



<https://doi.org/10.48269/2451-0610-ksm-2023-1-003>

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Realism, idealism or opportunism? Iran's reason of state in foreign policy towards Russia

Introduction

Since the end of the Cold War, the Islamic Republic of Iran has significantly increased its political holdings in the Middle East, the Caucasus and Central Asia. They did it mostly by using political changes caused by the uprising in the 1990s in quasi-anarchic turmoil after the collapse of the USSR. On the other hand, the 21st century brought with it to the Middle East *inter alia* the US intervention in Afghanistan, the war in Lebanon, the ruin of Iraq, the Arab Spring, political changes in Turkey, the emergence of ISIS/DAESH and the return of Russia as an active element of the political puzzle in the region. Above events resulting from long-term socio-political processes also contributed to a significant strengthening of Iran's position. For many years, Tehran patiently rebuilt its tarnished revolution, war with Iraq and sanctions limited economy. It was equally meticulous about expanding its influence in the region, at the expense of his main rivals. Thanks to extremely favourable political circumstances, in particular the disintegration of Iraq and Afghanistan and the Arab Spring, Iran

‘emerged’ from its mountain stronghold and re-emerged as a regional power. Despite the initial competition for influence in the post-Soviet states (Armenia, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan), in the face of Russia’s obvious advantage at the time and the need to focus on the main threat that Iran has considered the US to be since 1979, the Islamic republic improved relations with Russia and strengthened the message, which positioned Iran as a revisionist force actively seeking to change the US-created post-colonial and post-imperial balance of power at the regional level.¹

This paper’s aim is not to analyze the behavior of Iran toward Russia in details. Instead it seeks to indicate the main sources and currents that mold the general pattern of Iran’s foreign policy and propose the explanation of Iran’s actions in regard to Russia. The paper shortly analyses, political dualities like pragmatism vs. idealism, decision making through the institutions of the revolution vs. parliamentary democracy, Iran’s desire for recognition as a regional power vs. forward defensive approach and last but not least an accurate terminology to use in a broader debate about Iranian policy.

***Raison d’etat* or national interest? Definitions, concepts, ambiguities related to the Iranian political system**

At the beginning it is worth mentioning why the term the ‘reason of state’ (or more widely known *raison d’etat*) usage in relation to the subject is more accurate than the more common ‘national interest.’ This is important for a proper understanding of the ontological foundations on which Iran’s policy towards Russia is based. Arkady Rzegocki criticizes the traditional concept of *raison d’etat*, which boils down to the praise of absolute power and the supremacy of the interest of the state over the interests of citizens, and points to the anachronism of such a concept. He distinguishes two concepts of *raison d’etat*: traditional (connected with complex relations between the sacred and the profane) and modern (where the state is superior to citizens).² Klaudia Kałużna and Remigiusz Rosicki, agree with the thesis about the anachronism of the primacy of the state (as an *essential entity* per se, being more important than the welfare of citizens), treat the

¹ As the Par. 3:16 of the Iranian Constitution defines “[...] framing the foreign policy of the country on the basis of Islamic criteria, fraternal commitment to all Muslims, and unsparing support to the freedom fighters of the world.” Par. 154 expresses it equally explicitly. Full text of the English translation of the constitution at: “Constitution of Iran”, www.servat.unibe.ch/icl/ir00000_.html [accessed: 3.07.2023].

² A. Rzegocki, *Racja stanu a polska tradycja myślenia o polityce*, Kraków: Ośrodek Myśli Politycznej, 2008, pp. 15–18.

national interest as a category related to the community of citizens, and not to the state as a political entity.³

However, referring to the nation as a relatively unified community is problematic from the point of view of the theory of international relations. As Kałużna and Rosicki note, one can abstractly assume a situation where the nation will represent other interests that may be contrary to political actions. An example of this is the opposition of American society to participate in the Vietnam war. The concept of interest presented in this way should be extended with elements of social influence, as well as the possibility of shaping the interest in the consciousness of the nation, not only in terms of the actions taken by political decision-makers. Such an extension of the concept of interest would go beyond the traditional definition of the national interest as the interest of the state.⁴ George Modelski, on the other hand, tries not to use the concept of national interest at all, because it is not, in his opinion, legible. According to him, this category would suggest the existence of a coherent national community with a common interest, which seems impossible due to the multiplicity of interests put forward by various groups within the state and society.⁵

In the case of Iran, this is particularly evident because, despite the roots of the state embedded in the mass revolutionary movement, the current political system and the practical implementation of its paradigms, means that the vital needs and demands of large numbers of Iranians are marginalized or even considered harmful from the point of view of the priorities set by the *rahbar*.⁶ Iranian society is extremely atomized in its views. In its spectrum we will find both radical apologists of the Islamic republic ready to die (and kill) at the

³ K. Kałużna, R. Rosicki, "O interesie narodowym i racji stanu – rozważania teoretyczne", *Przegląd Politologiczny*, vol. 1, 2013, p. 120.

⁴ *Ibid.*, p. 124.

⁵ G. Modelski, *A Theory of Foreign Policy*, London: Cambridge University Press, 1962, pp. 70–72.

⁶ This is evidenced by, for example, the fuel protests, which were a reaction to the increase of fuel prices without a political charge, the less intense but still important farmers' protests in Isfahan, and the protests after the death of Mahsa Amini, carrying a very large political and emotional charge. The issue of political marginalization of some elites and their current voters is also very important. See more at M. Krzyżanowski, "Iranian Parliament and its Political Role after the Recent Elections", *Mena Monitor*, 22.02.2022, www.warsawinstitute.org/iranian-parliament-political-role-recent-elections [accessed: 3.07.2023]; M. Tomczak, "Czy protestujący obalą reżim w Iranie?", *Oko.press*, 24.10.2022, www.oko.press/czy-protestujacy-obala-rezim-w-iranie- [accessed: 3.07.2023]; M. Krzyżanowski, "Czy Iran wróci do rewolucyjnych korzeni", *Dział Zagraniczny*, 8.12.2022, <https://dzialzagraniczny.pl/2022/12/czy-iran-wroci-do-rewolucyjnych-korzeni> [accessed: 3.07.2023].

behest of the *rahbar*, as well as people who morbidly fight the ruling system. The number of citizens who do not identify themselves with their state and actively contest it is steadily growing. Therefore, from the point of view of policy, the Iranian nation cannot be treated as one, egalitarian collectivity, and thus the category of ‘national interest’ is of little use, especially considering Iranian foreign policy. This is an otherwise interesting composition with Weber’s behavioral-instrumental definition of power, mentioned by Kałużna and Rosicki. The first part of this definition assumes that the relationship of power is of a conflict nature, because it is based on the imposition of one’s own interest by the holder of power, which does not always have to be the same as the interest of the people affected by it. The second element of this definition implies that the state has legally sanctioned centers of violence that enable the achievement of its goals.⁷ This is very relevant in the case of Iran, as evidenced, for example, by the authorities’ approach to the recent protests after the death of Mahsa Amini (September 2022–March 2023) and their brutal pacification.

