

THE FOREIGN POLICY OF POST- REVOLUTIONARY IRAN: EXPEDIENCY AT THE CROSSROAD OF SUPRA-NATIONALISM AND SOVEREIGNTY

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Introduction

The direction of the Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy has been a source of argument among scholars since the establishment of the revolutionary regime in 1979. Iran's foreign policy just like its revolution is still a mystery to many researchers as it is difficult to find an appropriate theoretical framework for it. Revolution and how revolutionary states such as China and Cuba view the world and build their foreign relations with other nations have been long discussed in the works of prominent scholars including Leng (1972), Armstrong (1993), Walt (1996), Halliday (2002), and Doma-Nguez & Domínguez (2009). However, what makes the foreign policy of revolutionary Iran different from other revolutionary states (mostly Marxist revolutions) and, therefore, more confusing to study, is the Shi'a Islamic nature of it.

The Shi'a Islamic ideology is a central constraining factor, which "limits the choice of an appropriate conceptual framework to analyze the country's foreign policy" (Nia 2011). The unpredictable and to an extent confusing foreign policy of Iran has been the source of this division among scholars to theorize Iran's foreign policy. This paper, therefore, aims on providing answers to two important questions on how to explain the pendulum-like foreign policy of post-revolutionary Iran, between supra-nationalism and national interest, and how the decision-makers in Tehran choose which path to take in different contexts. By reviewing the current literature and analyzing

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several cases in Iran's foreign policy, this paper argues that the conflict between the Islamic supra-nationalist nature of Tehran's foreign policy and the current Westphalian system of international relations is the main source of confusion and disintegration in Iran's foreign policy. By emphasizing the concept of *maslahat* (expediency), the paper also provides explanations on how the foreign policy of Iran decides which path to take at the crossroad of supra-nationalism and sovereignty.

Background

Placing Iran's foreign policy within the existing frameworks and theories of international relations has long been debated among scholars since the establishment of the Islamic republic in 1979. The inconsistent behaviour of Tehran in facing events at the international level has been the source of this confusion. Reviewing the current literature demonstrates two main arguments addressing Iran's foreign policy behaviour: the rational actor model and the supra-nationalist approach.

Rational Actor Model (RAM)

One of the most used frameworks to analyze a country's foreign policy is the Rational Actor Model (RAM). This simple yet effective framework is based on the rational choice theory which "consists simply of selecting that alternative whose consequences ranks highest in the decision maker's payoff function; value maximizing choice within special constraints" (Zelikow 1999). The rationality element in this framework, therefore, makes us predict and explain a consistent trend of policy and action by the state. This means states choose the action that will maximize strategic goals and objectives (Zelikow 1999). Concepts such as objectives, calculations, choices, threats, and opportunities are central, weighing all advantages and disadvantages and taking up a value maximizing option regarding the major formula in RAM Allison employs (Kafle 2004).

The rational actor approach shares similarities with neo-realist theory, in which the impact of domestic politics on foreign policies is marginalized. Neo-realism argues that it is the structure of the international system that has the most impact on the design and implementation of foreign policy for any given country (Toni 1998). Based on the neo-realist approach, the major objective of the Iranian state can be viewed within the framework of

prioritizing its survival in the anarchic nature of the international system. Within the same neo-realist structure, it can be argued that Iran is maximizing its power by strategically calculating the opportunities and restraints of each issue towards its interests in the international system (El Berni 2018). For this reason, and contrary to the ideologically-bounded representation of Iran's foreign policy, a number of scholars such as Tarock (1999), Ramazani (2004), and Salehzadeh (2013) trace more pragmatic and realist approaches. Ramazani argues that some pragmatic national interest existed even in the earliest, most volatile and ideological phase of Iranian foreign policy in 1980's (Ramazani 2004).

Scholars in favour of explaining Iran's foreign policy through the RAM approach indicate several historical incidents to strengthen their argument against the claims calling Iran's foreign and ideological policies ideological. The Iran-Contra affair is known as one of the main cases to debunk the ideologically led direction of Iran and portrays a more rational actor image. In 1985 and at the height of the Iran-Iraq war, Iran got involved in a direct arms deal with both the United States and Israel. Based on the Iran-Contra agreement, American and Israeli arms were decided to be transferred to Iran in exchange for Iran's assistance in the release of Western hostages in Lebanon (Ramazani 2004).

