way of thinking about independence enabled the establishment of the Islamic Republic and a revolutionary strategic culture and foreign policy. The second part analyzes the current strategic culture and seeks to assess whether there is a change or a continuation in the strategic culture of Iran, where the last part consists of a conclusion that summarizes the main findings.

The American king and the revolution

This section explores the strategic culture around the time of the Shah and the revolution. It argues that Iranian sovereignty and independence is the foundation of the inter-related beliefs shared by the majority of the Iranian decision-makers and population. These were exploited by the clerical elite in order to establish a new, strategic culture based on anti-imperialism, the fight against foreign influence in its decision-making processes and the Persian-Islamic history.

Concerning the years of 1970s that defined the Shah's last ruling period, David Farber stresses the volatile, negative perception the Iranians had of Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi as a foundation for a shift in their collective understanding of the West and their country's sovereignty. He adds that these negative perceptions go even further back with the regime change in 1953: *"At worst, Iranians believed American influence and power made a mockery of their national autonomy and desecrated their religious beliefs"* (Farber 2005: 37). This translated into an ascending anti-imperialism which had its roots in an inter-related belief of Iranian autonomy; the idea that the Iran is great on its own, without foreign interference in its societal, political or governmental affairs.

Additionally, the Shah had the vision of turning Iran into a great civilization, drawing connotations to its ancient history and made the case for a new, great position for Iran during his time of rule:

He aimed at making Iran one of the five conventional military powers of the world. (...) His popularly opposed status-of-forces agreement with the Pentagon seemed to many Iranians to be a return of the old capitulatory rights of foreign powers. Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini called the agreement 'a document of the enslavement of Iran'. Emblematic of the people's alienation from the Shah and the United States was the revolutionary label applied to the Shah, 'the American king' (Ramazani 2013: 342).

The title of 'the American king' fitted well with the traditionalist-Islamist population's view of the Shah. As mentioned before, the Shah was perceived negatively by the opposition which, according to Charles Cogan, consisted of fundamentalist extremists but surprisingly also moderates. Cogan underlines the factional political split during the time before the revolution, where the moderates and the fundamentalist extremists were fighting for the recognition of the same person: Imam Khomeini. He was the leading critic of the Shah, which revolved around his relation to the U.S. The Shah was quoted for saying that he owes his throne to the Americans and this was directly in opposition to the revolutionary mindset and the Iranians' growing demand for autonomy (Farber 2005: 37 & Molotsky 2000).

The Shah was viewed as the manifestation of foreign influence, where his policies were perceived as directed by Western and American interests and his means to establish a 'Great Persia' lacked the foundation of the ancient Persian Empire: sovereignty and independence from foreign influence (Momeni 1980: 292). In order to suppress the opposition, the Shah looked to modernize Iran. However, the means were once again lacking the national identity: Pahlavi looked towards the Western countries in order to draw inspiration and support and not at the Middle Eastern region or the Islamic world. This, coupled with his mission to greatly reduce the threat to his throne from the Islamic clergy as much as possible, made his policies and his perceptions increasingly lacking the Persian identity, which also had a long history of Islamic tradition and

religion. Hereto, the lack could explain why even the moderate Iranians were supportive of Ayatollah Khomeini and his Islamist, revolutionary perspectives (Farber 2005: 61 & Adib-Moghaddam 2005: 274).

Contrary to what one might derive from the aforementioned, Ramazani notes that the historical Persian argument was correspondingly used by the Shah and his father: *"(...) the Shah, like his father, trumped the Islamic aspect of Iranian political culture. They both tried to legitimize their unpopular regimes by claiming the mantle of the sixth-century BC monarch Cyrus the Great"* (Ramazani 2013: 342). Islam is an important part of the Persian culture and history, and the opposition to the powerful Muslim clergy only adds to the Shah's own unpopularity. This is something that the most prominent critic of the Shah's rule, the highly religious Ayatollah Khomeini, exploited by attempting to shift the common understanding of the Shah as being against the Iranian people's interest: *"Any agreement that is concluded with these American capitalists and other imperialists is contrary to the will of the people and the ordinances of Islam"* (Farber 2005: 36). The Islamic clergy did naturally see the Shah as a direct threat to their power inside Iran, and one could argue that they sought to safeguard their own interests of power and control first rather than the population's, even though they arguably appeared to fight for them.

Nonetheless, the clergy brought up a strong argument in order to successfully convince the population to support the Islamists: Iran is being ruled by foreigners. Khomeini knew that the population's and the decision-makers' collective way of thinking about security and politics had its foundation in the long history of the Persian Empire's independence. He thus pointed out the lack hereof and exaggerated the belief of foreign rule over the country in order to build up support for his and the clergy's own interests. Iran has for more than two thousand years been known as Persia and ruled over an enormous territory and the country has for hundreds of years not been ruled over or occupied by another state or empire. Mehrdad Mashayekhi notes that the Persian history makes the core for an ancient Iranian strategic culture consisting of a common suspicion and skepticism of outsiders and foreign nations:

Major invasions by Greeks (334-330 BC), Arabs (seventh century), Turks (eleventh century), and

Mongols (thirteenth century) contributed to the formation of a foreign-suspicious collective memory; a mass psychological defence mechanism that helped Iranians to adjust themselves to the alien forces undermining their collective identity (Mashayekhi 1992: 85).

The sovereignty and independence of Iran is thus an essential part of the country and its people's inter-related beliefs and a central part of how the Iranians have viewed the international system and neighboring states since antiquity. With the Ayatollah and the clergy being well-aware of the long history of Iranian sovereignty and power, they sought to bring out the ancient, collective suspicion towards foreign nations in the Iranian people by stressing that the country is under foreign rule. Considering the Shah's relations with the U.S. and his pro-Western views, this approach was appropriate for the obtaining the clerics' goal.

Ayatollah Khomeini and the revolutionary, anti-imperialistic mindset won and had an enormous revolution in 1979. The revolution was the definite beginning of the revolutionary style of governance and mentality that entered the realm of international politics in 1979 along with the Iranian society and central administration. To put the revolution in perspective, the Iranian revolution had a massive civilian participation at 10% of the population, where in comparison, the French revolution had around 2% and the overturning of Soviet communism had only less than 1% (Kurzman 2004: viif).

With the massive participation, one can argue that the revolutionaries had succeeded in assessing the common way of thinking and used a rationale that fitted the mindset and identity of the population. In order to continuously bolster the domestic support to the regime's and the revolutionaries' foreign policy, Nader Hashemi adds that: *"As a result [of] Iranian policies clashing with Western policies since the 1979 revolution, [red.], the Iranian regime feels entitled to spin a David and Goliath narrative around the theme of anti-imperialism"* (Hashemi 2014: 27). Also, the regime tried to get other Muslim countries' support by depicting itself as the vanguard Western imperialism (ibid.).

In relation to this, Arshin Adib-Moghaddam discusses what he calls the *'foreign policy culture'*. He

argues that a transformation of the Iranian state identity took place around the revolution. This made a shift from pro- to anti-Western worldviews of the foreign policy culture and included the belief of an independent Iran without any foreign influence. However, this did in return make Iran more isolated from the international system (Adib-Moghaddam 2005: 266 & Farber 2005: 38).

Moreover, Shahram Akbarzadeh and Dara Conduit state that the new Islamic-Iranian regime advocated exceptionally strong resistance towards foreign powers. Its motto revolved around independence, freedom, and the Islamic style of governance, where they add that Iran aspired to achieve fundamental economic, cultural and economic independency around the revolution (Akbarzadeh & Conduit 2016: 35). With an Iran consisting of collective beliefs of pro-independence and non-foreign influence, the foreign policy of Iran saw a shift towards self-reliance and anti-Americanism. Iran got the freedom from foreign influence, but got isolation, a heavily damaged relation to the U.S. and a suffering economy in exchange.

However, they furthermore state that the decision-makers in Iran saw a liberation of the decision-making processes in the central administration in Iran after the revolution. This was highly sought after by the officials at that time, and they have since then actively defended this independence (ibid.). The support of the population and the success in implementing a revolutionary strategic culture in the Islamic Republic meant that the leaders of the revolution now got the position as the decision-makers tasked with the conduct of foreign and domestic policy in the country. Anti-imperialism was now the root for the state's policies and the clergy could now proclaim independency from foreign influence in their decision-making and policy-implementation.

Therefore, in order to further understand how the new, revolutionary decision-makers embedded their powers and ideas of Islamic-Iranian self-determination and made it a definitive part of the Iranian society, one needs to take a closer look at the new Iranian constitution. The revolutionary constitution of 1979 heavily focuses on the independence of the Iranian nation and Islam, where it is written that:

The complete elimination of imperialism and the prevention of foreign influence [and] all round

strengthening of the foundations of national defence to the utmost degree by means of universal military training for the sake of safeguarding the independence, territorial integrity, and the Islamic order of the country (Iran Chamber, article 3).

It furthermore underlines the importance of striving to obtain self-sufficiency in technology, military and agricultural domains and stresses the focus on expanding and strengthening an Islamic brotherhood among all people and that the foreign policy should be based on Islamic criteria (ibid. article 13-16). The constitution has a substantial focus on ensuring that Iran is independent, and the rationale behind this is the belief that the more Iran can be independent from others, the more it can tend Iranian national interests rather than having to make compromises and strike deals with foreign countries. One could further support this argument with assuming that this is also an attempt to invoke a collective perception of 'independency-above-all', which focuses on the importance for cooperation and support for, and from, the public to this revolutionary style of governance and this anti-imperialistic worldview. The core idea is that the Iranian decisions and policies are based on the Iranian population's joint and widespread perceptions and interpretations of the country's history and these should shape the essence of the national interests of the Islamic Republic.

According to Ali Alfoneh, the revolutionary foreign and security policy of Iran should be seen as three phases, where the first one (1979-1989) concerns freedom of alliance: Iran wants to be neither a Soviet nor an American ally - Iran strives to be autonomous. Also, it is a common position among the revolutionary leaders and supporters hereof, that other states and peoples in the region would enjoy a revolution that ensures independency from foreign powers. Iran therefore had a strategic culture which also focused on exporting its own revolution and revolutionary ideas to the neighboring countries (Kjær 2006).

One could ask, whether the threat is directed towards the country or the revolutionary regime itself. In the constitution, there was also a focus on strengthening and expanding an Islamic brotherhood among all people and it moreover stated that the foreign policy of the country should be based on Islamic criteria. This could be an attempt to create an Islamic alliance in the

region, and a note to the neighboring countries that Iran is a new, non-Western controlled Islamic country, ready to create or expand alliances across the region with similar minded Islamic countries. Eventually, the ideal outcome could be to export the revolution and the revolutionary ideas in order to acquire further legitimacy and power in the region, something that in the end could help the Islamic Republic to become a regional, Islamic leader against Western values, activities and power. Looking at the article 154 in the constitution, the focus on the Islamic Republic's style of governance as being superior is prominent:

The Islamic Republic of Iran has as its ideal human felicity throughout human society, and considers the attainment of independence, freedom, and rule of justice and truth to be the right of all people of the world. Accordingly, while scrupulously refraining from all forms of interference in the internal affairs of other nations, it supports the just struggles of the *mustad'afun* against the *mustakbirun* in every corner of the globe (Iran Chamber article 154).

Mustad'afun refers to the lower classes or *"those who are deprived of the opportunity to develop their full potential"* (Niaz 2014) and the *mustakbirun* as *"those who exalt themselves above others"* (Esack 2004). The Islamic ideals embedded and legitimized in the constitution tries to create a strong focus on the fight for the oppressed against the oppressors, much like the rhetoric used against the Shah and the United States. One could argue that this could be lucrative as a style of governance for other Islamic states, which all have been in some way under the influence of foreign, Western, powers.

Contemporary Iranian strategic culture

The former section sought to shed light on the strategic culture around the time of the revolution and found that the common understandings of the security environment manifest as a revolutionary strategic culture. This section seeks to analyze the strategic culture of today and seeks to clarify whether there is a change or a continuation in the Iranian view of security.