In the case of Iran, the analysis of its policy is additionally complicated, because unique features of the Iranian political system defies simple categorization. First of all, the Iranian state claims to own religious sanction. The Islamic republic is not only a form of government, but also a system that is also a tool for establishing the Islamic government (*hokumat-e eslami*). The most important documents defining the framework of the system explicitly indicate the supremacy of religion over the good of citizens. The official doctrine which is the basis of Iran’s current system, i.e. *velayat-e faqih*, assumes that the country is headed by a supreme leader (*rahbar-e moazzam-e enqelab-e islami*), which can only be a Muslim cleric, because only such a person is qualified to lead the country on the patch of sharia.⁸ This leads to interesting paradoxes. Namely, the *rahbar* (as a religious authority, not a political one in the strict sense) may, in extreme situations, temporarily suspend religious duties, as long as it would serve the good of the state (and thus the religion promoted by it) in the long run. Similarly, the *rahbar* may, by personal decree, suspend existing laws, including the constitution.⁹ The grounds for the post-revolutionary state of Iran were clearly laid out by ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini, stating that “the government (state) which is a part of the absolute vice-regency of the Prophet of God is one of

⁷ K. Kałużna, R. Rosicki, *op. cit.*

⁸ Such leadership will prevent any deviation by the various organs of State from their essential Islamic duties. “Constitution of Iran”, *op. cit.*

⁹ H. Mavani, “Khomeini’s Concept of Governance of the Jurisconsult (*Wilayat al-Faqih*) Revisited”, *The Middle East Journal*, vol. 67, no. 2, Spring 2013, pp. 214–215.

the primary injunctions (*akhhkam-e avvaliye*) of Islam and has priority over all other secondary injunctions, even prayers, fasting and Hajj.”¹⁰

During the post-Khomeini era in Iran, *rahbar* has initially played a crucial role as a balancing force, adapting to the shifting dynamics of both domestic and foreign conditions. Throughout this period, there has been a gradual inclination towards the more radical factions within Iran. The supreme leader has skilfully managed to maintain a balance among Iran’s diverse political groups, depending on the prevailing circumstances gaining more authority at the same time. For instance, when the United States encroached upon Iran’s borders in 2001 and 2003 ayatollah Ali Khamenei adopted a relatively appeasement oriented approach. He aligned himself with the pragmatists and, in October 2003, agreed to sign the additional Protocol of the Nuclear Non-proliferation Treaty (NPT), which included provisions for a comprehensive inspection regime. This decision was made despite calls from the radicals to reject the NPT. Furthermore, in November 2004, Khamenei consented to postpone the uranium-enrichment projects and abandon the completion of the nuclear fuel cycle. It was only in August 2005, following President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad’s declaration of election victory, that Khamenei reversed his position and supported Ahmadinejad’s policy of reactivating Iran’s uranium enrichment program. This shift demonstrated a change in stance by the Supreme Leader, aligning with the more assertive and radical approach advocated by Ahmadinejad. Throughout these instances ayatollah Khamenei strategically balanced the interests and demands of various political factions within Iran, adapting his position based on the prevailing circumstances and the specific domestic and foreign policy challenges faced by the country.¹¹ However, over time, the *rahbar* shifted the center of gravity towards the radicals and allowed the IRGC to gain unprecedented importance in the country’s politics and economy. The final stimulus that led to the marginalization of centrists and reformists turned out to be the breaking of the JCPOA by Donald Trump in 2018. This event entailed a number of changes in Iran’s internal and external policy, including *rahbar*’s decisions about the so-called pivot to the East.¹²

¹⁰ M. Moslem, “Ayatollah Khomeini’s role in the rationalization of the Islamic government”, *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies*, vol. 8, no. 14, 1999, p. 81.

¹¹ I. Salamey, Z. Othman, “Shia Revival and *Welayat Al-Faqih* in the Making of Iranian”, *Foreign Policy, Politics, Religion & Ideology*, vol. 12, no. 2, June 2011, p. 204.

¹² See more at S.H. Mousavian, “Iran’s New Doctrine: Pivot to the East”, *The Diplomat*, 5.10.2020, www.thediplomat.com/2020/10/irans-new-doctrine-pivot-to-the-east [accessed: 20.04.2023] and S. Jafari, “Trump Has Pushed Iran Into China’s Arms”, *Foreign Policy*, 8.08.2020, www.foreignpolicy.com/2020/08/08/trump-has-pushed-iran-into-chinas-arms [accessed: 20.04.2023].

This is all the more important from the point of view of considerations on the question of whether Iranian foreign policy is guided by the reason of state based on realism or is it an idealistic one? The political idealism of Iran is visible primarily in the political foundations of the republic, which was created as a result of a grassroots revolutionary uprising. In practice, however, *rahbars* were guided by realism and sacrificed ideology in the name of the interests of the state as it was seen in the case of events of the Arab Spring in Bahrain. The policy of the Islamic Republic towards Shiite communities in Bahrain has proven to be multi-faceted and complex, which stands in contrast to its clear and explicit paradigm of supporting the revolution and the ‘Islamic awakening,’ which significantly damaged its credibility. In case of Syria Iranian rhetoric quickly excluded the Syrian issue from the realm of revolution, which it had previously labelled as part of the Islamic Awakening as Arab Spring was mainly called in Iranian medias. The Iranian narrative described the situation in Syria in terms similar to those used against internal protests in Iran after the 2009 presidential election, such as ‘sedation,’ ‘treason’ and ‘foreign conspiracies.’¹³ In this significant case religious idealism lost to pragmatism.