The impact of war as an international pressure factor to shape Iran's choice of foreign and security policy was evident in the Iran-Contra affair. In several other periods such as during the rule of reformist President Khatami (1997-2005), Iranian foreign policy was not consistent with its ideological patterns. During this period, Iran was more cooperative and improved relations with western countries especially the EU member states and the members of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC). Iran's cooperation with the world community and the U.S. in its nuclear talks was further a sign of Iran's rational behaviours in foreign affairs.

Supra-nationalist Approach

On the other hand, and contrary to the above narrative, several scholars such as Nia (2011) and Beeman (2008) reject the application of the Rational Actor Model for Iran's foreign policy and, instead, emphasize the Islamic supra-nationalist ideology as the main explanatory driver of Iran's policies. They criticize the Rational Actor Model for overlooking the importance of domestic politics in shaping Iran's foreign policy and emphasize the impact of domestic variables in shaping the structure of the foreign policy decision-

making of Iran since the 1979 Islamic revolution more than any other international variable (Ramazani 2004). The insignificant impact of two major paradigm shifts in international relations, namely, the collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990 and the September 11 attacks in 2011, on Iran's foreign policy, is the backbone of this argument. In fact, strategies such as counter-hegemonism, resistance, justice-seeking, anti-arrogance campaign, anti-American, and anti-Israel as the fundamental principles of Iranian foreign policy have remained intact since 1979 (Nia 2011).

Unlike RAM, an Islamic supra-nationalist-based foreign policy does not view policies merely based on materialistic cost-benefit relations or their outcomes. Supra-nationalism on its own is an understudied field within different branches of political science. Much of the research conducted on the concept of supra-nationalism is focused on the European Union (EU). Following this regional focus, supra-nationalism is majorly viewed as the merging of several states into a new entity (Agnes 2017). At the same time, the current definitions of supra-nationalism mostly argue about entities above domestic sovereign politics of recognized territories such as in the EU (Sweet, Sandholtz & Fligstein, 2001).

Supra-nationalism in the Middle East, however, is of another type. Unlike the territorial definition of supra-nationalism in the EU context, there is a strong ideological dimension to it in the Middle East. The pan-Arabism movement of the mid-twentieth century is a testimony to this ideological approach, by trying to unify the Arab nations of the Middle East and North Africa around the Arabic language and/or their common struggles against external aggressors (Dawn 1988). In the case of Iran's foreign policy, however, the binding element is Iran's Shi'a state ideology.

Contrary to most countries in the world, Iran is a Shi'a messianic state with the mission of passing the state to Imam Mahdi whom Shi'as believe went into occultation in 874 AD. Supra-nationalist principles such as 'the defense of the rights of all Muslims' and 'non-alignment with respect to the hegemonic superpowers' are the basis of Iran's foreign policy and, according to the Islamic Republic's Constitution, the country "supports the just struggles of the oppressed against the oppressors in every corner of the globe" (Papan-Matin 2014). Although these statements are general in nature, the main focus of Iran's foreign policy has been the Islamic *Ummah* (Islamic community), especially the Shi'as. For this reason, one of the first attempts by the newly founded Islamic Republic in 1980 was to establish the Office of Liberation Movements in Tehran aiming on bringing together different Islamic militant organizations to facilitate the export of the revolution and to further pave the path for Iran to intervene domestic affairs of other mostly Muslim countries

(Alfoneh 2013, Ostovar 2016).

In theory, the supra-nationalist and ideologically driven direction of Iran is in favour of *Ummah* (Islamic community) and Islamic unity against nationalist ideologies. Yet in practice, the same foreign policy favours the Shi'a minorities over the majority Sunnis. Such an approach seems incompatible with RAM or neorealist principles. The strong support of Iran for Islamic militant groups which are mostly identified as terrorist groups by the world community and Iran's opposition to Israeli-Palestinian peace negotiations are mostly viewed as evidence that Iran's foreign policy should be viewed from their ideological perspective.