As mentioned earlier, Ali Alfoneh has divided the foreign and security policies of Iran into three phases and argues, that the second phase (1995-2005) is the phase of moderate politics. However, he only notes that Rafsanjani and Khatami each did not have much success in domestic politics,

but that Iran nonetheless managed to improve its relations to other countries during this period. Alfoneh's article was written in 2006, therefore he mentions the third phase starting from 2005, where one can assume that it continues until president Ahmadinejad's end of rule in 2013. He notes that this phase is the hardline phase, where the armed forces' power and influence in the political system in Iran grew with Ahmadinejad in the front.

Alfoneh mentions that about one-third to half of the seats in the parliament after 2004 has been taken by people with relations to the IRGC: a militarization of the political system in Iran. He says that the reasons for this, is the lack of Iran to reform itself political and economic, lack of listening to the population and a pressure from the neighboring countries: Afghanistan and Iraq. These two have been invaded by the arch enemy of the revolution, the United States, which itself is a part of the foreign pressure on Iran. One can assume that if the essential decision-making body of Iran has many people who has ties to the IRGC, there would be two points on how this can affect the foreign and domestic policies in Iran.

The first point is that the policies brought up for debate is likely to have an anti-imperialistic and confrontational, hardliner aspect as the IRGC-biased members take up this much space in the parliament. Additionally, bringing up anti-regime or counter-revolutionary ideas is likely to be perceived as acts of treason and possibly even as attempts of foreign influence, making reformist and Western-friendly policy recommendations less likely. Alfoneh stresses that the persecution of so-called 'counter-revolutionaries' was particularly present during the revolution, and as a matter of course done by the supporters of the regime (Alfoneh 2006). Since the constitution and Islamic style of governance is still in place today, these revolutionaries are likely to only have gained power since then.

The second point is that the policies implemented has without a doubt a pro-regime bias, since the Supreme Leader would not allow policies that disembed his or the revolution's power and the IRGC would be sure to enforce their legitimacy of protecting the revolution and revolutionary style of governance. The parliament needs to ensure that the policies implemented tends to the interests of the Islamic style of governance and one can assume that this is the reason that the

IRGC-tied members are in the parliament. Especially at the time where both Afghanistan and Iraq saw a Western-led invasion, the IRGC and the anti-imperialistic mindset from the revolution gave reasons for a sentiment that Iran could be next to lose their sovereignty and consequently they seek to counter a perceived containment policy.

The Iranian strategic culture is also influenced by the experiences from the Iran-Iraq war. The Iranian leadership found that Iraqi invasion was an illegal war and they saw that the international society supported the foreign invasion instead of coming to Iran's rescue. Moreover, Iran made a similar experience with the Iraqi troops' chemical bombing of Iranian forces: the international system was silent. It was only when Iran developed and retaliated the chemical bombings that Iraq stopped its use of chemical weapons (Alfoneh 2006). The Iran-Iraq war was with no doubt an event which is unlikely to be forgotten, especially by the participants. The historical event influences the perception of Iranian foreign policy executives and the population to this day, where the Iranian victory strengthened its decision-makers belief that the country has a natural right to be involved in the larger regional affairs (Schahgaldian 1994: 28).

Shireen Hunter also finds that the strategic culture seems to revolve around recognition of old Persian interests: *"What has often been interpreted as Iran's imperialist or hegemonistic behavior in the Persian Gulf has been nothing but an attempt to gain recognition for Iran's legitimate interests in the region and its right to be fully engaged in its politics and economics"* (Hunter 2017: 24). The decision-makers today remember the wartime and are still well aware that none of the Western countries supported Iran. The aforementioned collective understanding of Persia's greatness is still prominent: Iran won the war, and successfully managed – almost by itself, to push back the Iraqi invaders and win a costly and strategically unbalanced war. The Iranian decision-makers thus require recognition for this victory by getting its natural, historical share of the power in the Middle East.

Kamran Taremi argues that due to the wartime experience, the importance of ideology in Iranian decision-making declined: *"The end of the Iran-Iraq conflict meant that the regime no longer needed Islam to mobilize the people in support of the war (...) Tehran was now genuinely willing to*

cooperate with them to ensure Gulf security" (Taremi 2012: 389). However, the anti-Western stance in the Iranian leadership were still prominent: Ayatollah Khamenei were fiercely anti-American and relations with Great Britain, Germany and France were also in a bad shape. Today, even though the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic had become more pragmatic and less revolutionary, Taremi does not see a significant shift in Iran's foreign policy. He argues that the main reason for this is that the leadership in Iran is still heavily influenced by ideology (ibid. 391).

In relation to this, Mehrzad Boroujerdi and Kourosh Rahimkhani looked into the members of the parliament, with the aim to find IRGC-affiliated members and mentions, that: *"Overall, the numbers of parliamentarians with IRGC pedigrees at least doubled between the elections in 2000 and 2008. The elected IRGC veterans tend to pursue a hardline foreign policy agenda, although there are significant differences among them especially on domestic issues"* (Boroujerdi & Rahimkhani 2011). They further mention that the Guards held 16 percent of the 290 seats at the seventh parliament (2004-2008) and that *"Most of the former Guards were reelected in the 2008 elections. Besides former IRGC members, the seventh parliament (2004-8) and the eighth parliament (2008-12) have also included many veterans who fought in the 1980-88 war with Iraq"* (ibid.).

It is difficult to assess the precise power and influence of the hardliner faction that this could indicate. However, the fact that the tendency in parliamentary elections points in the direction of more Iran-Iraq war veterans being members of the parliament, one could argue that they are still likely to hold revolutionary and anti-imperialistic perceptions from that important moment in the country's history. This would sway the policy-making in favor of a defensive, anti-West and nationalistic view of security, founded in the Iranian fight for independence - something which Boroujerdi and Rahimkhani also finds: *"On policy, the veterans tend to be hardline on foreign policy, including the nuclear issue and support for Hamas and Hezbollah"* (ibid.).

Ali Alfoneh supports this view and mentions that the years around 2006 saw the Iran-Iraq war veterans having the positions of power and stresses that they do not give up Iran's security to international organizations. He also notes the experiences from 9/11 could affect the decision-

makers along with the North Korean regime, which is offered an opportunity of negotiation from the U.S. when it brags about its nuclear weapons (Alfoneh 2006 and Lee & Shin 2019). Looking at the decision-makers in the Iranian regime, one could further assume that the Iraqi invasion, use of chemical weapons, the invasion of two of the neighboring countries and negotiation opportunities for nuclear states makes the veteran decision-makers determent to adopt security policies that are based on a common assumption that Iran's survival and independence requires strong self-defense capacities and deterrence-capabilities.

However, as this common assumption might not be shared by the general Iranian population, the government have to implement methods of fear mongering to inflate the threat. John Mearsheimer notes that fearmongering is typically used in name of national security, where: *"Leaders (...) will exaggerate or 'hype' a recognized threat that is not causing much alarm outside of government circles"* (Mearsheimer 2011: 46). The goal is to create domestic support for what might otherwise be seen as illegitimate policy creating or get acknowledgment of policies not necessarily supported by the population.

Alam Saleh argues that this is what the current supporters of the revolutionary Iranian strategic culture makes use of: *"Tehran today tends to take an anti-imperialist stance in order to strengthen its national unity by exacerbating and catastrophizing over the real threats posed to it"* (Saleh 2012: 56). He further notes that this revolutionary strategic culture is bringing the regime into more isolationism, furthermore challenging the perception itself, the revolutionary style of governance and the revolutionary decision-makers: *"The revolutionary slogans, calling for independence from foreign powers, indicate that the struggle to maintain the country's national 'dignity' is arduous and challenging"* (ibid.).

In Iran's situation, the more the Western countries, especially the U.S., put pressure on Iran with sanctions, containment policies and assertive foreign policies in the region, the more fuel the fearmongering argument get to the advantage of the revolutionary leaders in Iran. The revolutionary decision-makers would strengthen their revolutionary mindset and seek to exaggerate the threat from the foreigners by stressing the threat to the Iranian independence.



Picture 1: Poster of the Shah and the perceived relations to the US and Great Britain. Source: author.

Moreover, the hardliners need a strong enemy in the region, thus making the enmity between Iran and Israel a rational enmity: the presence of a foreign enemy strengthens the internal unity between the many political fractions and mindset in Iranian decision-making. He sees the strategic culture as being revolutionary, but with the need of creating a common enemy to ensure a common line of thinking in the domestic political scene (Alfoneh 2005). One could complement the enmity between Iran and Israel with the American's presence in the neighboring countries: having a threat close by invokes the ancient suspicious mindset towards foreign powers.

This need is much required for the today's strategic culture. The revolutionary and independence argument around 1979 was much more legitimized than today since Iran clearly had a U.S. biased ruler, the Shah, and a strong Iraq with a strong and hostile dictator. The attempt to keep the revolutionary strategic culture alive would necessitate a direct, strong and dominant threat to the whole of Iran and not just the regime. With even with the factional political split in Iran, one would not see a wish for a regime change as long as the regime can provide security and uphold the common belief of Persian autonomy and independence. A threat of an invasion of the country would with no doubt strengthen the internal unity even more, but as unstable and weak some of the countries around Iran (Iraq, Syria, Afghanistan) looks like today, it is not likely to happen. Thus, the revolutionaries lack the much-needed threat in order to keep their revolutionary, anti-Western worldview as the common view of the Iranians and the government and they continuously need to make use of fearmongering to inflate the current security picture.

Alfoneh notes that the spokesman for the Iranian government during the Ahmadinejad period responded to the moderates' criticism with a direct link to the counter-revolutionary practice, which formed the basis of execution during the 80s (Alfoneh 2005). This indicates that the revolutionaries could be under pressure. They are still present many years after the revolution,

but they need to use the method of fearmongering and accuse those who doubt or criticize the revolutionary view of security of treason. Elliot Hen-Tov and Nathan Gonzalez mentions that the difference between the two times are not that vast: *"Much of what makes Iran's foreign policy so destructive today is related to its own internal factionalism and the need to create a cult of anti-Americanism"* (Hen-Tov & Gonzales 2011: 55). Picture one was taken in the streets of the southern part of Tehran and depicts a strong opposition towards the Shah. This might be an attempt from the regime or its supporters to reignite the common assumption that the Shah was under the control of foreign, Western powers and that the Iranians must not forget the history of Western influence.

In relation to this, Mahmood Sarioalghalam argues that the current Iranian decision-makers conduct the foreign policy based on revolutionary idealism and the view of the U.S. as an existential security threat (Sarioalghalam 2003: 69 & 72). However, he notes that Iran has since 9/11 been more cautious in the international scene: *"(...) Iran has practiced greater caution, toned down its rhetoric, and even been willing to engage in issue-area negotiations with the United States in Geneva"* (ibid. 69). He furthermore mentions that the current strategic culture in relation to the U.S. is the same as the 1979. The Iranian clerics believe that they are under the threat of being removed from power by foreign actors, where their experiences of the Shah, the Iraqi invasion and the American engagement in the nearby neighboring countries consequently sustains a revolutionary strategic culture (ibid: 70ff).

Sarioalghalam does not see much difference from 1979 to now, where he notes that security revolves around the threat from the U.S. especially because of the Iranians fundamental distrust: *"A mixture of religious and nationalist orientation based on maintaining sovereignty, continues to overshadow the attitudes of Iranians – both clerics and non-clerics – toward the United States; fear of U.S. domination has shaped much of contemporary Iranian political behavior and thus Iranian history"* (ibid. 73). One could with this argue that the current strategic culture is still revolutionary. The hardliners from the Iran-Iraq war and the top clerical elites are among Iran's decision-makers and they remember the American's influence on their country through the Shah and the Iraqi invasion. Overall, a revolutionary strategic culture is what originates the Islamic Republic of Iran's

decision-making and policy-implementation and its view of the international system today. Additionally, the entrenched nationalistic-historical perception of the Persian empire's greatness is a uncompromisable part of the country's security and history and is shared among both opponents and proponents of the revolutionary strategic culture.

Sub-conclusion

This section sought to answer the second factor of the hypothesis concerning the strategic culture in Iran and how it affects its foreign policy. The section has hereto two main findings.