This turn of events has an extensive theological background. Among the Shia clerics, there are many views on both the religious and political competence of the *rahbar* and the source of his power. Opinion ranges from seeing him as a leader chosen by the clergy in recognition of his theological competence, to seeing him as the regent and representative of the Hidden Imam on whose behalf he exercises power on earth. This power, despite some signs of democracy, is not based on the will of the people and is not dependent on it. In the most extreme version of this interpretation, *rahbar* has sole power to govern, and concepts such as democracy and politics are considered irrelevant in view of his divine mandate.¹⁴ The Iranian theological currents nowadays are significantly increasing the number of supporters of the thesis of the mystical legitimacy of the *rahbar’s* power, and he himself has managed to marginalize all other centers of power, effectively becoming an autocrat. His theological vision became the most important determinant of Iran’s policy goals. Therefore is justified to say that in case of Iran the *raison d’état* is superior to the national interest (understood as the good of the community), because

¹³ See details at L.J. Cerioli, “Roles and International Behaviour: Saudi–Iranian Rivalry in Bahrain’s and Yemen’s Arab Spring”, *Contexto Internacional*, no. 40(2), 2018, p. 299 and S. Chubin, “Iran and the Arab Spring: Ascendancy Frustrated”, *GRC Gulf Papers*, no. 9, 2012, p. 5.

¹⁴ A. Nader, D. Thaler, S.D. Bohandy, *The Next Supreme Leader*, Santa Monica: RAND, 2011, p. 20.

the state, or more precisely, state power, is an instrument for the implementation of God's plan. This concept focuses on the traditional view of the national interest as the interest of the state, which in turn is dictated by the need to fulfil God's will.

Interestingly, in the context of deliberations on the nature of politics and the possible validity of theses proclaimed by the supporters of realism in international relations, according to Charles Beard, the concept of *raison d'état* was replaced by the concept of national interest along with the suppression of theological norms from the public space in the West and secularization. This phenomenon resulted from the competition between the 'old order' represented by the interests of the dynasty and the 'new economic force' represented by the bourgeoisie. The victory of the bourgeoisie made economic priorities the main factor shaping the perception of the national interest of states.¹⁵ In the case of Iran, we are dealing with a post-revolutionary return of theology to the political scene, with the growing importance of the alliance between the mosque and the bazaar and the subsequent reliance of the authorities on the IRGC military-industrial conglomerate.

Among the group of scholars who questioned the existence of the category of one universal national interest and denied its definition was Raymond Aron. Instead of the overriding national interest, Aron formulated two groups of features of international relations: eternal and historical. An autonomous political entity, i.e. the state, thanks to its power and potential, strives to achieve the basic eternal goal, which is survival, i.e. its own security in an antagonized international environment. Unlike Henry Morgenthau, however, Aron did not believe that the strength of a given political unit was autonomously equivalent to its security.¹⁶ An example is the Third Reich under the rule of Adolf Hitler, who, using the strength and potential of the German state, irrationally led to the collapse and almost destruction of Germany. Iran, contrary to appearances, behaves rationally and fulfils the goals formulated by Khomeini. Russia is far less of a threat to Iran than the US.

As rightly noted by Imad Salamey and Zanoobia Othman, it is crucial to acknowledge that the foundation of the regime is rooted in religion. Therefore, the exclusion of "ideologism" from the scope of analysis cannot be completely disregarded. Khomeini introduced a Shia tradition of religious and political emulation, which required a shift from individual choice and preference

¹⁵ R. Wordliczek, *Regionalny wymiar interesu narodowego Stanów Zjednoczonych Ameryki*, Kraków: Wydawnictwo UJ, 2019, p. 34.

¹⁶ R. Aron, *Pokój i wojna między narodami*, trans. A. Mielczarek, Warszawa: Centrum im. A. Smitha, 1994, p. 100; R. Wordliczek, *op. cit.*, pp. 70–72.

to an institutionalized Vatican-like 'Popeism' (which *velayat-e faqih* resembles in most political aspects). In his work 'Islamic Government,' Khomeini emphasized that the faqih's knowledge of Islamic law and justice is a prerequisite for assuming *velaya* (leadership) and subsequently establishing a just and universal Islamic government, which constitutes the core purpose of the existence of the Islamic Republic.¹⁷ Comparing two countries of Islamic identity, Saudi Arabia and Iran, Przemysław Osiewicz stated that although ideology holds significant influence in both countries, it should not be assumed that their leaders make decisions solely based on ideological beliefs. Rational political calculations also come into play. In both Iran and Saudi Arabia, the ultimate authority lies with the current Supreme Leader and the Saudi King, respectively, when it comes to crucial political issues. However, it is important to note that the Iranian system is unique in that it assumes *rahbar* serves as both a political leader and the spiritual guide of the nation, acting on behalf of the hidden Twelfth Imam. Consequently, the supreme leader's political position carries a metaphysical aspect in addition to its practical implications.¹⁸

In connection with the above, it can be concluded that Iranian policy, including foreign policy, is based on an idealistic (even messianic) foundation, and idealism co-shapes the paradigms of the Iranian *raison d'état*. Is idealism the dominant factor? As Rafał Wordliczek noticed, according to realists, the current realities of the international order and the ability of individual states to adapt to these realities are crucial for their survival in an anarchic political system. Conflicts between participants in international relations are a natural element of the global system, and peace is only a temporary ceasefire between them. Hence, the period of peace is used to accumulate resources and increase strategic potential in the event of a conflict that could threaten the key paradigm of *raison d'état*, i.e. the physical survival of the state.¹⁹ Iran, due to the constant threat from the US and Israel (leaving aside at this point how much this threat is caused by Iran's aggressive attitude on the international arena and the sense of threat caused by the Iranian nuclear program and how much by the hostile attitude of the US) fits perfectly into this canon of thinking. However, instead of references to the famous Machiavellian advice to the prince, ayatollah Khomeini is quoted, in whose words one can find the foundations of defensive realism and preventive defence.

