Ontological Security and the Foreign Policy Analysis of the Islamic Republic of Iran

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Abstract

The foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran during the past three decades has witnessed a variety of developments and trends. This, in a way that even within the framework of basic and fixed fundamentals and principles, Iranian foreign policy has shown different behaviors. On the other hand, despite the changes and developments in the domestic and international arenas, some behaviors on the part of Iran have remained unchanged. Thus, there has always been a fundamental question: what is the main motive and reason for the behavior of Iran via its foreign policy? In response to this question, the theories analyzing foreign policy and international relations explain the motives for Iran's behavior on the basis of the concept of physical security. However in this article, the behavioral motive and reasoning behind Iranian foreign policy are analyzed based on the ontological security theory. Through this prism, the most important behavioral motives of the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran during conflicts are to consistently seek and ensure ontological security. Meaning, Iran, in its foreign policy, is more concerned about preserving its own identity as an Islamic state and gives preference and priority to ensuring ontological security which translates into preserving and sustaining Iran's Islamic identity.

Keywords: Foreign policy, ontological security, Islamic Republic of Iran, behavior patterns, identity, conflict, arrogance, domination, basic trust system.

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Introduction

The foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran has undergone many changes in the past thirty years, including ups and downs. However, some fundamental principles of Iranian foreign policy such as opposition to foreign hegemony and arrogance as well as support for Muslims and the oppressed have always been fixed and continuous. On the other hand, despite changes and developments at different individual, structural, institutional, regional and international levels, parts of the behavior of the Islamic Republic have been remained unchanged. The continued lack of diplomatic relations between Iran and the United States and the durability of tensions between the two, endurance of hostility towards Israel, support extended to the Palestinian nation, and Iran's insistence on keeping its nuclear capabilities during various foreign policy eras all testify to that some aspects of Iranian foreign policy have remained constant.

On the same basis, there have always been questions about the motives and reasons for Iranian foreign policy behavior from the onset of the Islamic Revolution: Why did the Islamic Republic refuse to accept the cease-fire offered by former Iraqi dictator Saddam Hussein and continued its defense? Why is Iran continuing its battle and confrontation with the U.S., despite the American threats? Why does the Islamic Republic not take steps to normalize relations and put an end to the conflict? Based on these and other similar questions, one could pose the fundamental question: What are the basic motives and reasons for the foreign policy behavior of the Islamic Republic? And is there any possibility for a change in the

steadfast behavioral patterns in Iranian foreign policy?

Various theoretical approaches in the field of foreign policy analysis and international relations theory offer different responses to this question. Each one of these approaches emphasizes and explains different reasons and motives based on particular theoretical logic. The interim response by this author, based on the theory of ontological security, is that the most important motive and reason for the foreign policy behavior of the Islamic Republic of Iran in sustained conflicts is to seek and ensure ontological security. In response to the question of the possibility of change in regards to the steadfast behavioral patterns of Iranian foreign policy, the secondary and complementary hypothesis is that in case ontological security is ensured, which amounts to stabilization and endurance of identity, there is a possibility of change in sustained and continuous behavioral patterns in Iranian foreign policy.

In our discussion, which involves an examination and testing of these hypotheses, arguments are presented in three sections and a conclusion part. The first section briefly explains ontological security as the theoretical framework. The second section reflects on the meaning and concept of ontological security in the Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy. The third and final section explores, through some case studies, the extent to which the propositions and general hypotheses of ontological security can be validated and applied. Verification of these hypotheses is rendered through the examination of Iranian foreign policy behavior with regards to two case studies; firstly, Iranian behavior during the war with Saddam Hussein's forces, and particularly after the liberation of Khorramshahr. The second case study we will examine is Iran's continued conflict with the United States.