Firstly, it is found that the strategic culture at the time around 1979 had its roots in entrenched beliefs of the historical Persian empire's independence from foreign powers. An increasingly part of the population shared the cleric elites' view that the Shah and Iran was under foreign control and that the Iranian national interest and foreign policy was directed by Western powers. These collective understandings evolved into common, inter-related beliefs of anti-imperialism and anti-Americanism, heavily backed by the clerical elite. They saw a widespread demand for independency in the central administration's decision-making processes and they saw a wish for a national interest that is defined by its long Persian and Islamic cultural history, experiences and perceptions. This common way of thinking toppled the Shah and gave the clerics a new opportunity of directing the foreign policy of Iran based on a revolutionary strategic culture of nationalism, anti-imperialism and suspicion of foreign powers. This is especially seen in the constitution written by the clerical leadership, which manifests a strive for independence, self-sufficiency, Islamic style of governance and the fight against foreign influence as the core of its decision-making and national interest.

Secondly, it is found that the contemporary strategic culture has not varied considerably. The Islamic style of governance its constitution and revolutionary aspects still defines nationalism, independence and suspicion of foreign powers as the core of how the Iranian decision-makers and leaders perceive the international system of states and threats towards the Islamic Republic today. The common way of thinking about the security environment is heavily influenced by the IRGC politicians who have since Ahmadinejad's period taken up a vast amount of the parliamentary seats and positions in the decision-making and policy-implementation of the central administration. These military politicians perceive the security environment through the historical experiences of foreign invasions in the Middle East, which strengthen the revolutionary strategic culture. However, the strategic culture is gradually being challenged, as there is no direct, imminent threat and a waning ideological way of thinking. This has shifted some of the Iranians' perceptions of the foreign and domestic security environments and the opponents of the revolutionary strategic culture are slowly accumulating support.

State-Society Relations

This part concerns the third factor of the hypothesis and is divided into four parts. The first part argues that the disharmonious relations between the state and the society during the Shah era contributed to Ayatollah Khomeini's success in creating an Islamic Republic as he managed to increase the degree of harmony. This subsequently led to the establishment of a new, revolutionary social contract that gave the clerics unique positions of power in Iran.

The second part argues that the youth's lack of identification towards the clerical experiences, values and principles that created the foundation for the Islamic Republic creates a disharmony between the state and the society and affects the policy-implementation towards more moderate demands. The third part argues that the moderate clerical president, Hassan Rouhani, is seen as a result of a pragmatic dispute-resolving decision-making from the clerical leadership to better the harmony between them and the society. The last part seeks to briefly enclose a consolidated understanding of the main findings and arguments through a sub-conclusion.

The Shah and the Ayatollah's social contracts

This section concerns the creation of the revolutionary social contract in 1979 and argues that the Shah's negative dispute-resolving decision-making furthered the low degree of harmony between the monarchy and the population. The disharmonious relations were sought reversed by the population and Ayatollah Khomeini's ideas and principles were highly appealing creating a great opportunity to increase the harmony between the state and the society. The attempt was successful and led to the establishment of an opaque social contract which vastly divided the sovereignty between his clerics and the population, which by time caused unexpectedly disharmony.

In the 1970s, the Shah's popularity was declining and his dispute-resolving decision-making of suppressing individual rights and the brutality against critics of his regime created a disharmony between the Shah's governance and the population. The Shah worsened the disharmony through his decision to abolish Iran's multiparty system in 1975, which concentrated the power of the Shah's even more and distanced his rule from the popular demand of freedom and rejection of autocracy. In addition, his marginalization of the religious part of the population saw a particularly

strong backlash from these numerous members of the society. The marginalization, his Westernization of Iran and his much Western-friendly foreign policy, made particularly the leftist-Islamist part of the population feel alienated and highly frustrated, which contributed to the disharmonious relations (Bender & Robinson 2015).

Besides the Shah's decisions which brought divided opinions about his rule, the social contract existed on a weak foundation. The Iranians did not have a chance to negotiate the social contract with the Shah, as the legitimacy to back his rule was founded on a coup by Western powers and not supported by popular demand. The marginalized Islamic, conservative and traditionalist part of the population, his rapprochement to the West and his coup-founded rule along with his suppressive dispute-resolving decision-making thus lead to an exceedingly low degree of harmony which had characteristics of anti-Western opinions. The Shah did not manage to ensure domestic stability and security and the disharmony led to a revolution which ended the Pahlavi monarchy's rule. This consequently created the opportunity for new rulers to take over the leadership of the country and direct the country's decision-making (Gasiorowski 1987: 261, Allen-Ebrahimian 2017 & Saleh 2012: 57).

The opportunity to acquire the leadership role of Iran was grabbed by the prominent opponent of the Shah's rule: Ayatollah Seyyid Ruhollah Khomeini. With the end of the Shah's monarchical rule, the new and popular Islamic Republic was created. The Ayatollah's popularity and his populist politics along with his network of supporters and their capability to engage in mass mobilization led to a victory over the divided opposition, ensuring clerical rule with a vast amount of political legitimacy granted by the harmony they brought between the state and the society (Abrahamian 1988: 13-38). This time, the Persian people saw an opportunity to renegotiate and have an influence on the social contract and the state's dispute-resolving decision-making responded positively to the popular demand, offering them a new social contract in the likes of the Islamic Republic's constitution.

The high degree of harmony was indicated by the constitution's massive support of the Iranian people: more than 98% voted in favor of the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Additionally, the same number showed up in favor of the division of sovereignty between the population and the new clerical rulers:

The key events that embodied this new social contract were two national referendums in 1979 (...) which divided sovereignty between the people and the clerics, with the latter having special privileges and a unique role in leading the new regime that was not subject to direct democratic accountability or checks and balances (Hashemi 2014: 198).

The high degree of harmony the clerics brought back ensured a new social contract which gave them the higher authority with exclusive rights and without needing to worry about being toppled. Additionally, it gave the clerical leadership a much higher influence, if not a monopoly, on policy-formulation and decision-making as the definition of the Islamic Republic and its implementations were not fully transparent and exact (Schirazi & Chehabi 2012: 178). With the population conceding its power greatly, the clerical elite sought to exploit it to ensure their rule for the many years to come: *“The writing of the 1979 constitution is particularly noteworthy for the strong-arm tactics of the Islamist supporters of Ayatollah Khomeini who manipulated the constitution-writing process to guarantee clerical supremacy”* (Hashemi 2014: 198).

With the Shah’s negative dispute-resolving decision-making and low degree of harmony, the Ayatollah’s utilized the opportunity to exploit the popular demand for change through a dispute-resolving decision-making that responded positively to the popular demand. This increased the harmony and gave the clerical leadership a massive support from the society and a political legitimacy which enabled them to formulate a new social contract. Additionally, with the support of the population, the new clerical government would be freer to conduct their own foreign policy agenda of exporting the revolution and its Islamic, anti-Western principles to the neighboring counties. Moreover, they withdrew the Shah’s Western-friendly foreign policy, as the Islamic leadership perceived the U.S. a grave threat to their Islamic Republic’s existence. Hereto, the Shah’s policies were perceived as failing to respond to the domestic needs as they did not enjoy a broad support from the population, consequently overthrowing him (Hashemi 2014: 218ff).

Nevertheless, the clerics only presented the good intentions to the population in order to legitimize their new regime and giving them a legal way of maintaining their positions of power in the future through the revolutionary social contract. In spite of this, the population eventually found out about the regime's authoritarian intentions during the following years and as a result of their discoveries, the revolutionary social contract shifted from bringing harmony to causing disharmony. Specifically, the Iranians started questioning the social contract and its now way more strict, Islamic laws that imposed Islamic dress codes and strongly contradicted the Shah's secular views. The clerical leadership did also attempt to ban the ancient Persian celebration of Nowruz, a tradition that is an entrenched part of the Persian culture. The population now perceived the clerical leadership as a new regime and the widely supported and popular ideas and principles of freedom that helped the clerics turning over the Shah were seen as mere deceptions (Saikal 2014: 107-113 & Saleh 2012: 54).

The disharmony between the state and the society caused concerns in the new clerical leadership, which feared for its power in decision-making and policy-implementation. They sought to contain or stop the declining harmony through suppressive negative dispute-resolving decision-making: they banned Islamic left candidates from the parliamentary election, shrunk individual rights and implemented harsh punishments for anti-revolutionary ideas and conspiracies against the clerical leadership. The negative dispute-resolving decision-making was along with the gradual withering of the revolutionary enthusiasm and the diminishing unity-bolstering effect of the Iran-Iraq war, among the main reasons for the population's declining support for the Islamic style of governance and an increasing resistance towards its principles and values. Additionally, the disharmony caused the loyal supporters of Khomeini to undergo a shift towards moderate, liberal and democratic ideas (Mackinnon 2019 & Hashemi 2014: 203).

Iran's neighboring countries, Afghanistan and Iraq, had experienced invasions by foreign powers and the Iraqi neighbors was heavily engaged with Western forces in various conflicts and wars. This disharmony threatened the stability of the state and the clerical leadership saw a need to respond to the domestic pressures in order to lessening the risk of a revolution and to free resources towards reducing the systemic tensions, diminishes the risk of a foreign intervention.

The regime needed a moderate, clerical president in order to reduce these pressures and the clerical leadership's positive dispute-resolving decision-making led to Iran's reformist president, Muhammed Khatami's double term. The population sought the social contract rewritten and saw an opportunity in the clerical leadership's approval of Khatami, whose policies had: *"(...) an emphasis on people's rights, greater democracy, respect for basic freedoms, support for civil society associations, and a less confrontational foreign policy"* (Hashemi 2014: 202).

Mohammed Khatami's goal to reduce the pressures consisted externally of a less confrontational foreign policy by increasing cooperation with its neighboring and the European countries in order to stabilize the region and bringing Western-recognized views of human rights and democracy into the domestic scene. Additionally, he took a less ideological approach to both domestic and foreign policy creation, contrasting the clerical leadership's anti-Western views (Soltani 2010: 203f). However, even though Khatami was able to reduce the systemic pressures on the Islamic Republic, the reformist president Muhammed Khatami did not succeed with reforming the regime or renegotiating the social contract. The constitution was carefully and skillfully written so that in the event of a conflict between an elected president (who threatens the regime's survival) and the clerical leadership, the leadership would reign supreme thus preserving their power (Samii 2004: 403-423).

Thus, the disharmony between the Islamic Republic and the society continued: the population saw that the clerical leadership is untouchable by any democratic or peaceful measures and that a reformist-oriented president possesses little power in comparison. They additionally saw a contrast between themselves and the state: the clerics view their own security threatened by popular demands for a Western rapprochement, as the West is perceived a core enemy of the Islamic Republic. A president must be approved by the clergy before he can run, indicating that a reformist president, promising moderation and reformation in policy-formulation, is mainly used for the clerical leadership's own-interests of reducing internal and external pressure on the country, so their positions of power and style of governance remains unthreatened.

The Green Movement

This section seeks to analyze the regime's deteriorating public appeal towards the population and takes a closer look at the principles and ideas of the Green Movement and the demographics in Iran. The section argues that the establishment of the Green Movement indicates that the Islamic Republic and its clerical leadership have increasingly more difficulties appealing to the Iranian population, especially the youth, and that this causes a disharmony between the state and the society.

The Green Movement largely consists of people discontented with the revolutionary social contract, the suppressive nature of the regime and people who demands a change towards a democracy and a foreign policy of openness (Milani 2010 & Takeyh 2010). In its Western inspired ideas, the movement has attracted a lot of Iranians who share reformist and moderate views like Khatami, where they: *"(...) want Iran to be more open to global commerce in goods and ideas; they are often pious, but they wish Iran could shed its puritan image and dispense with some of the more oppressively "Islamic" aspects of the post-revolutionary republic"* (Maljoo 2010). Hereto, its core supporters consist of middle-class citizens (about 50% of Iran's population) and the Iranian youth (about 66% of the population). The younger part of the population consists of highly educated, globalized and more pro-Western Iranians, who favor a rapprochement to the West and is more secular than the older part of the population. Additionally, most of the intellectual class, including university students and dissident clerics, are supportive of the movement, and remarkably, the movement's leadership consists of former regime insiders, for example the former president Mohammad Khatami.