¹⁷ I. Salamey, Z. Othman, *op. cit.*, p. 201, more at *Velayat-e Faqih*.

¹⁸ P. Osiewicz, "Ideological Determinants of the Current Saudi-Iranian Rivalry in the Middle East", *Przegląd Polityczny*, nr 2, 2016, p. 122.

¹⁹ R. Wordliczek, *op. cit.*, p. 37.

The superpowers are intent on opposing Islam at present. The other puppet regimes would do likewise. [...] Is it Iran that threatens them or is it Islam? If they call on the Arabs to unite, it is a call to unity against Islam. They consider Islam to be against their interests. [...] We have no recourse but to mobilize all of the faithful forces of the Islamic Revolution, and with the mobilization of forces in every region, we must strike fear into the hearts of our enemies so that the idea of invasion and the destruction of our Islamic Revolution will exit from their minds. If our revolution does not have an internationalistic and aggressive worldview the enemies of Islam will once again enslave us culturally and politically.²⁰

Despite those grim predictions the actions of the main enemy of the revolution were, by the long term, beneficial for Iran's position in the region as it took the opportunity created by US military endeavours. The 'war on terror' (including invasion of Afghanistan and more importantly – Iraq) has had significant implications for Iran's foreign policy agenda. It not only eliminated key obstacles to Iran's expansionist goals but also provided a rational pretext rooted in the ideological Shia revival to justify those objectives. A closer examination of Iranian strategy in Middle Eastern regional hotspots reveals a shift towards a more offensive realist foreign policy. The presence of an anarchic international system and pervasive mistrust among states often necessitate a rational survival strategy based on offensive militarism. The rise of a strong transnational Shia ideological orientation, inspired by the Supreme Leader, complements the principles of offensive realism. Offensive realism acknowledges that states may pursue goals beyond security, such as economic prosperity and the promotion of specific ideologies like pan-Islamic unity, to enhance their power. Iranian radicals have capitalized on this, guided by the Supreme Leader, to extend Iran's influence beyond its borders. While Iran's state-centric pragmatism may seek international normalization and state-building, ambitious radical visions and a desire for leadership beyond mere survival often hinder these efforts. That's the reason why any analysis of Iranian foreign policy must consider the regional focus on Shia revival and its connection to the concept of *velayat-e faqih*. Despite some predictions suggesting a shift towards a pragmatic post-revolutionary state foreign policy, Iran appears to be experiencing a 'double movement.' On one hand, as the regime matures, pragmatic considerations become increasingly important for the state's survival. This may involve economic cooperation with other states to ensure domestic growth or regional collaboration to address

²⁰ A. Ostovar, "Sectarian Dilemmas in Iranian Foreign Policy: When Strategy and Identity Politics Collide", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 30.11.2018, www.carnegieendowment.org/2016/11/30/sectarian-dilemmas-in-iranian-foreign-policy-when-strategy-and-identity-politics-collide-pub-66288 [accessed: 15.05.2023].

common security threats. Such considerations prioritize practical interests over ideological preferences, as evident in Iran's cooperation with the United States in Afghanistan and Iraq. On the other hand, ideological considerations complement political calculations, especially when the surrounding environment fuels domestic divisions and awakens long-standing suspicions. In such circumstances, the regime reverts to revolutionary strategies and rhetoric, transcending the state's immediate domestic interests.²¹

As indicated by Eskander Sadeghi-Borujerdi, some researchers consider Iranian foreign policy as a manifestation of the application of the assumptions of offensive realism and the concept of Aron relating to the existence of 'eternal' interests. The core element that remains constant and unchanging in Iran's case is its 'imperial ambition' that serves as a driving force behind its foreign policy. This ambition is coupled with a religious worldview that rejects the principles of the traditional international order. However, the argument presented suggests that instead of being exclusively aggressive and sectarian, the Islamic Republic should be perceived as a 'regional middle power.' Its foreign policy has predominantly been shaped by the systemic insecurity within a regional system influenced by dominant global powers. The historical evolution of Iran's security policies after the revolution is intricately intertwined with its adoption of asymmetric 'strategies of opposition.' These policies often involve providing financial and military support to co-sectarian groups that are politically responsive. These processes align with security crises, issues of trust, and legitimacy in weak states, ultimately fueling the dynamics of sectarianism in local and regional conflicts.²²

Iran has frequently been perceived by the West as a threat and a significant concern for regional stability in the Middle East. In the realm of international relations theory, there exist two contrasting explanations for Iran's aggressive (or defensive – depends of a point of view) behaviour. The first theory posits that Iran views a chance to establish itself as a regional hegemon, aiming to capitalize on various opportunities and assert dominance, both economically and politically, over the Middle East. This perspective suggests that Iran seeks to attain an imperial position in the region, encompassing cultural and societal influence as well. On the other hand, the theory of defensive realism offers an alternative interpretation. According to this viewpoint, Iran's engagement in

²¹ I. Salamey, Z. Othman, *op. cit.*, p. 211.

²² E. Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, "Strategic Depth, Counterinsurgency & the Logic of Sectarianization: Perspectives on the Islamic Republic of Iran's Security Doctrine and Its Regional Implications", [in:] *Sectarianization: Mapping the New Politics of the Middle East*, eds. N. Hashemi, D. Postel, London–New York: Hurst, Oxford University Press, 2016, pp. 1–2.

aggressive behaviour is driven by a need for self-preservation in an unpredictable and chaotic world of international politics. In this narrative, Iran perceives itself as vulnerable to external threats and adopts a defensive stance, seeking to safeguard its national security interests through proactive measures.

These competing theories attempt to explain the motives behind Iran's actions and its approach to regional dynamics. They reflect the differing perspectives within the field of IR regarding Iran's objectives and the underlying factors influencing its behavior in the Middle East. Iranian state ratio paradigms are simple – achieving economic self-sufficiency, international legitimacy, regional security, power and influence and finally to overthrow what it sees as the US-dominated global political order. All those to guarantee survival of the Islamic republic in an unfriendly environment.²³ Khomeini considered imperialism, particularly that of the US and Israel, to be the main enemy of Iran, the Muslim world, and the Third World. He believed that the interests of these hegemonic powers were based on politically, economically and culturally subjugating the underprivileged nations, plundering their resources and confiscating their territorial independence.²⁴ Due to the fact that today the USA is considered both the greatest threat to the physical existence of the Islamic republic and the greatest ideological threat (through the 'moral corruption' spread by the USA, which threatens Islam), and Iran in a possible open clash with the world hegemon would become in a lost position, then all other threats necessarily become secondary. Consequently, as the practice after 1979 shows, Iran is guided in its foreign policy by anti-Americanism rooted in religion and fear of a US military attack and Washington's policy aimed at 'regime change' in Tehran.