The Foreign Policy Doctrine of Iran

Iranian foreign policy is the sum of a dual identity: "a quasi-imperial nation pursuing political hegemony and an anti-status quo Islamic revolutionary power." (Hokayem 2012). The policy was substantially influenced by the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, when Iran transformed from a pillar of US security in the Persian Gulf into a challenger of the Western-dominated regional order (Hinnebusch 2011). In line with Gasiorowski's argument, which introduces the U.S.-Iran clientelist relationship as a predominant factor that facilitated the road to the Revolution (Farhang 1991), the concepts of the 'rejection of all forms of domination' and 'defending the rights of Muslims around the globe' (explicitly mentioned in Article 152 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran) have become the key principles of post-revolutionary Iran's foreign policy. The roots of this drastic shift of policy can be also addressed from the structuralist point of view, which argues that the historical presence of imperialism in the Middle East relegated countries such as Iran to the bottom of the global hierarchy. This in turn imposed an order against indigenous resistance, through coercion and co-optation and in violation of regional identity, which lacks hegemony in the region, hence, is subject to regular challenge by counter-hegemonic movements that ultimately leads to regional instability (Hinnebusch 2011).

To this end, the new revolutionary state identified the U.S. (and later all Western countries including Israel) as its main rivals in both the regional and international arenas. Shortly after the formation of the Islamic Republic, on November 4, 1979, the Iranian revolutionary students invaded the U.S. embassy in Tehran and took hostage of its 52 staff. The invasion of the U.S. Embassy in Tehran and the ensuing hostage crisis became "an ordeal for revolutionary idealist foreign policy which pitted Iran against virtually every

country in the world” (Ramazani 2004). The hostage crisis lasted 444 days, and among its more lasting repercussions, is the suspension of diplomatic relations between Iran and the United States to date.

Abandoning ties with the U.S. was not the only move made by the newly established revolutionary state concerning its foreign policy. Against the cold war division of states, Iran subsequently adopted the slogan of *Na Sharqi, Na Gharbi, Jomhoori-e Eslami* (Neither East nor West but the Islamic Republic) as the foundation of its foreign policy. Armed with this vision, Iran joined the Non-Alignment Movement (NAM) in 1979 hoping to discover new partners among developing nations which would meet its foreign policy objectives as a developing state, “whereas an alliance with either the East or the West would not fit the Iranian religious, cultural, or historical context” (Sadri 1998). At the same time, Islamic Republic also condemned all regional governments with pro-Western tendencies in the Middle East and North Africa (MENA) as corrupt and un-Islamic, directly questioning their legitimacy (Byman 2001).

Given the Islamic nature of the Revolution of 1979, Iran’s foreign policy is fundamentally rooted in Shi’a principles in which religious values and ideologies have a norm-defining function (Dehshiri & Majidi 2008). Ideology, in this context, is defined as a system of collectively held normative and reputedly factual ideas and beliefs and attitudes advocating a “particular pattern of social relationships and arrangements, and/or aimed at justifying a particular pattern of conduct, which its proponents seek to promote, realize, pursue or maintain” (Hamilton 1987). The following sections will explain the main areas of conflict between Iran’s Islamic supra-nationalist foreign policy and the Westphalian system of international relations. The sections will also explain Iran’s pendulum-like swinging between the two by using the concept of *maslahat* (expediency).

Ummah vs. Nation-State

The Islamic ideology emphasizes unity among Muslims regardless of their race, ethnicity, nationality, or social status. For this reason, it is Muslims’ belief in Islam which makes them different from other citizens of the world. Therefore, a strong narrative in Islam does not recognize the current political borders among countries as legitimate means of separating people. Within this strong narrative, the world’s population is divided into two sections, *Ummah* (the global Muslim community) and the non-believers. In this system, the political loyalty of citizens is not to the nation-states, but to the Islamic community as a whole. This supra-nationalist view finds its

origin in several Quranic verses including: “And surely this your nation is one nation, and I am your Lord, therefore be careful (of your duty) to Me” (The Holy Quran). According to interpretations of such verses, the only path to redemption for human beings is to surrender to the will of Allah. For this reason, differences such as nationality, language or ethnicity must be ignored.

However, the main challenge for this approach in the current setting of the world is its contradiction with the existing international rules and regulations. The approach of this narrative towards international relations is in direct contrast with Article 2 (7) of the United Nations which clearly declares that “nothing should authorize intervention in matters essentially within the domestic jurisdiction of any state” (United States 1945). This specific Islamic approach is also in conflict with the 1648 Peace of Westphalia, which supports a society of states based on the principle of territorial sovereignty (Newnham 1992). The abovementioned narrative shapes the principles of Iran’s post-revolutionary foreign policy.