Additionally, Nader Hashemi notes that the Green Movement and the 2009 protests revealed that the policies and politicians whose agendas consist of non-revolutionary and -violent, moderate and reformist have a mass appeal in the Iranian society. The disharmony that created the movement and the protests is seen as effectively reducing the clerical leadership's legitimacy and indicates that the age of radicalism has ended. The clerical leadership was taken by surprise with the public support for the Green Movement: *"The Iranian regime was deeply embarrassed and shocked by this turn of events, largely because it had been claiming since June 2009 that the Green Movement was a foreign-inspired plot with no public support, which the regime had successfully*

crushed” (Hashemi 2014: 212ff). The clerical leadership’s embarrassed and shocked reaction to this indicates misguided perceptions of its Iranian population and the popular demand that risk worsening a disharmonious relation.

The Green Movement was perceived a threat to the regime’s legitimacy and an opposition to its core ideals and for this reason, the regime used its Basij paramilitary forces with the purpose of brutally squelching the movement by force. Furthermore, the regime shut down communications used by Iranians to coordinate the protest (Maljoo 2010, Saidi 2018 & RAND 2011: 1). The assessment by the clergy fostered a perception that the Green Movement threatens the survival of the regime and is seen by its desperate and negative dispute-resolving decision-making. The need for propaganda, deception, brutal force and a shut-down of communications in order to suppress the protests in order to reduce the Movement’s political impact and demotivate further public support is seen as backfiring as it furthered the disharmonious relations even more.

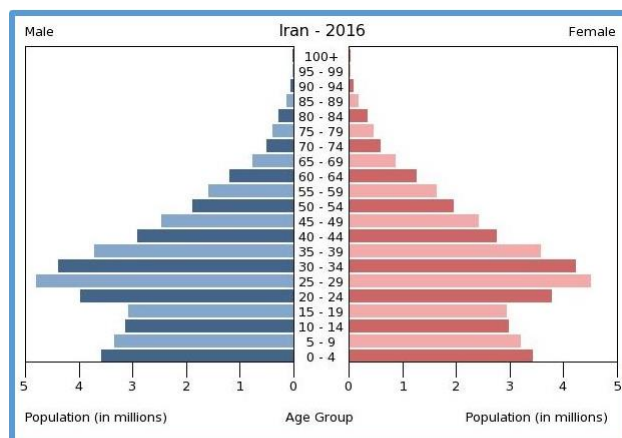
The core aim of the Green Movement is thus seen as an attempt to increase the harmony between the state and the society by making the state conduct positive dispute-resolving decision-making in the likes of moderate policies and reforms. However, even minor reformations of the Islamic Republic are difficult to implement as the clerical leadership’s old experiences entrench their views of domestic and foreign policy affairs and possess a high willingness to block any reformation through suppression and force.

The regime’s deteriorating public appeal towards the population, and its refusal to remit to popular demands, is a significant factor for the disharmonious relations that created the Green Movement. However, as the Green Movement and its protests occurred ten years ago, one could speculate whether the support of its ideas and principles has waned. To go into more detail with this, a further examination reveals that the Western ideas of democracy and support for a less confrontational foreign policy is prominent in the younger population of Iran and is not likely to change.

Specifically, the youth's absence of the key experiences of the influential events in the country's history is considered a fundamental reason for the support of the Green Movement's ideas, principles and objective. As aforementioned, these events shape the clerical leaderships' perceptions of international affairs and systemic stimuli and affect the contemporary decision-making and policy-formulation they conduct, however:

Most of the youth supporters of the Green Movement, by contrast, were born after the 1979 Revolution, and their frame of reference and political experience have thus been qualitatively different from those of their leaders, who were politicized and shaped by their experience under the secular authoritarianism of the Pahlavi monarchy (Hashemi 2014: 206 - 214).

As the leaders of the Islamic Republic's decisions and worldviews are influenced by the Pahlavi monarchy, the revolution and the Iran-Iraq war their world views contrast the contemporary



Age	Percentage
0 – 14	23,6 %
15 – 29	27,8 %
30 – 39	19,1 %
40 – 44	6,8 %
45 and over	22,7 %

Source: Central Intelligence Agency, World Fact Book 2016.
Link: <https://www.cia.gov/library/publications/the-world-factbook/geos/ir.html>

youth. The youth lack the experience of these significant events in the country's history, making it much likely for them to perceive the clerical decision-making as not reflecting their view of the world, creating a disharmony between the state and the society. Looking at the demographics for Iran to support this rationale, it arguably seems more evident that the clerical leadership lacks the demographical support required in order to for the population to identify with the Islamic style of governance and its Islamic, revolutionary worldviews.

Specifically, Iranians with no first-hand serving experience in the Iran-Iraq war constitute the vast majority of the population today. The military service age during the war was 15 and included women, which means that the youngest people who served the whole war would be 51 in 2016 where the statistics were conducted (Piven 2012 & Gallagher 2015). Assuming that people were

recruited during the war, 43 would be the youngest age in the end of the war in 1988. Looking at the graph, the Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) estimates that 22,7% are above the age of 45 (or 29,5% with 40 and above) today and is likely to have served in the war.

Knowing this, one could argue that the regime's strategy of promoting a foreign policy based on anti-imperialistic, revolutionary and ideological ideas and principles is going to have a diminished support with time (Macmillan 2017). The longer the regime maintains these ideals as the core of its legitimacy and worldviews, the more disharmony it would gradually bring. As seen, the younger the population is, the more likely it is to oppose the Islamic Republic's principles as the revolutionary mindset (and its historical foundations of the majority) of the population is seen as waning and likely absent in a lot of cases.

The clerical leadership underrated the support and mass appeal of the Green Movement and the effect that especially the youth has and necessitates the clerics to respond to the demographical problem they stand to face. The clerics' perceived threat of the Green Movement and their correspondingly negative dispute-resolving decision-making contributed to deepening the disharmonious relations between the state and the society.

Thus, based on the disharmonious relation and the decreasing support, the regime must seek different methods to reduce the domestic pressures and regain popularity for its Islamic style of governance – and the clerical leadership might have found just that.

[Rouhani and his popularity](#)

This section concerns the clerical leaderships' attempts at shifting the disharmony towards more harmonious relations. The section argues that the disharmonious relations necessitate the Islamic Republic to seek a different, pragmatic approach to its dispute-resolving decision-making that satisfies the popular demand for a more moderate approach to decision-making. This is done with the intention of reducing the domestic pressures that challenges the support of the clerical leadership and the Islamic style of governance.

The previous section found that the disharmony between the state and society was specifically

seen among the moderates and the Iranian youth who were frustrated and highly dissatisfied with the revolutionary social contract. It also found that the clerics dramatically saw that the popular demand called for a shift in the Islamic Republic and they felt that their ideas and principles that constitute the regime's foundation were threatened. Like the aforementioned election of Khatami, the election of Rouhani is seen as an example of the clerical leadership's positive dispute-resolving decision-making in order to respond to domestic demands and increase the harmony between the Islamic regime and the society. The clerical leadership once again seeks to reduce the domestic pressures by approving a moderate cleric who appeals to cooperation with the West, openness in trade, a governance of pragmatism and less ideology and one who creates a more youth-identifiable, Westernized and harmonious Iran (Dehghan 2014).

However, how did the moderate Rouhani get the Supreme Leader's approval to run to run if he was backed by the same people who lack identification with the revolutionary social contract, its Islamic principles and likely prefers the clerical leadership gone? The answer lies in the president's background. The president is considered a loyal regime insider who possesses: *"(...) extensive knowledge of the strengths and weaknesses of the regime, and an unquestionable commitment to its survival. Simultaneously, these qualities make Rouhani uniquely placed to embark on rejuvenating the Islamic Republic of Iran"* (Akbarzadeh & Conduit 2016: 10 – 12). The clerical leadership could have seen the former president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's increasing power as a threat to the medium-term survival of their Islamic Republic. Domestically, the regime had to handle a disharmonious relation and the Green Movement, where internationally, Ahmadinejad's confrontational foreign policies and rhetoric worsened the systemic pressures on the country as he: *"(...) brought the hostility of Iran with the West and the East in center of Iranian policy again"* (Soltani 2010: 204f).

Much like Khatami, a clerical president with moderate views, who can reduce domestic and systemic pressures without threatening the regime through a reformation, was sought after by the clerical leadership in the election of Hassan Rouhani. Rodger Shanahan mentions that the president has no interest in reforming or ending the Islamic Republic and its clerical style of governance even if the majority of his voters consisted of moderates and reformists (Shanahan

2015: 2). However, the moderate president still needed to reduce the domestic pressures and did so through addressing the popular concerns, where Rouhani: *"(...) broke a number of political taboos. He criticized media censorship in a live television interview, questioned the need for heavy-handed state security, and declared that the 2009 postelection protests were natural and popular"* (Sayah 2013). Rouhani serves as a healthy balance that satisfies the clerical leadership's ideological, revolutionary worldviews while also serving the popular demands for a more Westernized and open Iran, and consequently increasing the harmony while not threatening the clerics' power. Rouhani is additionally able to satisfy popular demands through his criticism of the unpopular aspects of the state and his criticism is able to go unpunished due to his unquestioned loyalty to the regime along with the clerical leadership's need for a pragmatic approach to reduce the internal and external pressures.

As an example of Rouhani's positive dispute-resolving decision-making, to make sure the policies align with popular demand, and as an attempt to better understand how to increase the harmony while maintaining the clerical leadership's power, Rouhani has inserted moderate professionals with a better understanding of the West:

His cabinet is full of ministers with advanced degrees from Western universities — indeed, his cabinet has more members holding PhDs from US universities than does President Obama's. That is not to say that they are proponents of Western social values, but having lived in the West they have a much better understanding of Western perceptions of Iran than many of their predecessors did (Shanahan 2015: 2).

The solution to reduce the pressures lies in increasing the harmony between the state and society through positive dispute-resolving decision-making that satisfies popular demand. With the government having ministers with deeper and different knowledge of the Western world, they are much more able to correctly assess which policies that serves to satisfy popular demand and the domestic pressures as well as ensuring the clerical leadership's power and the systemic pressures.

The moderate approach to increase the harmony is also seen in Rouhani's different goals and

means towards bettering the economy, Iran's international reputation and the regime's domestic reputation. Hereto, the popular demands of his anti-isolation, Western-friendly foreign policy seeks to be implemented without discrediting the regime and without threatening the cleric's power (Akbarzadeh & Conduit 2016: 13, Nasser 2013 & Choksy 2014). An example of the moderate and popular open foreign policy and its Western rapprochement aspect is seen in Rouhani's historical decision to speak directly to a U.S. president – a president of a country that is considered the arch enemy of the clerical leaders. Additionally, Rouhani has invited and received a lot of visits from foreign policy officials to Iran (Mason and Charbonneau 2013, Doucet 2014 & Sami 2015). The open foreign policy the Rouhani administration conducts is seen as a pragmatic and positive dispute-resolving decision-making to reduce the domestic and systemic pressures. The pragmatic approach is assessed as the best way to ensure a harmonious relation between the population and the government and to increase its Islamic leadership's legitimacy by trying to prove, through Rouhani's success, that the revolutionary style of governance still serves the population's interests.

Additionally, the nuclear deal could be seen as another example of Rouhani's positive dispute-resolving decision-making. Rouhani signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in order to increase the harmony by satisfying domestic demands for an improved economy by the means of breaking out of its isolation and conduct a rapprochement to the West (Fisher 2016). Speculations could be made about why the traditionally conservative and anti-Western clerical leaderships supported a deal with their arch enemies. One might find the answer in the clerics' aspirations for increasing their public appeal and the harmony hereof, and to ensure that the revolutionary social contract remains unthreatened. By publicly supporting the deal, the Supreme Leader shows that the regime listens to the population's demands and is willing to be swayed by pragmatism as long as the population does not necessitate a reformation of the style of governance or a renegotiation of the social contract - a strategy that seemingly works (Shanahan 2015: 5, Colleau 2016: 49 & Sherrill 2014: 74).