This could lead to simple conclusion that Iranian foreign policy is based on defensive realism flavored with Islamic idealism. However, many critical theorists, exemplified by Robert W. Cox, express dissatisfaction with neorealism's inflexibility in adapting to evolving circumstances. They contend that neorealists disregard the historical context and mistakenly ascribe a universally applicable value to the state-centric framework of international relations. Critical theorists advocate for an analysis encompassing ideas, material factors, and social forces, aiming to comprehend the origins of this structure and its potential for transformation. They argue that neorealism perpetuates exclusionary practices and a quest for dominance, while neglecting alternative

²³ Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's inaugural address to the Non-Aligned Movement Summit on 30.08.2012, "Part II: Khamenei on U.N./World Order", *The Iran Primer*, 31.08.2012, <https://iranprimer.usip.org/blog/2012/aug/31/part-ii-khamenei-unworld-order> [accessed: 22.06.2023].

²⁴ I. Salamey, Z. Othman, *op. cit.*, p. 201.

approaches and the historical evolution of identity construction. However, when realism transforms into a rigid dogma, it loses its effectiveness. By adhering strictly to a state-centric and oversimplified framework like neorealism, and by rejecting the potential for any advancements in international relations, realism itself becomes an ideology. Its focus on power dynamics and national interests can be exploited to legitimize acts of aggression. Consequently, it is necessary to replace such theories with frameworks that more accurately reflect the dynamic and evolving nature of global politics.²⁵

Extensive researches have been dedicated to gaining theoretical insight into the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic. A range of theories, from positivism to post-positivism, have been employed as conceptual frameworks to explore Iran's foreign policy. According to Seyed Jalal Dehghani-Firouzabadi, classical or structural realism emerges as the prevailing paradigm that most accurately characterizes the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Nonetheless, simply applying international relations theories to analyze Iran's foreign policy without necessary adjustments and adaptations would be insufficient. This is due to the distinctive Islamic, revolutionary, and developing identity and nature of the Islamic Republic of Iran, which introduce additional limitations and considerations that hinder the complete explanatory capacity of such theories. One notable limitation stems from the context and nature of international relations theories, predominantly shaped by Western values and perspectives aimed at maintaining the existing international order or establishing a desired global structure. Furthermore, the dominance of realism in post-World War II international relations studies has confined the discipline to the relationships and interests of major powers, marginalizing developing countries and excluding their foreign policies and relationships from the purview of such theories. Consequently, mainstream international relations theories lack the capability to thoroughly analyze and comprehend the foreign policy behavior of states whose history, culture, and values diverge significantly from the Western world. However, despite the limitations imposed by theoretical and conceptual frameworks, it is crucial not to perceive the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran as an inexplicable phenomenon. As Dehghani-Firouzabadi noted, to gain a comprehensive understanding, paradigms must incorporate three distinct levels of analysis: the third world perspective, the revolutionary nature, and the Islamic identity and essence

²⁵ W.J. Korab-Karpowicz, "Political Realism in International Relations", [in:] *The Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy*, ed. E.N. Zalta, <https://plato.stanford.edu/entries/realism-intl-relations/#KennWaltInteSyst> [accessed: 10.04.2023].

of Iran, and how these factors shape its foreign policy variables. Mainstream positivist theories in international relations, particularly realism, whether classical or structural, are inadequate for this task. They primarily focus on the positions and foreign policies of major powers, while underestimating the dynamics of developing countries. Furthermore, they tend to overlook the role of non-materialistic structures and capabilities in shaping foreign policy, such as national identity, revolutionary character, and the predominant Islamic and ideological discourse that significantly influence the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran. These theories also fail to consider the communicative and critical rationality evident in Iranian foreign policy, and they view Iran solely through the lens of interest-based rational choices, disregarding its unique motivations, objectives, and foreign policy behaviours. Given the differences in conceptualization, one can utilize critical theory of the Frankfurt School, to conceptualize Iran's foreign policy with necessary modifications to its principles and assumptions. Critical theory, rooted in the notion of 'homo-sociologicus,' diverges from rational choice theories that centre on the analysis of 'homo-economicus' as the fundamental actor. In critical theory, the actor is not driven solely by self-interest, profit-seeking, or isolated objectives, but is inherently social and context-oriented. Foreign policy, within the framework of critical theory, is defined and analysed in a distinct manner compared to other conceptual frameworks. It perceives foreign policy as a pursuit of emancipation from hegemonic and oppressive structures in the global system, aiming to safeguard and actualize aspirations and foreign objectives. Hence, the concept of emancipation assumes a pivotal role in analysing the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran.²⁶ Those assumptions above lay in a line with the thesis of R.K. Ramazani, who argues that there are four ideal types of interest as guides to foreign policy in Iran's modern history are: sultanic (prerevolutionary), ideological-Islamic, pragmatic-Islamic, and democratic-Islamic. Each one except outdated sultanic, it is made of many interpenetrating layers and various proportions of messianic manifest of destiny and technocracy.²⁷ Moreover, academic investigations of the post-1979 constitution that emphasize Islamic internationalism have led many analysts to conclude that the foreign policy of the IRI is idealistic rather than realistic, but it is more realistic not to say-opportunistic in its nature. The question if offensive

²⁶ S.J. Dehghani-Firouzabadi, "Emancipating Foreign Policy: Critical Theory and Islamic Republic of Iran's Foreign Policy", *The Iranian Journal of International Affairs*, vol. 20, no. 3, Summer 2008, pp. 2–6.