Because of the same narrative, the Islamic Republic’s constitution is confused between holding to the ideological principles of the 1979 Shi’a Islamic revolution or adhering to the necessities of the current international order. It can be argued that this confusion is a common issue in the foreign policy of most Islamic countries, where lip service is paid to a universal *ummah* against their realpolitik practice. However, what makes Iran’s foreign policy different from these Islamic countries is that, firstly, the Islamic supra-nationalism makes the backbone of the country’s constitution and secondly, in the past four decades, Tehran has repeatedly executed these supra-nationalist principles in practice (mostly in favour of Shi’a populations) around the world.

Article 16 of Iran’s Constitution clearly frames the foreign policy doctrine of the country on “the basis of Islamic criteria, fraternal commitment to all Muslims, and unsparing support to the *mustad’afin* (the oppressed) of the world” (Algar 1980). Such criteria cover a wide range of foreign policy components that encompasses international relations, citizenship and Islamic *Ummah* (global Muslim community), sovereignty, protection and security of the citizens, and foreign military relations. Among the fundamental principles of the Iranian foreign policy which has played a critical role in shaping Iran’s international behaviour is the concept of utilizing Islamic supra-nationalism and the *Ummah* (global Muslim community) to reject domination by “oppressors”.

In accordance with Shi’a Islamic thoughts on international relations and as it was argued earlier, Iran’s foreign policy is constructed on the ideology of Islamic supra-nationalism - which places its emphasis on the unity of the global Muslim community (*Ummah*). Arguably, this ideologically-based supra-

nationalist doctrine is in many ways incompatible with the current political world order which is based on the concept of the Westphalian nation-state. It is argued that in the Islamic traditions, “the tribe and the *Ummah*, have been the principal foci of loyalty and commitment, and the nation-state has been less significant” (Huntington 2000) The importance of Islamic supra-nationalism was also emphasized greatly by Ayatollah Khomeini, the founder of the Iranian revolution: “Islam is not peculiar to a country, to several countries, a group, or even the Muslims. Islam has come for humanity. Islam wishes to bring all of humanity under the umbrella of its justice” (Owen 2010). Contrary to the above principles, there are several other articles in the Islamic Republic’s Constitution that recognize the Westphalian nation-state approach including, “In the Islamic Republic of Iran, the freedom, independence, unity, and territorial integrity of the country are inseparable from one another, and their preservation is the duty of the government and all individual citizens,” “All changes in the boundaries of the country are forbidden” and “the hierarchy of the executive authority, will be determined by law, in such a way as to preserve national unity, territorial integrity, the system of the Islamic Republic, and the sovereignty of the central government” (Algar 1980).

The conflict between the Shi’a Islamic interpretation of international relations and the Westphalian nation-state concept has created an inconsistent trend in Iran’s international behaviour. While justifying its support of radical Muslim groups around the world based on its Islamic ideological values, Iran is absolutely careful not to be identified as a country with a desire to expand its territorial borders based on its Islamic supra-nationalist ideologies. This can be observed in Iran’s insistence on recognizing Iraq as the aggressor in the eight-year war by the world community through the UN Resolution 598.

Supporting the Global Oppressed

As it was mentioned earlier, Iran utilizes Shi’a Islamic principles as its point of reference concerning foreign policy, therefore, it does not recognize nationality based on political borders or nation-states. This is because, in Islam, nationality is a faith-based concept. Non-Muslims are considered aliens and Muslims all around the globe are citizens of the universal *Ummah* (Nakhaee 1997). Therefore, the Islamic Republic of Iran is responsible for the affairs of Muslims anywhere in the world irrespective of political borders. This phenomenon is well framed in the Article 154 of the Iranian constitution as “it supports the just struggles of the *mustad’afun* (the oppressed) against the *mustakbirun* (the oppressor) in every corner of the globe” (Algar 1980).

Clearly, this approach conflicts with the current world order that is based on the sovereignty of nation-states. Shortly after its establishment, the Islamic Republic went on to export revolution as its way of assisting and supporting oppressed Muslims around the world. In general, the policy aimed to spread Shi'a revolutionary ideas against the so-called Arab apostate states in the region, force a clash of civilizations with the "infidel" West, and proclaim leadership over the Arab Middle East - particularly in the oil-rich Persian Gulf (Shapira & Diker 2007). Implementing such a policy created a tense and distrustful relationship between Iran and its neighboring Arab nations, particularly those with large Shi'a populations - including Bahrain, Iraq, Kuwait, and even Saudi Arabia. The eight-year Iran-Iraq war in the early 1980s could be viewed as Iran's first attempt in putting its new foreign policy ideology into practice. The war could be defined as a clash between Khomeini's pan-Islamism and Saddam Hussein's pan-Arabism (Toni 1998).