Unfortunately for Rouhani and the moderate government; the U.S. pulled out of the nuclear deal, causing Iran's economy to go downhill: *"(...) the economy is in miserable shape. The currency has*

depreciated, inflation is rampant, and unemployment is high, while GDP contracted last year and looks set to shrink even further this year” (Johnson 2019). This economic unrest is particularly exploited by Rouhani’s conservative opponents. They have an interest in showing that a foreign policy of Western rapprochement is doomed to fail, and that the conservative, revolutionary perceptions of the U.S. and its Western allies still hold water.

The conservatives have moreover attempted to spoil Rouhani’s positive dispute-resolving decision-making of a more transparent style of governance by muting his live TV addresses to the population (Kenner 2014 & Akbarzadeh and Conduit 2016: 19). Additionally, they have blocked Rouhani’s attempts of conducting moderate policies in Syria and Iraq and they have tried to publicly accuse him of selling out to the U.S. in order to try to obstruct him domestically through attempting to appeal to the population’s nationalist and anti-American perceptions (Steams 2014 & Abdo 2014).

However, the conservatives’ attempts at impeding Rouhani’s moderate policies have backfired immensely. As an example, the protests in late 2017 and early 2018 have had many different social groups protesting against the money spend on the foreign policy towards Syria, Iraq and Yemen, which is considered the conservative’s foreign policy (Saidi 2018, Pascual 2018 & Fitzgerald 2018). The popular opinion was that the conservative foreign policy is requiring a tremendously amount of the state budget, which contradicts the popular demands of a better economy. More interestingly, the protests were supported by the lower classes – a part of the Iranian population that is generally considered supporting the conservatives. One could argue that the support of the traditionally more conservative part of the population suggests a chance for success in Rouhani’s open foreign policy and could indicate that a successful dispute-resolving decision-making entails a moderate approach.

Additionally, the dissatisfaction with the conservatives might have caused a spill-over effect against the Islamic leadership as pro-Shah chants were to be heard at Azadi stadium in April 2018 in Tehran: *“(...) some demonstrators have even chanted death to the dictator, referring to Khamenei”* (Murray 2018, Fitzgerald 2018 & Ross 2018). Unfortunately, but expected, the dispute-

resolving decision-making toward these protests were negative: the government banned different methods of communications in order to weaken protest organization and gave a substantial budget increase to the domestic security forces' and military equipment. The population responded negatively to this by using social media to spread identities and personal information on IRGC and Basij security forces who have been involved in suppressing the protests (Saidi 2018).

Nonetheless, this could indicate that the current relations between the state and the society are moving towards more disharmony since Rouhani's moderate policies must correspondingly ensure protection for the clerical regime. As the popular demands appears to be moving towards more moderate and reformists aspects, the president would likewise need to move his policies towards a reformation of the Islamic Republic's core values as seen in Tehran in late 2017, where the enforcement of Islamic dress codes was changed or diminished (Smith 2017 & Batrawy 2017). This is also applicable to the clerical leadership, which must consider a gradual use of pragmatism in leading the state, as the population is getting demographically distanced from the foundational values and experiences that created the Islamic Republic and guide its leaders' decision-making.

Sub-conclusion

This section concerned the third factor of the hypothesis regarding how the degree of harmony between the state and the society affects the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic. The section has three main findings in relation to this.

Firstly, the low degree of harmony during the Shah caused the 1979 revolution, which in return brought a high degree of harmony. However, the clerical leadership exploited the harmony; took control of the creation of the new social contract and gave themselves exclusive rights and a monopoly on the decision-making and policy-implementation in Iran. This created a shift from Western-friendly and -inspired foreign policy to a foreign policy consisting of Islamic, revolutionary and anti-Western principles and ideas. The population found out and the discovery caused disharmony, which necessitated the clerics to respond to the domestic pressures by electing the moderate cleric Khatami as president. Under him, the foreign policy saw a higher degree of Western rapprochement which satisfied the domestic pressures and increased the harmony.

Secondly, the following president, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad caused a disharmony which led to the Green Movement that sought to better the harmony through its moderate ideas and enjoyed a lot of support by the Iranian people. It was also found that there is a diminishing revolutionary, ideological mood in Iran, which is especially present in the Iranian youth: the younger the Iranians are, the more moderate they are likely to be and the more they demand a Western rapprochement, democracy, a less confrontational and a more corporative foreign policy. They lack the clerical leadership's experiences and they contrast their ideas. This entails, that the more the clerics conduct policies rooted in these, the more disharmony it causes.

Thirdly, the domestic pressure from the population made the clerics choose another moderate president. Rouhani managed to bring a high degree of harmony and reduce the domestic pressure by conducting a rapprochement to the West; bettering the economy and opening Iran to the international system without threatening the clerical leadership's power. The conservative side fought against the rapprochement, but their support base appreciated Rouhani's efforts at bettering the economy and they criticized the hardliner foreign policy in Syria, Iraq and Yemen, underlining that domestic affairs should be prioritized over Iran's engagement in foreign countries.

Domestic Institutions

This section concerns the fourth factor of the hypothesis and the presupposition that the domestic institutions' own-interest affects the foreign policy of a state. It argues that the decision-making and policy implementation in Iran is largely influenced by the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. It hereto argues that the institution's influence on the central administration is not based on national interest or swayed by popular opinion, but solely on what best serves the IRGC and how it can maximize its own power.

This section consists of five parts and firstly examines the Guards' constitutional mandate and how this affects the Iranian state apparatus and power game. Secondly, the establishment year(s) of the Islamic Republic is analyzed and argues that the clerical leadership needed protection from domestic and foreign actors, and they wanted to safeguard their interests in preserving their control of the Iranian state, which created the foundation for the power of the Guards.

Thirdly, the contemporary power of the Guards is examined. This concerns their economic grasp of the country and their significant military power and it is argued that they have used this power to embed themselves in the Islamic Republic and narrow down the national interests of the country to match their institutional interests. Fourthly, internal power balance between the Guards and the clerical leadership is studied. The part argues that the clerical leadership is well-aware of the Guards' immersive power and is now seeking new alliances to balance the power to the clerics' favor, which might be too late. Lastly, a sub-conclusion summarizes the former four parts' main findings.

The constitutional mandate

With the aim of examining the IRGC's impact on the decision-making and policy-implementation in the Islamic Republic, it is important to understand their legal institutional movability. Their institutional movability, or constitutional mandate, reveals how much the Guards can legally accomplish and how they can use it to increase their power and affect the political environment in the Islamic Republic.

In April 1979, Ayatollah Khomeini issued a decree which formally created the IRGC as a

revolutionary security institution, established to defend the integrity of the country and its new rulers (Alfoneh 2013: 23). Looking at the constitution, the Guards' mandate is focused on security and protection: *"They have responsibility not only for the safeguarding of the frontiers, but also for a religious mission, which is Holy War (JIHAD) along the way of God, and the struggle to extend the supremacy of God's Law in the world"* (Iranchamber: constitution). The IRGC's constitutional mandate is furthermore elaborated, declaring that the institution is to be preserved so it can continue its role of protecting the revolution and its achievements. In addition, the scope of the IRGC's duties and areas of responsibilities are to be determined by law, where the constitution emphasizes brotherly cooperation and harmony (Iranchamber: article 150).

The constitutional mandate thus defines the role of the IRGC as being an extended arm for the clerical agenda of promoting themselves and their principles to the Iranian people and foreign actors and states. One could speculate how much power is required in order to satisfy this part of the Guards' constitutional mandate. It appears to give the IRGC a possibility to continuously remain active in domestic and foreign affairs with the economic and legal support of the Islamic Republic. Also, the role of protecting the revolution and its achievements seems wide-ranging and appears to charge the IRGC with a domestic responsibility for ensuring that the integrity and stability of the Islamic Republic is upheld.

This extensive role in both domestic and foreign matters presupposes that the IRGC receives a substantial budget and resources from the central administration in order to meet the criteria of the mandate. It also suggests that the Guards quite possibly have been given free reins as long as their actions in domestic and foreign affairs can be attached to the religious interests and principles of the Islamic republic and the clerical leadership.

Ali Alfoneh states that the IRGC's constitutional mandate is extremely comprehensive and their main goal is to guard the Islamic revolution in Iran and expanding it abroad. The constitution gives the Guards the role of a conventional military army, stating they are charged with defending the country against foreign occupiers. In addition, they are given the role of a police force where the tasks included are corporation with the government in security and policing affairs, tracking down

and arresting counterrevolutionary elements and the collection of intelligence (Alfoneh 2013: 23 and Hen-Tov & Gonzalez 2011: 48). Ali Alfoneh concludes his analysis of the legal framework of the IRGC with stating that: *"From its very start, therefore, Islamic Republic law made the Guards not only a military organization deterring foreign threats but also a political-military organization tasked with fighting domestic opposition"* (Alfoneh 2013: 24). In relation to the broad constitutional mandate, the clergy got the Iranian parliament, the Majles, to pass a decree after 1982 which had specific terms of service for the those in the IRGC: faith in Islam and the Islamic revolution along with nonpolitical participation in any kind of way (Hen-Tov & Gonzalez 2011: 48).

One could thus see the constitution defining the IRGC's role as two-sided. On the one side, the requirement of faith in Islam and the Islamic revolution gives the Guards a pathway to ensure institutional stability and increase their power: the Islamic style of governance and the clerical elite. The more they rationalize their actions through the revolutionary constitution and its principles, the more they can increase their lucrative position and power in the Iranian society and politics. Although the IRGC might be a security institution intended for protecting the clerical elite, their ideas and style of governance, the more power they gain, the more they are likely to pursue their own institutional interests instead. Their increasing power and resources would be used to strengthen and maintain their influence on governmental decision-making and domestic politics, regardless of their members' political standpoint and faith to Islam.

On the other side, the clergy thought of ensuring their own interests of remaining in control. Their need to ensure a clerical control over the revolutionary guards could disclose a possible perception of a long-term threat to their leadership of the country. This could be why there is a requirement of nonpolitical participation and faith in Islam. This could ensure that the IRGC member's way of thinking, perceive threats or decision-making is based on their faith to Islam and the Islamic leadership in order to establish a strict guideline, which serves the clerical leadership's interest. In practice, however, one might doubt that these rules ensure a linear way of thinking since how would one measure a faith to Islam, and who should do it? The clerics and their own judgement. The idea is to create an excuse, or a legal way, for removing undesirable individuals from the IRGC.

The IRGC's constitutional mandate is wide-ranging and appears to concern every mean to protect the revolutionary style of governance and the principles that defines the clerical leadership and the revolution. The IRGC's exact role in the Iranian society is difficult to assess when solely looking at the institution's constitutional mandate. In order to understand its role further, one has to take a closer look at the history of the Guards' and how the war got them embedded in the Iranian state.

The Revolutionary Guards' inclining power

This part concern shows the Revolutionary Guards has risen to power. It argues that the IRGC has had the interest of power since the fall of the Shah and the power vacuum left by the regime change created an opportunity for the Guards to exploit it and secure a vast among of power in the Islamic Republic.

In its establishment year, the IRGC had to suppress, control and fight internal institutional resistance against the Islamic Republic and the clergy, especially from the former supporters of the Shah and the regular army (Alemzadeh 2018: 1ff). Ali Alfoneh elaborates on this institutional competition and states that four different Islamic revolutionary groups were all fighting for the newly created domestic power vacuum in Iran: The National Guard, the IRGC, Holy Warriors of the Islamic Revolution, and Guardians of the Islamic Revolution. He further mentions that Khomeini needed to bring peace domestically in order to ensure the survival of his regime change:

Khomeini instinctively knew that competition between the multiple guards loyal to him would weaken them and leave the revolutionary regime vulnerable to coup attempts. To solve the problem of competing guards, Khomeini, along with the revolutionary clergymen in the Council of the Revolution, suggested creation of a unified Revolutionary Guards Corps incorporating the four paramilitary forces (Alfoneh 2013: 12-17).