²⁷ R.K. Ramazani, "Reflections on Iran's Foreign Policy: Defining the 'National Interests'", [in:] *Iran at the crossroads*, ed. J. Esposito, New York: Palgrave, 2001, p. 211.

or defensive realism is prevailing remains open, however more arguments are supporting defensive approach.²⁸

Contrary to popular misconception, Iran does not choose its partners based on their shared affiliation with Shia Islam. To enjoy Iranian support, actors must defy the status quo, defined by a regional order dominated by the United States and its local partners, especially Israel and Saudi Arabia; they don't necessarily have to be Shiites. This is why Hamas and Islamic Jihad – Sunni nationalist groups opposed to Israel – are Iran's partners in the Palestinian territories. Iran has also provided limited and discreet support to the Taliban, an extreme Sunni group in Afghanistan with which it has had conflicts in the past.²⁹ Instead on simple sectarian approach Iran is using rather the *mostazafin-mostakberin* ontological division where 'oppressed' can be any entity (state and non-state) standing against US interests, position and activities.

Iran's reason of state and the war in Ukraine

It is beyond the scope of this chapter to provide a blow-by-blow account of the various phases of Iranian foreign policy over the last forty-four years but rather to provide a general picture of Iranian policy toward Russia and to put some light on complexity of Iran-Russia relations.

Relations between Iran and Russia have a history dating back to the 16th century and have undergone many fluctuations. Starting from the 19th century, they were rather hostile, then went through the stage of Iran's imperial dependence on tsarist Russia, the occupation of part of Iranian territory by the USSR, Iran's membership of the anti-communist alliance under the aegis of the USA, the USSR's support for Saddam Hussein in his war against Iran, and finally, after collapse of the USSR to return to a more positive track. Initially, the 'new' Russia and post-revolutionary Iran treated each other with distrust and tested the limits of their expansion possibilities in the case of Iran and defended their spheres of influence as in the case of Russia. The Tajikistan Civil War (1992–1993) and the Armenian-Azerbaijan War (1993) serve as notable examples of the early phase of Iran's foreign policy. In both instances, Iran's involvement prompted Russia to respond, employing a combination of public warnings and private diplomacy to convey that Iran was nearing the point of

²⁸ *Idem*, "Ideology and Pragmatism in Iran's Foreign Policy", *The Middle East Journal*, vol. 58, no. 4, Autumn 2004, pp. 1–11.

²⁹ T. Juneau, "Iran's policy towards the Houthis in Yemen: a limited return on a modest investment", *International Affairs*, vol. 92, no. 3, 2016, pp. 649.

crossing a line. Iran, recognizing the red lines set by Russia, adjusted its more aggressive stance, reaffirming its dedication to collaborating with Moscow in order to alleviate tensions and restore peace and stability. This demonstrated a modest indication of the two countries' potential to effectively manage crises in the future.³⁰

In the face of American hegemony, mutual animosities receded into the background, and zones of regional domination were established. Competition gave way to limited economic cooperation, and then, after the US invasion of Iraq in 2003, it became a tactical alliance based on reluctance towards US world domination and Iran's sense of threat. On the one hand, Russia was afraid of the American presence in the region, on the other hand, it wanted to gain economic benefits from supplies to Iran, which at that time was under the pressure of American sanctions. At the same time, Iran needed a strong partner to help it resist pressure from the West.

In the past decade, the intensification of Western sanctions against Iran and hostilities between Iran and the US have prompted Tehran to further deepen its political, economic and security ties with Moscow. Russia shares the Iranian vision of a multipolar world order in which the role of the US is smaller. Until the Russian invasion of Ukraine, or more precisely, the imposition of broad economic sanctions on Russia, Moscow behaved quite restrained and placed itself in the role of a benevolent mediator rather than an ally. Russian companies were afraid of sanctions, which blocked the development of economic relations. Fearing the reaction of the West, Russia also inhibited the previously agreed deliveries of anti-aircraft systems³¹ and remained deaf to Iranian proposals for deepening military cooperation. Failures in Ukraine, economic problems caused by sanctions, disruption of supply chains and pushing Russian companies out of many existing markets prompted Moscow to 'release the brake' and start a new stage of cooperation with Iran.³² This fact has reignited a debate in Tehran about how much Iran should lean towards Moscow. The debate in the Iranian parliament, of course, did not affect the

³⁰ J. Hannah, "Evolving Russian Attitudes Towards Iran", [in:] *Iran's Strategic Intentions And Capabilities*, ed. P. Clawson, Washington, DC: National Defense University, 1994, pp. 56–57.

³¹ A. Brady, "Russia Completes S-300 Delivery to Iran", *Arms Control Association*, 1.12.2016, www.armscontrol.org/act/2016-11/news-briefs/russia-completes-s-300-delivery-iran [accessed: 20.05.2023].

³² E. Avdaliani, "Russia-Iran Ties Are Transactional – And Warming Fast", *The Moscow Times*, 9.06.2023, www.themoscowtimes.com/2023/06/09/russia-iran-ties-are-transactional-and-warming-fast-a81414 [accessed: 10.06.2023].

general direction of the policy of the Islamic Republic, determined by *rahbar*, but it was a signal of disagreement as to future relations among Iranian politicians. Nevertheless, Tehran's approach did not change and continued within the lines crystallized in the 1990s, this time approaching the upper limits of support for the Russian 'friend.'

There are two primary explanations for the notable continuity observed in the relationship between Iran and Russia. The first explanation lies in the institutional framework. The Supreme Leader holds the primary decision-making authority concerning the Iran-Russia relationship, which is considered a matter of significant national security importance. This relationship has played a crucial role in the survival of the Islamic Republic, particularly when faced with pressure from Western countries since the end of the Cold War. The second explanation relates to the limited alternatives available to Iran.³³ The context of Western and international sanctions, which target various sectors including the Iranian economy, civil nuclear technology, space technology,³⁴ and military domains, has significantly restricted Iran's options for international cooperation. In this context, Russia stands as one of the few major powers willing to engage in collaboration with Iran in these strategically significant areas. China, albeit to a lesser extent, also presents some opportunities for cooperation alongside Russia. Given the combination of institutional factors and the scarcity of viable alternatives, the continuity in the Iran-Russia relationship persists, serving as a crucial pillar for the Islamic Republic's resilience and maneuverability in the face of Western pressure and economic sanctions.³⁵

Despite the official message omitting all historical and current conflicts of interest between Russia and Iran, many Iranian politicians remain deeply suspicious of Russia, bearing in mind both the predatory policy of Tsarism and the USSR, as well as Russia's maneuvering during the negotiations of the nuclear deal. The Iranian political elites, including the *rahbaram* court, have divided themselves into two main groups regarding the assessment of the development of mutual relations. One group advocates strong ties with Russia as beneficial to the survival and development of the Iranian regime and as

³³ C. Therme, "The Iran-Russia entente after the Vienna Agreement: marriage of convenience or strategic partnership?", [in:] *Iran After the Deal: the Road Ahead*, eds. P. Magri, A. Perteghella, Milano: Epoké, 2015, p. 97.