As a result, the Arab states of the Persian Gulf were terrified as they unexpectedly found themselves 'in the much broader context of the Islamic world in which Islamic groups and segments of the population were responding to the Iranian revolution' (Marschall 2003) The result of this approach was the regional isolation of Iran, which in turn did little in convincing the revolutionary state to change its ideologically based foreign policy. Such policy turned out to be the backbone of the ideologically-based foreign policy doctrine of Iran since 1979, irrespective of the political differences among the political figures raise into power in Iran (Cakmak 2015).

Due to its ideologically-based foreign policy, Iran pays particular attention to Muslim countries with large Shi'a populations, such as Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, Bahrain, and Afghanistan. Syria, together with Iraq and Lebanon, form the Shi'a Crescent in the Middle East. The Shi'a Crescent is viewed by the Arab Sunni states as an endeavor by the Islamic Republic to mobilize the Shi'a population of the region and to establish an ideological belt of sympathetic Shi'a states and political parties in Iraq, Syria, Lebanon, and the Persian Gulf region (Barzegar 2008). The Shi'a Crescent provides Iran with invaluable strategic and ideological depth in the region against Israel and other Sunni Arab states. The importance of the Shi'a Crescent in Iran's foreign policy is easily traced in Tehran's response to the Arab Spring. In line with the Islamic concept of "rejection of all forms of domination", Iran warmly welcomed the Arab Spring by calling it the "Islamic awakening" against the U.S. and its regional Sunni Arab allies.

Choosing between Ideology vs. Maslahat

Another important conflict between the Islamic system of international relations and the Westphalian nation-state order is their views on the source of laws and regulations. Based on the Islamic ideology, Allah's will is the sole source of all human laws and regulations regardless of race and ethnicity. Therefore, establishing institutions to ordain laws and regulations based on national interests conflicts with Islamic values and principles. In the Westphalian system, however, states are the only subject of international law, having the last and absolute power within their sovereign territory (Engle 2004). This very core principle of the Westphalian system is challenged by Islamic principles.

Within the context of Shi'a Islamic thoughts and *Fiqh* (jurisprudence), supra-nationalism is based on the two key binary concepts of *Darul-Islam* (territory of Islam)/*Darul-Kufr* (territory of disbelief) and *Darul-Islam* (territory of Islam)/*Darul-Harb* (territory of war). *Darul Islam* is referred to "region of Muslim sovereignty where Islamic law prevails" (Esposito 2003) In this concept, the existence of an Islamic state (not a nation-state) is the necessary condition for regarding a territory *Darul-Islam*, and Islamic laws must be enforced by the state in that territory. Consequently, *Darul-Kufr* refers to regions of non-Muslim sovereignty where Islamic law does not prevail.

To overcome the clashes between this ideological system and the reality of today's relations between the states, the concept of *maslahat* was introduced to the Islamic jurisprudence. Based on this concept, Muslim states are conditionally permitted to deal and interact with non-Muslim territories that are not at war with them. A majority of Islamic countries have accepted using *maslahat* in foreign relations. In the immediate years after the Islamic revolution of 1979, the Iranian regime has adopted the more radical binary approach of *Darul-Islam* (territory of Islam)/*Darul-Harb* (territory of war). *Darul-Harb* refers to the terrains in which Islam does not prevail. Symbolically, "the *Darul-Harb* is the domain, even in an individual's life, where there is a struggle against or opposition to, the Will of God" (Paterson 2009). Based on this approach, Jihad as a divine institution of warfare should be declared on such territories to defend and restore the rules and regulations of Islam. This principle was both a fundamental component of Iran's foreign policy and of its security in its first decade after the Islamic revolution of 1979.