Khomeini managed to merge these fighting institutions into the IRGC, and this move was gravely needed. The Ayatollah did not completely trust the imperial army despite its neutrality and had to purge it, which meant that the IRGC was left as the only institution capable of fighting the Iraqi invaders in the 80s. Elliot Hen-Tov & Nathan Gonzalez stress that the IRGC got a decisive power

during the Iran-Iraq war and this serves to understand their current embedment in the Iranian state. The IRGC succeeded in reversing the losses of the war's beginning and the Guards' success peaked in 1982, where the Iraqi invaders were expelled from the Islamic Republic's territory. This wartime success made the clerical leadership, their Islamic Republic and revolution survive both internal and external challenges, where a lot of the success is owed to the decisive work of the Guards (Hen-Tov & Gonzalez 2011: 48). In relation to this, one can argue that the war had two outcomes in relation to the IRGC and the clerics.

Firstly, the clerical leadership wanted a safe Iran both externally and domestically. They needed protection from the international system and old, adjacent enemies and they wanted to safeguard their interests in maintaining their control of the Islamic Republic and places of power by accumulating legitimacy through their governance and military success. The threat of the institutional competition and the weak state Iran was left in was managed by the Supreme Leader by merging the many of the competitors and giving them a lot of power. The power of the IRGC and their success in the war then generated popularity and recognition from the population to the newly founded Islamic Republic and its clerical leadership. Secondly, the IRGC wanted to accumulate more power to its institution. The IRGC needed to prove that it could uphold its constitutional mandate given to it by the clerical leadership, and the its role in the war served to build itself a strong and respected reputation. Also, one could argue that the Guards ensured a continued flow of funds and power, since the clerical interests of security and survival largely depended on this institution.

As mentioned in the strategic culture chapter, a foreign threat bolsters the internal unity and in the case of the IRGC's role in turning the war to the advantage of Iran, the internal unity got bolstered around the impression of a new and strong Islamic, revolutionary leadership: *"Although Khomeini may have been a charismatic figure, the unifying effect of the Iran-Iraq War (1980-88) bolstered his authority, reducing political disunity across the board"* (Hen-Tov & Gonzalez 2011: 47). Also, one could assume that the old royalists and moderates from the Shah's era also began supporting the idea of having the IRGC taking care of the domestic security as it has proved its worth. This might also be rooted in the strategic culture, where one can argue that the integrity

and safety of the country is a priority to the extent that it does not matter which Persian institution or leadership that manage to ensure this.

According to Ali Alfoneh, much of this exact history and conflict is to be the main point of analysis in order to understand how the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps acts today. In the time of the Grand Ayatollah Khomeini's rule, he: *"(...) systematically used the IRGC to suppress the challengers, which in turn made the IRGC a major player in the domestic politics of Iran during the first decade after the revolution"* (Alfoneh 2013: 22). Alfoneh furthermore elaborates on the growing role of the IRGC, mentioning that the current Ayatollah, Khamenei, used the Guards, which included president Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, to suppress domestic demands for political and economic liberation and the external threat owing to Iran's nuclear program.

The internal and external pressure were perceived by Khamenei as a direct threat to his and the clerical rule and since this is a constitutional part of the Guards' responsibilities, they got the task of handling these threats, which naturally only increased their own institutional power (ibid.). The Ayatollah ensured the survival of his clerical leadership by assuring that domestic demands for reformation are suppressed if they threaten the clerics through using the IRGC. One could hereto argue that the increase of power is difficult to revert for the ruling clerical elite and bears a risk of a snowballing effect: the more power the clerical leadership gives to the IRGC, the harder it is for them to reverse it. Khamenei must then make sure that a balance is kept in order to reduce the chance of the IRGC to give in to using their power to get the lucrative role of ruling the Islamic Republic.

Overall, the Guards' pursuit of ensuring its institutional interests makes their role in Iran two-faced. On the one side, the institution is strictly following its official mandate to protect the Islamic Revolution, the country and its clerical leadership. This serves their superiors' interests of ensuring the survival and legitimacy of their leadership of the country. On the other side, since the Ayatollah's Guards have the responsibility of protection, one must assume that the clerical leadership expects them to protect not only the country, but also themselves. This reliance means that the clerics will most likely assume the same threat perceptions as the IRGC. The Guards are

well-aware of this, and the more power they receive through this, the more they can translate the power into political influence on how the country and the leadership should view threats, make decisions and conduct policies.

The power of the Guards today

The former parts addressed how the IRGC increases its institutional power by serving the interests of its superiors, the Ayatollah and his clerical leadership and how their role in the Iran-Iraq war proved their legitimacy. This part seeks to examine how the constitutional mandate and the clerics' approval are furthermore exploited by the IRGC and how they are narrowing down the national interests of the Islamic Republic to increase their own military, economic and political power.

This section is divided into two parts; the economic power and military power. Both parts seek to elaborate on how the IRGC uses its power in practice to influence decision-making and policy-implementation in Iran and why the Guards could be viewed as not just a business with corporate interests, but a business with a strong military using its cohesion capabilities in pursuing its corporate interests.

Economic power

This part concerns the economic power of the Guards today. It argues that the IRGC have embedded themselves in the economy to a degree where they have a direct impact on the decision-making and policy-implementation of the Islamic Republic.

According to Francis Ghiles, the IRGC's economic power and business interests started in the end of the 80's war and was boosted under the former president of Iran, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad. This gives the Guards a unique, powerful role in the Islamic Republic today:

The IRGC's involvement in the economy can be traced to the end of the Iran-Iraq war in the 1980s when commanders were rewarded with contracts to build roads, dams and bridges to help reconstruct the country. The IRGC's business interests rapidly spread during the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-13), a populist hardliner, when the corps was awarded state projects in such key strategic sectors as oil, gas and telecom (Ghiles 2018).

The IRGC has enjoyed unprecedented power under Ahmadinejad, who is a former IRGC member himself along with most of his cabinet at that time. During his eight-year rule, the IRGC received massive economic power through Ahmadinejad's administration. His administration supported the IRGC through governmental contracts in construction and energy, which concerned billions of dollars and increased the IRGC's influence in the Iranian economy by conceding governmental control of critical infrastructure to the private sector, in which the IRGC owned the most of. The public share of the gross domestic product (GDP) went from eighty to forty percent, creating a huge advantage for the IRGC's companies who were well established and ready for this huge privatization of the Iranian economy and it is assessed that the Guards control at least around one sixth of the GDP (Hen-Tov & Gonzales 2011: 49, Rahimi 2009 & Rubin 2013).

According to the Anti-Defamation League, the IRGC is likely to be the third largest corporation in Iran with more than 500 firms and the control of several banks and nuclear power plants: *"In addition, the IRGC reportedly controls more than half of Iran's imports and one-third of the country's non-oil exports, enabling the IRGC to generate a profit of approximately \$5 billion annually"* (ADL 2012: 3). Hafezi and Charbonneau state that the IRGC's domestic and business power is wide-ranging and comprehensive, where the Guards are in control of major tourism, transportation, energy, telecommunications, internet, construction companies and corporations (Hafezi & Charbonneau 2015). Examples of these companies include Shahid Rajaee Professional Group (construction), Sadra Iran Maritime Industrial Company (oil and gas), Ansar Bank and Sepanir Oil and Gas Engineering. In addition, in 2009, a business affiliated to the Guards bought the Telecom Company of Iran (Bozorgmehr 2017).

Additionally, in 2002, the Turkish cell phone company Turkcell won a bid for the Iranian communications market in. This was threatening the state's monopoly in the telecommunications sector, which is why the IRGC made a lot of legal and practical obstacles to remove this competition. Their constitutional mandate was once again brought in as a resounding argument: the IRGC argued that the competitor was a threat to the national security. As a result, Turkcell left the Iranian market and allowed the IRGC's own communications technology and electronics firms to continue its monopoly on the Iran communications network. Based on their aggressive stance

on the threat of competitors, one could assume that this is their core, non-negotiable area of interest, where the IRGC needs its comprehensive control of the critical infrastructure to increase their economic and political power in the Islamic Republic (Alfoneh 2007).

One could firstly argue that the approval of the IRGC's growing power occurred because of the Western invasion of Iraq during Ahmadinejad's time as a president. The Ayatollah might have feared another invasion of the country, either from the US, which had their embassy sieged in Tehran, or from an upcoming Iraq with an American influenced government. The Guards' role in the economy could thus be highly needed and one could assume that they used their close relation to the leadership to influence how the invasion of Iraq should be perceived by the clerics. They managed to impact the decision-making of the leadership, convincing them that in the policies they implement, the IRGC must have the dominant role in the country's economic affairs to uphold its strong military, as it guarantees a strong defense for the integrity of Islamic Republic and the Iranian people.

Secondly, one could argue that the increased economical role in the country was legitimized and approved by their successful role of rebuilding the country after the Iran-Iraq war and the Guards' decisive role during the war. They had used their power to fulfill their mandate as a protector of the country and a persisting threat and a state that still craves a stronger economy made the clerical leadership approve of continuously increasing the flow of power to the Guards.

Thirdly, the Guards can translate their economic power of the country into political power and influence the future governments by their control of the remarkably large part of the country's GDP. As an example, in 2011, the IRGC managed to get Rostam Qassemi, an IRGC commander and head of the Khatam al-Anbia, the petroleum minister position (Hen-Tov & Gonzales 2011: 49 and Radiofarda 2018). The IRGC managed to get a business CEO an economical strategic and lucrative position under Ahmadinejad. This does not just show that the IRGC has an impact on the decision-making in this area but that the Guards have directly been in charge of the policy-formulation and implementation in its core area of interest.

They might also be able to influence the population by the sheer amount of capital they possess and jobs they create by their numerous firms and could use their vast control of the economy to veto governmental decisions that do not serve their institutional interests. This power is something they strive to increase or at least maintain, and this is exactly why the Guards are following their constitutional mandate closely in order to not have the leaders of the country as the opponents just yet.

Additionally, the power they received under Ahmadinejad and the vast business empire they control make the Guards' look like an enormous lobby group with military cohesion capabilities. They are thus not just a military branch devoted to protecting the country from foreign and domestic threats, but also a business empire. A business empire devoted to protecting its profits and influencing the policies and the leadership in the country to preserve and increase its own power as much as possible. If this continues, they are likely to outroot its political competitors and take complete control of the Islamic Republic in the long term.

[Military power](#)

This part seeks to shed light on the military power of the Guards. It explores how the IRGC use it in conjunction with, and to maintain, their economic and political power in order to affect the decision-making and policy-implementation in Iran.

The military power of the IRGC is a valuable asset for the IRGC's institutional power and their influence on the country's decision-making. Their military power is a part of the essential defense capability against foreign threats and the foundation for the clerical leadership and their Islamic Republic. The Islamic Republic of Iran has an active military strength of 523.000, which includes the regular army, IRGC, the navy, air force and its paramilitary. The IRGC holds more than 125.000 personnel and controls the Basij paramilitary forces, which has an estimate of 12,6 million members where about 1 million of them are combat capable. The regular army has 350.000 active personnel but consists mainly of conscripts (220.000). The IRGC navy is hereto slightly larger than the regular army navy with a staff of 20.000 versus the army's 18.000, but has taken a larger responsibility, in that the IRGC's navy has replaced the regular army's role in the Persian Gulf (The Military Balance 2018: 334 – 337 & CNN 2007).

The IRGC's Air Force branch is in control of the Islamic Republic's strategic missile-force. Strategic missiles are a core part of the regime's defense and deterrence against eventual foreign intervention or war, and a lucrative capacity for the IRGC to have (The Military Balance 2018: 333ff). Their view of needing a strategic missile-force goes back to the Iran-Iraq war, where Iran perceived them as essential in combating foreign aggression from the U.S., Israel or Iraq. The missiles were also used to bolster the regime's support from the population through their retaliation capabilities when Saddam Hussein bombed civilian targets (CIA 1986).