³⁴ See more at M. Krzyżanowski, "Irański program atomowy – historia i perspektywy", *Układ Sił*, nr 27, marzec 2021.

³⁵ See more at *idem*, "Partnerstwo z rozsądku? Relacje ekonomiczne Iranu i Chin", *Układ Sił*, nr 26, luty 2021.

a counterbalance to both the US military presence near Iran's borders and the growing economic dependence on China. The decision of the Trump administration in 2018 to withdraw the US from the nuclear deal and the policy of maximum pressure on Iran increased support for supporters of rapprochement with Russia under the so-called Return to the East. This group includes e.g. Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei, President Ibrahim Raisi and Speaker of Parliament Mohammad Baqer Qalibaf, although the latter is highly sceptical about Russia's ability to fulfil its commitments. Supporters of rapprochement with Russia share the Kremlin's concerns about the threat from the West (including NATO expansion) and seek stronger bilateral cooperation to protect Iran from Western sanctions and military strikes. Generally speaking, the supporters of closer ties with Russia are mainly representatives of the principalists camp.

The second group, combining the parties of centrists and reformists, are politicians who are ideologically more moderate and in favor of economic liberalization. Its members see Russia as an important neighbour, but reject efforts to strengthen strategic ties with that country. They believe that it is beneficial for Iran to leave options open to the West and to avoid becoming overly dependent on Moscow. Members of this group include former Foreign Minister Javad Zarif, former President Hassan Rouhani and former Secretary of the Supreme National Security Council Ali Shamkhani. All three call for a de-escalation of tensions with the West. Another member of the group, former IRGC commander Hossein Alaei, is a particularly vocal critic of the Russian-Iranian rapprochement. In his criticism of Iran's policy towards Russia, he points to the conflict of interests (competition in the energy sector), Russia's close relations with Israel, which interfere with Iranian activities in Syria, and Russia's unreliability as a close ally, as evidenced by the delays in deliveries of anti-aircraft systems purchased by Iran, and several times supporting sanctions against Iran in votes in the UN Security Council. The Supreme Leader's support for the 'turn to the East' policy and the economy of resistance makes Iran increasingly gravitate towards Russia, but the political current that recognizes independence from any foreign entity as the basis of the policy enabling the survival of the Islamic republic is still dominant.³⁶

Various analysts and politicians are raising concerns about an imbalanced foreign policy that appears to heavily favor China and Russia. These voices are advocating for a more balanced approach and the resumption of nuclear talks

³⁶ M. Sinaee, "Former IRGC Commander Says Iran Must Remove Russia From Nuclear Talks", *Iran International*, 27.03.2022, www.iranintl.com/en/202203277344 [accessed: 9.06.2023].

for Moscow revolved around Russian companies that operated both in Iran and the United States. This issue was particularly sensitive in the energy sector, where Russia opted to prioritize cooperation with US companies over investing in Iran. This decision aimed to foster collaboration with American counterparts in order to advance the development of Russia's domestic energy sector.⁴⁰ At the moment this barrier vanished but still there is a lot of distrust between businessmen and politicians.

In terms of balancing relations with major powers, Iran maintains diplomatic ties with both China and Russia, as they share similar strategic visions. However, the level of engagement with China is not substantial enough to form an anti-US bloc. In the case of Syria, Iran and Russia effectively collaborate to support the al-Assad regime. Nevertheless, it is unlikely that this cooperation extends to other conflicts such as Yemen or Afghanistan. In Yemen, Russian-Iranian relations are strained due to Iran's backing of the Houthis. In Afghanistan, the two parties have differing approaches regarding the inclusion of the Taliban in the emerging political settlement. Iran's foreign policy options are constrained by the regime's adherence to the strict principles of the Revolution. Although there have been attempts at innovative approaches, like Khatami's Dialogue of Civilizations, they were swiftly curtailed by conservative factions in response to counter-reactions from the United States. Overall, while Iran maintains relations with China and Russia and cooperates with Russia in certain contexts, the extent and scope of their collaboration vary depending on the specific conflicts and political dynamics involved. The ideological constraints of Iran's regime and its historical interactions with the United States also play a significant role in shaping its foreign policy decisions.⁴¹

Iran-Russia relations are characterized by complexity. While both countries have aligned in supporting Syrian President Assad against opposition forces, their motivations stem from different national interests. For Russia, aiding Assad's regime serves as a means to reestablish its influence as a major power in the Middle East. On the other hand, for Iran, maintaining a friendly Syria is crucial for sustaining its anti-US and anti-Israel coalition.⁴² In Syria, Russia and Iran maintain a close military alliance. However, their political

⁴⁰ C. Therme, *op. cit.*, p. 99.

⁴¹ T. Bayar, "Multiple Dualities: Seeking the Patterns in Iran's Foreign Policy", *All Azimuth. Journal of Foreign Policy and Peace*, vol. 8, no. 1, 2019, p. 43.

⁴² More at N. Grajewski, "The Evolution of Russian and Iranian Cooperation in Syria", 17.11.2021, *Center for Strategic International Studies*, www.csis.org/analysis/evolution-russian-and-iranian-cooperation-syria [accessed: 20.06.2023].

strategies within the country may diverge as they pursue their respective objectives. In the broader Middle East region, Moscow and Tehran often have distinct goals and priorities. However, within the wider Eurasian context, their objectives are comparatively more compatible. The dynamics of Iran-Russia relations reflect the intricacies of their overlapping interests and differing approaches in various geopolitical contexts. While they find common ground in Syria, their broader objectives diverge in the Middle East. Yet, when considering the broader Eurasian landscape, their interests show a greater degree of compatibility.