The impracticality of following Islamic principles in the current world order and the constant clash between the supra-nationalist approach and sovereignty has forced Tehran to seek religious justifications for shifting its ideologically based foreign policies towards more practical ones. *Maslahat*

seemed to fulfil this goal properly. To rescue the state from the consequences of ideologically driven decisions in both national and foreign policies, Iran established the Council for the Discernment of the Expediency of the State (*majma-e tashkhis-e maslahat-e nezam*, henceforth Expediency Council) in 1988. The duty of the Expediency Council is simply formulated in the words of Ayatollah Khomeini as an institute to intervene in situations that could not be solved through normal means (Sarrami 2001). In the context of Iran's pendulum-like foreign policy, the Expediency Council is among the main entities in the Islamic Republic to decide which path to take at the crossroad of supra-nationalism and national interests. Since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979, the Iranian state resorted, time and again, to the loophole (escamotage) of *maslahat* to bring forth crucial political projects whenever its survival was in immediate danger (Ghiabi 2019). The following section demonstrates the importance of expediency in the foreign policy of Iran in practice.

Discussion

A closer look at the history of Iran's foreign policy since the establishment of the Islamic Republic in 1979 indicates a pendulum-like trend of behaviour. This spectrum of behaviour varies from the total rejection of the current Westphalian system of international relations based on Islamic supra-nationalist ideologies to desperate attempts to be accepted as a part of this system. The source of such a paradox is rooted in the disintegrated approach of Iran toward the world. As it was discussed earlier, on one hand, Iran is trying its best to remain loyal to its ideological revolutionary principles while on the other hand, as a member of the international community, it needs to adhere to the current world order. This paradox can be best understood through the concept of *maslahat* (expediency) with the survival of the state at the heart of it.

The cause of such drastic convergence and divergence in Iran's foreign policy is rooted in its paradoxical ideological approach. Iran's foreign policy tends to accommodate both Islamic supra-nationalism and the Westphalian system at the same time within its structure. To achieve this goal, an ideological interpretation of *maslahat* is manipulated by Iran to ensure the survival of the Islamic state. In the complicated structure of the Iranian foreign policy, *maslahat* can be precisely viewed as 'nothing less than a cost-benefit approach to decision making' (Tarzi 2009) This approach posits that until the survival of the state is under immediate threat, Iran bases its initial

foreign policy on Islamic supra-nationalist objectives instead of rational ones within the Westphalian system. However, when such a threat materialises, Iran retreats from its initial ideological objectives in favour of adopting pragmatic approaches (recognising the Westphalian system), at which point it is prepared to either covertly or overtly negotiate its idealist objectives – sometimes abandoning them altogether.

On several occasions, Iran has retreated from its ideologically driven foreign policy when confronted with threats to the survival of the state. In the 1980s, Ayatollah Khomeini initially welcomed the Iran-Iraq war, calling it the beginning of a solution to the Middle East problems, and repeatedly stressed that Iran will fight till the last breath even if it takes 20 years. In 1982 and upon the liberation of all the Iranian territories, Tehran rejected the Iraqi offer of a ceasefire and declared that only “the overthrow of the Baath regime and its replacement with a Shia Islamic republic were the only peace terms Iran would accept” (Karsh 2014). Insisting on this ideological foreign policy however came to an end in 1988. After eight years of an inconclusive war and when Iranian forces were exhausted and were putting up very little resistance to the Iraqi offensives which were threatening the survival of the state, Iran’s foreign policy once again shifted towards pragmatism. Ayatollah Khomeini accepted the UN Security Council resolution 598 and agreed to a ceasefire in 1988. He called his acceptance of the resolution an act of *maslahat* and described it as drinking the bitter chalice of poison (Taremi 2014).

Shortly after the ceasefire and removal of the survival threat, Iran again shifted the direction of its foreign policy towards supra-nationalism in February 1989. In a historic *fatwa*, Ayatollah Khomeini ordered the execution of Salman Rushdie the author of *The Satanic Verses* and all involved in the publication of the book. In his *fatwa*, he called the book blasphemous against Islam. In his *fatwa*, Ayatollah Khomeini declared “I call on all zealous Muslims to execute them quickly, wherever they may be found so that no one else will dare to insult the sacred beliefs of Muslims. Whoever is killed on this path is a martyr” (Chase 1996). A national mourning day was declared in Iran and the Iranian Prime Minister Hussain Mousavi authorized radical Islamist groups to take the necessary action against Rushdie (BBC 1989).