The IRGC's control of this unique capability does firstly provide the institution with leverage in international negotiations. The missiles are one of the reasons for the U.S. withdrawal of the JCPOA and its missile capacity should, apart from its defensive aspect, thus be seen as an asset in the current (and future) negotiations in relation to the JCPOA or any nuclear talks. Secondly, they provide the institution with a leverage in national negotiations, since they work as a way to put political and economic pressure on the moderate side of the factional politics, making the IRGC able to influence or even direct and delimit the opponent's menu of policy choices through their missile capacity.

Thirdly, the IRGC's vast number of firms and their tight grasp of Iranian economy make the Guards' profit from the sanction's removal of competitors. The IRGC is likely to sustain a business monopoly as long as the sanctions are in place and as long as they disallow competition for the Iranian market (Elleman & Fitzpatrick 2018). Overall, the economic and political power these missiles provide translate into an overall bolstered position in the state apparatus: the future national and international negotiations in relation to the JCPOA or likewise deals must implement the IRGC. This gives the Guards a strong voice and political power in both domestic and foreign policy decision-making and implementation, allowing them to direct the national interests and the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic.

In addition to this, the assessment of the Military Balance connects the IRGC's military power with its business interests, especially within the Guards' own cyber defense: *"The IRGC has its own Cyber Defence Command; IRGC civilian business interests will aid its activities in this area* (The

Military Balance 2018: 337). These business interests extend to the airports in Iran. The IRGC have control over several, if not all the airports in Iran and one can with certainty say that the Guards are not afraid of using their military power should their political and economic power not be sufficient in protecting its core interests.

In 2004, the operation of the Imam Khomeini international airport was given to a consortium of Turkish and Austrian companies by the transportation ministry. Having a foreign company in the management of the airport would close the smuggling and duty-free import and export of commodities loophole that the IRGC exploited, weakening its lucrative business and economic power. Therefore, the Guards used their military power: *"(...) IRGC drove tanks onto the runways, stormed the control tower, and demanded that the IRGC – not foreign companies – run the facility"* (Alfoneh 2007). According to Alfoneh, the airport brought in several billions of dollars in luxury goods during the first eighteen months of operation, where the new management of the airport was now IRGC friendly. In addition, this episode caused the impeachment of the transportation minister, Ahmad Khorram, which shows that if the core interests of the IRGC are threatened, they are able to: *"(...) trump the power of the cabinet, if not the presidency itself"* (Alfoneh 2007).

This example shows that when a policy decision clashes with the IRGC's core interests, they are more than willing to use its military power to ensure they get what they want. It also shows that they are covering up business interests with their constitutional mandate: The IRGC stated that their actions protected the country against foreign intervention and control of the country's critical infrastructure. This argument might sound shady, but the IRGC knows that they can increase their power while not posing as a threat to the Islamic leadership by following its mandate. It might also be enough for the clerical leadership to accept it, since it publicly shows that the Guards are under the command of the clerics and seek to protect them by actively using its military power.

Alfoneh states that the IRGC also uses the clerical paranoia for a U.S. or Israeli attack and attempt of regime change to deepen its involvement in internal politics and security (Alfoneh 2013: 37). The threat inflation serves the institutional interests of the IRGC: the Guards obtain more

resources as long as the threats against the regime persists or increases, making the Guards' power increasingly embedded in the Iranian economy and security. This also means that if the threats are not continuously climbing, the IRGC must either inflate them or make-up their own threats (that serve their institutional interests) and combat them using their constitutional rationale.

The IRGC have, in addition to their domestic economic and military power an important player in international affairs: their Quds-force (IRGC-QF). The IRGC-QF is deemed a key component of the country's military power abroad, where Julian Borger and Robert Tait adds that the IRGC-QF is a foreign policy tool in harmony with the IRGC as a business empire. Externally, the Quds-force controls the relations with neighboring countries and internally, the IRGC controls the funding and economic backing of its foreign relations branch (Borger & Tait 2010 and *The Military Balance* 2018: 333).

Also, Iran's minister of foreign affairs, Mohammed Zarif had purportedly told a U.S. government official that he and his government did not control the foreign policy in Syria. Moreover, the IRGC Quds-Force commander, Qassem Soleimani has said to another U.S. government official that the IRGC is in control of Iran's foreign policy towards Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Afghanistan and Gaza (Akbarzadeh and Conduit 2016: 9f). This is very likely to be the case as the IRGC's engagement in e.g. Syria lines up perfectly with the Guards' institutional interests of power growth. For example, their Khatam al-Anbia is very capable of taking eventual contracts for the reconstruction of the war-torn Syria and the IRGC and the clerical leadership is able to mitigate the economic sanctions on the country through these enormously lucrative contracts:

(...) the I.R.G.C. will be the main beneficiary of Iran's role in Syria's reconstruction process. Two weeks ago, I.R.G.C. Chief Commander Major General Mohammad Ali Jafari revealed that the Guards, rather than the Iranian private sector or other state-run companies, will spearhead Syria's reconstruction efforts (Majidyar 2017).

One could deem it very likely that the role of the IRGC's QF is to embed the Guards militarily,

economically and politically in the surrounding neighborhood, seeking to create alliances for the Islamic Republic. The Guards would then have the power to direct the foreign policy conducted in these states, since they have the knowledge and the political power or support from the concrete politicians and/or populations in the state. They do also have a constitutional mandate to be involved in foreign affairs as long as they try to 'extend the supremacy of God's Law in the world' as mentioned earlier. The Guards can thus use their economic and political power and influence gained by their QF along with using their constitutional mandate to legitimize and direct how the clerical leadership should view the threats from its surrounding neighborhood and ultimately limit the regime's menu of foreign policy options.

One could thus argue that dealing with its close neighborhood, or core security interests, the IRGC is the commander-in-chief, making sure that the Guards institutional interests are safeguarded when Iran conducts its foreign policy and operations in the neighborhood. However, this strategy or power might be conflicting with the current, moderate government. The IRGC-QF assurance of strong IRGC alliances in the neighborhood sidelines the moderate government in decision-making and policy-implementation concerning foreign policy and could even lessen the grip of the clerical leadership.

In addition, the IRGC does still need to uphold its constitutional mandate, sticking to the clerical leadership's interests of regime security from domestic and foreign threats along with legitimacy through economic growth and safety. Nevertheless, a risk might lurk in this: at some point, the clerical leadership might not be able to reverse the IRGC's embedded role in domestic and foreign affairs, making the Guards an indispensable player in every part of the decision-making process and policy-implementation. If this power advance continues, the IRGC can become the one officially controlling the Islamic Republic of Iran, where the clerics and their ideology and principles are sidelined by the institutional, corporate interests of the IRGC and might even make the Guards overtake the office of the Supreme Leader after his death - and maybe this is already happening.

[The Islamic Republic versus the Revolutionary Guards](#)

As mentioned earlier, the IRGC controls core areas of the Iranian foreign and domestic policy decision-making and they are with their vast power and control able to narrow down the national

interests of the Islamic Republic to those which serve the institutional interests of the IRGC the best. This part argues that this serves as a great threat to the clerical leadership. The clerics' perceptions of the increasing power of the IRGC create the foundation for concrete balance initiatives, e.g. the election of Rouhani and his moderate policies, to reduce this power and get the control back into their hands.

The Ayatollah needs to ensure a broad spectrum of alliances inside Iran in order to balance the upcoming threats from the domestic scene in Iran and could be seen as why the moderate president, Hassan Rouhani got elected (and later reelected) right after the IRGC friendly and anti-reformist Ahmadinejad in 2013. Ali Alfoneh states that the Ayatollah might soon be a toppled and made a prisoner of the Guards' inclining power: *"More dangerously, the Supreme Leader's sole reliance on the Revolutionary Guards—should the IRGC manage to preserve its cohesion as a social group in Iranian politics—will make Khamenei a prisoner of his own praetorian guard, paving the way for a military dictatorship"* (Alfoneh 2013: 37 & 53).

Hereto, Alfoneh assesses that the IRGC expects to have a decisive and power position in the Islamic Republic: *"(...) regardless of whether the IRGC's concern about Turkcell was security or economic self-interest, the net result is the same: the IRGC expects to maintain its dominant position not only on the battlefield, but in civilian sectors as well"* (Alfoneh 2007). In relation to the economic part of this section, Hen-Tov and Gonzales argue that the IRGC's power is to be found among the private contractors along with a constitutional rationale that justifies the IRGC's status in the Iranian economy. They say the IRGC got part of the responsibility, along with its firms, for reconstructing the country after the Iran-Iraq war, where many companies under IRGC's management were merged into Khatam al-Anbia which became the leading contracting company in Iran's major industries.

One could argue that the aggressiveness of the IRGC in its core areas of interests are based off an unsatisfied position in the Islamic regime. Iran might not have won the war without the Guards' help, and the country might not have recovered this well if not for the Guards' reconstruction efforts. Sticking to the constitution and officially supporting the clerical leadership is only done as

long as needed, and it follows that the Guards have a core goal of completely and officially controlling the Islamic Republic. The IRGC's vast number of firms are contributing significant to the GDP, their decisive political positions and strong military and economic power give the Guards the ability to direct core Iranian domestic and foreign policy in their own key areas of interest. These power aspects constitute the foundation for a self-perceived entitlement to have the leadership in the Islamic Republic.

As a matter of course, the clerical leadership is aware of this prominent threat, and this could with ease be seen as why the moderate cleric and IRGC critic Hassan Rouhani was victorious in the 2013 presidential election. The current moderate government could be viewed as a direct threat to the institutional interests of the IRGC since they advocate a rapprochement to the West, a less confrontational and more diplomatic foreign policy towards the neighboring countries and most importantly, support a liberalization of the country's economy.

The president is openly supportive of the clerical leadership's agenda of reducing the IRGC's economical grip of the Islamic Republic and with the election of the cleric Hassan Rouhani, Clifton Sherrill argues that: *"Khamenei sought to reduce the IRGC's power by returning a cleric to the presidency and by restoring the regime's popular legitimacy at the polls. With Hassan Rouhani, Khamenei found the ideal candidate, a respected cleric who appealed to moderates but was loyal to the system"* (Sherrill 2014: 74). Sherrill further assesses that the clerical president has delivered as the Ayatollah and the clerical elite has hoped. Rouhani has regained popularity to the regime that the former president Ahmadinejad was missing and most importantly, Rouhani has weakened the political role of the Guards (ibid.).

Before Rouhani's reelection, he was certain that the IRGC needs to be under the control of the clerical leadership. He specifically sought to target the Guards economical control, trying to implement competitive conditions for the projects that the Guards have had little competition on before (Ghiles 2018). As mentioned earlier, the IRGC controls a massive business network, concerning many different companies and Hassan Rouhani have already discreetly started the crackdown on the Guards' power: *"In the past year, the guards, who have interests in sectors*

ranging from oil and gas to telecoms and construction, have had to restructure some holding companies and transfer ownership of others back to the state” (Bozorgmehr 2017).

In addition, some of its senior members have been arrested and the restructure or crackdown is being overseen by the joint chief of staff of the armed forces in Iran. Rouhani has, however increased the IRGC’s budget since the IRGC complained, arguing that they need their business to fund their engagement in the neighborhood (ibid.). Bozorgmehr states that the crackdown and the restructuring of the IRGC is only able to be done as long as the Supreme Leader lives: *“If the guards’ business interests are not rolled back today, they will take full control of the country after the leader’s death”* (ibid.) This could be the reason why the army is involved in the restructuring. They have a zero-sum perception of the power in Iran, and thus an institutional interest in getting a share of the power that the IRGC stands to lose. The crackdown is severely needed for the clerical leadership. It is not only the domestic affairs the IRGC taps its power from – it is also the foreign policy as aforementioned.

The corporation between the Ayatollah and the moderate president Hassan Rouhani is also prominent with relation to the Iranian foreign policy. The two clerics have jointly told the IRGC to stay away from foreign affairs: *“Rouhani told the Guards to stay out of politics, warning that the Corps should supplement political currents but should not accompany them and should not be engaged in them”* (Akbarzadeh & Conduit 2016: 143). The Ayatollah stressed the IRGC’s constitutional mandate, arguing that the political scene is not an area which the victorious Guard Corps contest: *“Khamenei supported Rouhani’s position, telling the IRGC that Iran needed to exercise “heroic flexibility” in foreign policy in a speech interpreted by observers as a warning that the guards should not get in Rouhani’s way”* (ibid.).