Another part of discrepancy protocol is the issue of Iranian nuclear program. Russia recognizes Iran's aspirations to become a significant player in the Middle East; however, it prefers that Iran remains a non-nuclear state. Moscow's position on the Iranian nuclear issue is primarily driven by its own national interests, and it has remained unaffected by the confrontation between the United States and Russia in 2014. The Russians strongly support the nuclear deal with Iran, known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), as the alternatives would either entail an Iran armed with nuclear weapons or a major conflict occurring in close proximity to Russia's borders. Therefore, Moscow is motivated by the desire to maintain the JCPOA, which it sees as crucial for preventing both a nuclear-armed Iran and a potentially destabilizing war in the region. Russia's approach to the Iranian nuclear issue is shaped by its own strategic interests and the potential consequences of a breakdown in diplomatic efforts. While acknowledging Iran's regional ambitions, Moscow is driven by the goal of preserving stability and preventing nuclear proliferation, which it sees as serving its own national security concerns.⁴³ Such attitude (apart from the real goals of the Iranian nuclear program) raises doubts in Tehran about possibility of basing a long-term policy on cooperation with Russia.

In light of Russia's challenges in Ukraine, its leadership sought assistance from Iran through various means. Firstly, the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps, a branch of the Iranian military, provided additional manpower to fill the gap left when Russia redeployed troops from Syria to focus on its campaign in Ukraine. Secondly, Russia plans to utilize Iran's cost-effective and battle-tested drones to counter Kyiv's Western-supported arsenal and bolster its own struggling forces, which have shown limited effectiveness in warfare.

⁴³ D. Trenin, "Russia and Iran: Historic Mistrust and Contemporary Partnership", *Carnegie Endowment for International Peace*, 18.08.2016, <https://carnegie-moscow.org/2016/08/18/russia-and-iran-historic-mistrust-and-contemporary-partnership-pub-64365> [accessed: 20.06.2023].

Thirdly, cooperation with Iran allows Russia to navigate economic challenges and circumvent international sanctions. These contributions from Iran serve a larger purpose in advancing Iran's ration of state. They enable Iran to directly challenge and undermine the United States and NATO beyond its usual regional sphere of operations. They enhance Iran's standing among countries that also aspire to confront the political, military, and economic power of the United States and NATO. Furthermore, they foster a sense of solidarity among these countries, strengthening their collective resolve.

Already after the first Ukrainian crisis in 2014, the Russians considered replacing sanctioned European supplies with Iranian ones. For instance, the Islamic Republic was mentioned as an option in order to replace, at least partially, some European products that Russia is banned from importing under the sanctions. However, at that time, the sanctions regime was not tight enough or wide enough to force (yes, force) Russian companies to deepen their cooperation with Iran. Currently, Russian entities are more motivated and determined, but logistical and legal barriers still remain in place. Although trade between Russia and Iran is expected to increase by 20% in 2023, it will still be relatively low compared to the expected increase in Russian-Turkish (100%) and Russian-Indian (200%) trade since the beginning of the war. It is worth mentioning here that these are very optimistic assumptions. As part of the strategy to revive trade, in July 2022, Moscow and Tehran signed numbers of memoranda on interbank cooperation. In addition, the Tehran exchange launched a rial/ruble exchange in an attempt to replace the SWIFT interbank payment system with domestic instruments aimed at de-dollarization of joint trade. Despite these efforts, bilateral trade will only play a minor role in meeting Russia's enormous needs. It will help Iran to a greater extent, but it will not be a breakthrough in the fight against the economic crisis. Even if the optimistic forecasts regarding the increase in trade turn out to be accurate, the mutual turnover will not exceed the level of 3% of Russia's total foreign trade. There is a huge gulf between Iran and countries like Turkey, whose trade with Russia is worth around \$30 billion a year compared to Iran's around \$3 billion. For Iran, Russia is one of the leading trading partners, but despite this, it lags far behind China, Turkey, the UAE in terms of turnover, and even Afghanistan in terms of exports (according to IMF data, in 2022 it was ranked 4th as an importer to Iran and 5th for Iranian exports, with Russia ranked 41st and 52nd respectively).⁴⁴ It is safe to say that the potential of economic cooperation is not (and will not be) fulfilled in the near future.

⁴⁴ Own research based on IMF data.

Conclusion

National interest as a category related to the general community of citizens is not adequate to Iranian policy-making and could be misleading in debate. The more appropriate category is reason of the state. The main center for formulating Iran's foreign policy is *rahbar* which shifted from balancing-powers role to revolutionary-authoritarian one.

Idealism in principle, due to religious sanction loomed into the political fabric of the Islamic Republic of Iran is present in Iranian foreign policy. However, the *rahbars* were more often guided by defensive realism manifesting in forward defence strategy and sacrificed ideology in the name of state interests whenever it was necessary or justified. Such actions have a theological underlay based on principles of *velayat-e faqih*.

To some extent concepts of Frankfurt school are useful in explaining Iran's policy. The author believes that approaches based on a single school of thought whether it would be states security-maximizer approach (as defensive realism), power-maximizer (offensive realism), influence-maximizer (neoclassical realism) or absolute gain-seeker (neoliberalism), are not sufficient to fully explain Iranian foreign policy and security behavior. Therefore, a multifaceted approach is essential to analyze it.

Iran is among Russia's most vocal supporters in the war. This has little to do with Ukraine and everything to do with Iran's long-term strategy *vis-à-vis* the United States, considered by *rahbar* as the main and active threat to Islamic Republic existence.

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Abstract

The paper seeks to indicate the main sources and currents that mold the general pattern of Iran's foreign policy and propose the explanation of Iran's actions in regard to Russia. The paper shortly analyze, political dualities like pragmatism vs. idealism, decision making through the institutions of the revolution vs. parliamentary democracy, Iran's desire for recognition as a regional power vs. forward defensive approach and last but not least an accurate terminology to use in a broader debate about Iranian policy. The paper secondary aim is to provide a general picture of Iranian policy toward Russia and to put some light on complexity of Iran-Russia relations.

Key words: Iran, Russia, Realism, *velayat-e faqih*