By issuing this *fatwa*, Ayatollah Khomeini played the role of a supra-nationalist Muslim hero by defending Islam against the proclaimed insult of Rushdie’s book. Although his supra-nationalist *fatwa* resulted in the mobilization of many Muslims around the world, it once again put Iran’s foreign policy at crossroads. In response to this *fatwa*, 12 European countries recalled their ambassadors from Iran and froze all economic ties with Tehran. Britain also broke diplomatic relations with Iran. Once again, Iran

found itself under mounting economic pressure and diplomatic isolation. Shortly after the death of Ayatollah Khomeini in June 1989 and in a clear change of direction towards expediency, both President Rafsanjani and President Khatami rescinded the Ayatollah's call for the death of Salman Rushdie (Eggerking 1991). During the United Nations General Assembly in 1998, President Khatami once again emphasized that we should consider the Salman Rushdie issue as completely finished. At the same time, Robin Cook, the British Foreign Secretary, and Kamal Kharrazi, the Iranian foreign minister, announced that the affair was over. Kharrazi also expressed his hope for a new chapter in the relationship with the UK to be opened through this act (Black 1998).

In another incident and in the aftermath of 9/11 and the invasion of Afghanistan and Iraq, Iran found itself under threat of becoming the next U.S. target in the region. American troops were by then deployed to their north in Central Asia, to their east in Afghanistan, to their south in the Persian Gulf and to their west in Iraq. Iran was virtually surrounded (Dobbins 2012). In this situation and against its ideological values, in June 2003, Iran covertly contacted the United States to open a channel for a broad dialogue over all disputing issues including full cooperation on nuclear programs, acceptance of Israel and the termination of Iranian support for Palestinian militant groups (Kessler 2016). Fearful for its survival and facing increasing international pressure, Iran halted its nuclear program in the same year (Mazzetti 2003).

The nuclear negotiations between Iran and the P5+1, which resulted in the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in July 2015, is another example of Iran giving up its ideological objectives in favour of pragmatic approaches. Similar to his predecessor, Ayatollah Khamenei, has long described the negotiations with the United States as a red line of the state. However, only under the U.S.-led global crippling economic and financial sanctions (threatening the state's survival) did Iran decide to engage in meaningful negotiations over its nuclear program with the Obama administration in 2013.

To justify this drastic change in foreign policy, in 2014, Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei announced a new phenomenon named *Narmesh-e Ghahramananeh* (Heroic Leniency). The idea of heroic leniency is based on the Shi'a interpretation of Imam Hassan's (the second Imam of Shi'as) peace agreement with Muawiyah bin Abu Sufyan, the Caliph of the time, in the seventh century. Based on this interpretation, Imam Hassan chose not to fight the stronger Muawiyah and become a martyr and instead made peace with him despite Muawiyah's illegitimacy. This peace treaty is justified by Shi'a clergies as safeguarding the blood of the Muslims, strengthening Islam and

preventing the external and internal enemies from taking undue advantage of the situation (Ayati 1984). The justification was used by Ayatollah Khamenei to justify Iran's change of foreign policy and starting negotiations at the highest level with U.S. officials since the 1979 revolution. It is apparent that in that period of time, the Islamic supra-nationalist principles were once again halted in favour of Westphalian values.

The JCPOA has permitted Iran to regain access to the global market after a decade of economic sanctions. Tehran was allowed access to more than USD 100 billion of oil revenue frozen in foreign countries in a special form of escrow. Iran also regained access to the international banking system as a part of the JCPOA (Samore *et al* 2015). However, the benefits provided by the JCPOA is argued to once again encourage Iran to leave expediency and resume its regional malign behaviours including its periodic testing of the limits of the nuclear deal, continued progress on ballistic missiles, regional expansion, support for Islamist extremist organizations and propagation of virulent anti-American ideology (Edelman & Wald 2018).

The “maximum pressure” policy of President Trump's administration on Iran can be viewed through the main argument of this article as well. Believing in facing survival threat as the main ground for the Islamic Republic to change its policy direction, the United States announced its withdrawal from the JCPOA on May 8, 2018. Upon the U.S. withdrawal, Iran once again faced crippling economic sanctions. The country's GDP contracted an estimated 4.8% in 2018 and shrank another 9.5% in 2019. The unemployment rate meanwhile rose from 14.5% in 2018 to 16.8% in 2019 (International Monetary Fund 2019). Meanwhile, by October 2019, Iran's crude oil production had fallen to 2.1 million barrels per day (bpd) on average only 260,000 bpd on average was being exported as compared to about 2.3 million bpd in early 2018. Iranian Rial has also lost 50% of its value against the U.S. dollar since the U.S. withdrawal from the JCPOA (BBC 2019).