What is particularly interesting in these statements is the alliance between the traditional conservative clerics and the presumably moderate president and his moderate policies. How does this presumably unconventional alliance exist? One can argue that Rouhani might be the flagship for moderate policies, but one cannot completely assess his complete role and viewpoints without taking a closer look at the president’s background. He is a former regime-insider who has held lots

of positions of power. Rouhani has been the Representative of the Supreme Leader to the Supreme National Security Council and he has been in the Assembly of Experts as a member - but also as the head of the Political and Social Committee. In addition to this, he has been the Commander of the Iranian air defenses and the deputy commander of Iran's Armed Forces along with over 10 years of experience as the national security adviser to two different presidents (President.ir, CNN 2018 & Shanahan 2015: 2).

With this in mind, it appears more evident that the IRGC's power has grown to a level too uncomfortable for the clerical leadership due to their zero-sum perception of the power over the Islamic Republic. The presumable conservative Supreme Leader has sought to reduce the institutional power of the IRGC through openly supporting a moderate president who seeks a rapprochement to the West, threatening the IRGC's vast economic power in Iran by trying to bring in competitors for the Iranian market. However, the accumulated power the IRGC has managed to secure is not easily threatened. The Ayatollah seemingly sides with what best serves the clerical leadership's interests, which was the conservative and anti-reformist Ahmadinejad and is now the moderate, IRGC critic Rouhani. The shifting clerical alliance between the moderate and conservative factions might be needed in order to reduce the power of the Guards but is not likely to change anything drastically.

The institutional power the IRGC has accumulated throughout the years, has embedded the Guards in the Islamic Republic and its core areas through which the country draws its stability, power and security from. This could mark a shift from the traditional moderate-conservative power game to a new clerical-IRGC power game. In this new political landscape, the clerics need to ensure the survival of their Islamic style of governance without the help from those sworn to maintain their power and is not likely to happen. The IRGC needs to ensure their corporate, military and political power is increasing or at least sustained, which should be perceived as a zero-sum game with the clerics at the other side. Since the clerics have relied on their 'hidden' competitors to ensure their control, the Islamic Republic might become the Revolutionary Republic of Iran should this game continue.

Sub-conclusion

This section sought to examine the fourth factor of the hypothesis concerning the institutional interests of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps and how their power affects the Iranian decision-making and policy-implementation. It can hereto derive four findings.

Firstly, since the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the clerical leadership has needed the Guards to reduce domestic and foreign pressures towards the country. The Guards thus hold the responsibility to secure the country for internal and external threats. Throughout the years, the IRGC has used the Islamic Republic's constitution and the support of the leadership to legitimize and expand their broadly defined security role in the Islamic Republic and accumulate vast amounts of power that has embedded them in the core areas through which the country draws its power and security from.

Secondly, the IRGC's power has two aspects in contemporary Iran. Their economic power stems from the country's reconstruction after the Iran-Iraq war and has steadily increased to a level that makes the Guards control a vast business empire. Hereto, the Guards use their immense military power in conjunction with their economic power in order to safeguard their business interests.

Thirdly, the vast power the IRGC has gained throughout the years protecting the integrity of the Islamic Republic and its clerical leadership, has embedded them in the policy-implementation and decision-making in Iran. The Guards can direct major parts of the Islamic Republic's domestic and foreign policies and they are able to dictate what is considered national interests and threats. This embedded role makes them an indispensable player in the policy-creation of the Islamic Republic.

Fourthly, however, it is found that the clerical leadership most likely views the Guards' power as a zero-sum game, where Hassan Rouhani was elected to ensure that the power of the decision-making in Iran remains in the clerics' hands. Rouhani has reduced the IRGC's power and influence on the decision-making in Iran through the moderate foreign policy he has conducted: the rapprochement to the West, a diplomatic, less confrontational foreign policy towards the neighboring countries and the Western world and most importantly; his support of a liberalization of the country's economy have collectively diminished the power of the IRGC. Nonetheless, as the IRGC has managed to embed themselves in the Islamic Republic, their existence is not threatened.

Conclusion

This project sought to examine the hypothesis that the source of the incoherent foreign policy of Iran is found within the conflicting domestic scene and that the four domestic factors of the leaders' images, strategic culture, state-society relations and domestic institutions construct its foundation. The project can present four main findings in relation to this.

Firstly, the high-positioned, key leaders' different personal beliefs, values and perceptions of the international system have led to multiple foreign policy outcomes, approaches and engagements. On the one side, the moderate Hassan Rouhani and Mohammad Zarif share most of the same core values as the traditional, conservative decision-makers in Iran, which values the Islamic style of governance high. However, they both have a Western background and thus an advantageous understanding of the West. This make them deem a rapprochement to the West and a diplomatic, less confrontational approach to foreign policy the appropriate response to reducing the systemic pressures on the state and is seen as the reason for Iran's agreement to the joint-comprehensive plan of action.

On the other side, the moderates' rapprochement is disputed by the conservative key leaders' conservative-revolutionary perceptions of the international system, which are rooted in anti-imperialism and anti-Americanism. They perceive foreign powers responsible for domestic and regional conflicts, and they are convinced that foreign actors are actively engaged in Iran, seeking to undermine the integrity of the Islamic style of governance. They thus deem a stronger military and a more confrontational foreign policy with an active engagement in the region and especially in the neighboring states as the appropriate response to the systemic pressures and is seen in the Islamic Republic's engagement in Syria and Iraq.

Further adding to the inconsistent foreign policy, is the Supreme Leader's two-sided approach to the reduction of both foreign and domestic pressures, as he seeks to balance the factional politics in Iran. He attempts to ensure that Iran appears united with him as leader to both internal and external actors, as the opposite might threaten the foundation of his Islamic style of governance.

Ayatollah Khamenei perceives the international system through the same core values as the conservative-revolutionaries but he assessed that their confrontational foreign policy direction might threaten the Islamic Republic. He thus carefully advocated for the JCPOA and supported Rouhani's moderate efforts, as he deemed these the best approach to reduce both the domestic and foreign pressures on Iran. After the U.S. withdrawal of the JCPOA, the Supreme Leader shifted his position back to the hardliner, anti-Western stance, and is seen as a pragmatic attempt to satisfy the opposing conservative faction.

Secondly, the strategic culture in Iran consists of a core, embedded perception that shapes the Islamic Republic's foreign policy: independency from, and suspicion towards, foreign powers. This entrenched belief is rooted in the Persian Empire's long history of independency and sovereignty from foreign states, including independency in its decision-making and policy-implementation.

The Shah's rule from 1953 to the late 1970s increasingly ignited a belief that the country was under the control of a foreign, Western power, which led to the revolution. This created a greater support to the clerics' perceptions of anti-Americanism and anti-imperialism and founded the revolutionary strategic culture. This shaped the national interest and foreign policy to be based on independency in Iranian decision-making, a sustained Islamic style of governance, that is sought exported to similar Muslim countries, and the fight against foreign influence on Iran's sovereignty.

It also found that Iran's strategic culture has not varied significantly as the clerical leadership and their Islamic Republic's constitution still shape the foundation of Iran's domestic and foreign policy. This includes a focus on nationalism, independence and a critical view of foreign powers' engagements in the Middle East and especially in the neighboring states.

Hereto, the strategic culture in Iran is, apart from the clerical leadership and the history, also influenced by the increasing power of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. The IRGC has since president Ahmadinejad taken up a vast amount of the parliamentary seats and positions in the decision-making and policy-implementation processes in the central administration. This strengthens the revolutionary strategic culture but is gradually being challenged by the waning

ideological and revolutionary support of the population as there is no imminent, foreign threat towards the country. Consequently, the strategic culture is likely to slowly shift towards a more moderate perception of foreign powers and a corporative, less ideological approach to foreign policy.

Thirdly, the relation between the state and the society has through Iran's last centuries necessitated the Islamic Republic to respond to popular demands, shaping its foreign policy options. The low degree of harmony during the Shah led to a revolution that increased the harmony, but consequently enabled the clerics to gain a monopoly in the Iranian decision-making and policy-implementation. This allowed the government to conduct foreign and domestic policies that consisted of their own core principles: Islam and anti-imperialism.

However, the population gradually got dissatisfied with the clerics' power and policies, which necessitated the clerical leadership to respond to this growing domestic pressure and permitted the moderate cleric, Mohammad Khatami to run for president. Khatami won and the foreign policy of Iran shifted towards a rapprochement to the West, rooted in Khatami's moderate principles of corporation and diplomacy, and brought a high degree of harmony.

In spite of this, the successor to Khatami, the IRGC-affiliated hardliner Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, caused a low degree of harmony between the state and the society. This led to the establishment of the Green Movement which sought to shift the low degree of harmony and bring moderate politics back on Iran's domestic and foreign policy agenda. The moderate ideas and principles have throughout the years gained support with the core reason that the Iranian population is progressively lacking the significant experiences that shape the clerical leaders' perceptions of the international system and how to appropriately respond to its stimuli.

The contemporary youth of Iran constitutes a significant part of the population, which increasingly demands a Western rapprochement, democracy, freedom and secularism domestically along with a greater diplomatic, corporate and less confrontational foreign policy. This is directly contrasting the clerical leadership and the hardliners' religious, ideological worldviews and policies and causes

a low degree of harmony. These domestic pressures led to the election of yet another moderate president: Hassan Rouhani.

Rouhani successfully managed to bring back a high degree of harmony and had reduced both the domestic and systemic pressures on the country. He has through his rapprochement to the West opened Iran to the international system, bettered the economy while not threatening the clerical leadership's power. The conservative, IRGC-affiliated side has attempted to stop Rouhani's moderate policies, but as the healthier economy serves the whole population, the conservative faction has seen a decline in support from its otherwise faithful voters.

Additionally, the conservative, hardline approach to the foreign policy in Syria, Iraq and Yemen has led to an increasing dissatisfaction among the population in Iran, which urges the government to prioritize domestic problems over foreign engagements and systemic pressures. It is thus likely that the moderate policies in the medium to long term direct the majority of the domestic and foreign policies in Iran.

Fourthly, the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps is found to have a significant impact on the decision-making and policy-implementation in both the domestic and foreign affairs in Iran. The establishment of the Guards rooted in the clerical need for protection of their new Islamic regime and to ensure domestic stability after the revolution. Hereto, the IRGC's broadly-defined role as a security institution has progressively enabled the Guards to accumulate substantial economic and military power since its establishment.

In contemporary Iran, the IRGC has, by using these two power aspects in conjunction with each other, embedded themselves in the decision-making and policy-implementation in Iran and has ensured that Iran's domestic and foreign policies are serving the business and military interests of the Guards. This enables the Guards to direct major elements of the domestic and foreign policy of Iran along with allowing the Guards to define the Islamic Republic's national interests and how it perceives, defines and responds to threats from the international system of states.

However, it is also found that the vast power of the Guards is gradually threatening the integrity of the Islamic style of governance and the clerical leadership, where the clerics perceive the Guards' rising power in the Islamic Republic as a zero-sum game. As a result of this, Hassan Rouhani was approved by the Supreme Leader to not only reduce the domestic pressures from the population like Khatami, but also from his own Revolutionary Guards.

Consequently, the moderate clerical president has shifted the foreign policy towards a rapprochement to the West, which opened Iran to international competition for its market. He has additionally conducted a less military-active and more diplomatic foreign policy towards the regional neighborhood. This was done in order to reduce the IRGC's influence economically and militarily in addition to better the harmony between the state and the society. The competition threatens the businesses of the IRGC, and a less militarily active Iran reduces the need for the IRGC's vast military power and budget.

Although the clerics have attempted to reduce the IRGC's impact on Iran's domestic and foreign policy decision-making, the Guards are considered an indispensable actor in every level of the decision-making process in the Islamic Republic. The IRGC are very likely to continuously direct Iran's policies in its core areas of military and business interests and stand to only increase its power and influence in the Islamic Republic of Iran in the future. Additionally, they are on the long term likely to take over the leadership of the country from the clerics.

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