Building upon the main argument of this article, the U.S. administration aims, by imposing harsher sanctions on Iran, to change its foreign policy direction towards political expediency. The U.S. hopes these sanctions lead to a significant reduction in Iran's revenues and therefore disrupt its interference in or influence states such as Iraq, Afghanistan, Syria, Lebanon, or the Persian Gulf Arab countries (Luers 2012). Pushing Iran into an economic crisis which threatens the survival of the state, the U.S. administration believes it will force Iran to reach out to the White House cap-in-hand to negotiate for a more holistic deal including issues such as the recognition of Israel, ballistic missiles program, and regional security. President Trump has repeatedly called the JCPOA a disaster agreement, and

his goal is set to reach a better agreement than he sees fit.

The mild reaction of Tehran to the killing of General Qassem Soleimani, Iran's most powerful figure after its supreme leader can be also analyzed through the main argument of this paper. Immediately after the news of General Soleimani's death was published, a shout of severe revenge was raised from all sides in Iran, including the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei. Some Iranian military officials have also warned the United States to consider a coffin for its troops in the region. However, despite all these shouts, Iran chose *maslahat* to respond. On January 8, 2020, Iran fired 10 ballistic missiles on Iraq's Ain al-Assad American military base and targeted Erbil facility. By informing the United States prior to the attack (through Iraqi officials) and despite its epic slogans, Iran once again showed that it has no intention to confront the United States militarily, even though its most prominent military man has been killed. The attack was only a symbolic act to protect the reputation of Iran's leaders in the eyes of their domestic followers. The country's chaotic socioeconomic condition has left no room for Tehran to seek for a full-fledged confrontation with the U.S. as this can severely question the survival of the Islamic Republic.

Conclusion

Studying the post-revolutionary foreign policy of Iran clearly shows a clash between its Shi'a supra-nationalist tendencies and acting as a committed member to Westphalian principles. As discussed through several cases in this article, as long as the state does not confront survival threats at the international level, it continues to pursue its respective ideologically bound foreign policy. In this phase, the ruling elites – consisting of the ruling political administration as well as the military and security apparatus, are primarily responsible for achieving the state's ideological foreign policy. However, upon facing conditions that threaten the survival of the state, the state adopts a more flexible attitude whereby its foreign policy decisions become more rational in nature within the Westphalian system. The degree of the State's flexibility is in direct relation to the severity and proximity of the threat to the state's survival.

The paper also suggests that the same argument can be utilized to study and analyze the foreign policy of other ideologically driven authoritarian states including North Korea, Cuba, and Venezuela. In these countries, the state will base its initial foreign policy on idealist objectives instead of pragmatic ones. Upon facing a threat to their survival, however, these states

choose expediency over ideological preferences.

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ABSTRACT

Following the Iranian Revolution of 1979 and the subsequent formation of the Islamic Republic, the Islamization of Iran's foreign policy has arguably become the newly established state's primary agenda in the international arena. In accordance with Islamic thoughts on international relations, the Islamic Republic's foreign policy was constructed on the concept of Islamic supra-nationalism - which places its emphasis on the unity of the global Muslim community (Ummah). Arguably, this supra-nationalist doctrine is incompatible with the current political world order which is based on the concept of the Westphalian nation-state. This incompatibility exists on three levels; first, Islam places its emphasis on ideological boundaries rather than political borders and therefore rejects the idea of nationalist states. Secondly, Islam denies current sources of legitimacy concerning international laws and regulations, and finally, Islam calls for the elimination of cultural, ethnic, and geographical boundaries among Muslims to unite Muslim communities in a new power bloc within the current political world order. This paper first identifies the differences between Islamic supra-nationalism and the doctrine of Westphalian sovereignty. Secondly, emphasizing the concept of *maslahat* (expediency) and using several examples, this paper also provides explanations on how the foreign policy of Iran decides which path to take at the crossroad of supra-nationalism and sovereignty.

KEYWORDS

Islamic Supra-Nationalism, Westphalian Sovereignty, Foreign Policy, Iran, Expediency.

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