1. Theoretical Framework: Theory of Ontological Security

The theory of ontological security in international relations and foreign policy studies has been deduced and derived from the human

existence theory proposed by Anthony Giddens. It has been used by some international relations theoreticians during the past few years (Giddens, 1991:243). For them, individuals are not merely those seeking to gain ontological security throughout their lifetime, but all societal actors, and particularly states are also trying to ensure their ontological security or identity security. States are not only seeking to maintain their physical security, meaning territorial and governance structure security, but they are also seeking to safeguard their identity security, which is the source and origin of ongoing priorities and interests. As Jennifer Mitzen argues, states, like other societal actors, are in need of constant and continuous understanding and appreciation of their individual identity and priorities as well as their goals and interests. For any action or measure, they need a determined identity, since accomplishment is an art and virtue which requires ontological security (Mitzen, 2006:270-85).

Therefore, ontological security implies the need of experiencing sustained and lasting identity in order to understand and realize the meaning and concept of accomplishment. This means that ontological security, like physical security, is a stimulus and motive of initial and important behavior of states in the arena of foreign policy. The motive to gain ontological security in the foreign policy behavior of states is derived from the authentic relation between doubt and mistrust, and identity. Doubt and mistrust make action and undertaking endeavors difficult. As the ability to act is a necessary prerequisite and precondition for identity, mistrust and doubt, impedes the sense of self and maintaining identity (Mitzan, 2004:3).

Henceforth, some types of deep mistrust and doubt threaten ontological and identity security. This is because accomplishment requires a stabilized ontological and aesthetic environment. In conditions where a state is unaware of its own desires, it cannot establish a meaningful relation between its means and goals in a regular and orderly manner and is not confident and sure about how to pursue and attain its goals. Since goals are boosters and backers of

identity, deep and severe mistrust and doubt make the identity of a country insecure. As a result, states are instigated and motivated to create ontological and behavioral confidence and finality. As Mitzen indicates, states create this confidence and assurance through establishing normal practices and routine habits and also through collective identities like nationalism and religion (Mitzen, 2006: 342).

Through making use of routinization and regulation of interactions and behavioral practices with others, states cope with mistrust and doubt. Routines mitigate and tranquilize mistrust and doubt and bring threatening environments under ontological and cognitional control, and thus, make action possible. Routinization of practices and actions creates a situation and conditions in which states feel self-awareness and cognition. This strategy establishes the possibility for states to preserve their own meaning through solving the problem of chaos and turmoil. In fact, routines are a mechanism to pursue and ensure ontological security. By routine practices and procedures, we mean reactions and responses to motives and stimuli which almost automatically take a usual and continual shape (Mitzen, 2004: 3-4).

As states' ontological and identity security has been shaped and preserved through social relations, they ensure their ontological security by regulating and normalizing these ties with other actors. Besides, as permanent and durable accomplishment requires sustained and uninterrupted ontological and cognitional confidence and certainty, these routine habits and normal ties pave the way for states' interest in and attachment to such social relations (Mitzen, 2006:343).

All states fulfill their need of ontological security through normalizing their social interactions. However, the manner in which they create their routines, including normalization of interaction as well as fixation and dependence on these routines, are different. The collection of individual routines which are evolved and developed by states is called "the basic trust system". Basic and primary trust systems are composed of a set of normal and enduring relations.

Called a "cognitive cocoon" by Giddens, the basic and primary trust system "at the scientific and behavioral level, classifies and keeps knowledge and awareness of all possible events which could be potentially threatening" (Giddens, 1991: 42-43). This system enables the state to define itself as unitary and solid, and an "own" bearing an identity, with interests which are to be pursued and materialized in its ties with others. The routines of the basic and primary trust systems act like a fortified and defensive massif against psychological chaos and anarchy.

There are two types of basic trust systems which states might be associated with: sound or flexible ones, and racked or abnormal ones. They reflect and indicate two potential outlooks and attitudes towards routines, or in other words, they are two different types of accomplishments. Hence, routines are considered to be the goals per se, or are used in an inflexible manner as a tool (Mitzen, 2004:4).

States with flexible and sound trust systems adopt reflective attitudes towards routines, so that they can keep their critical distance from these routines and practices. When mistrust and doubt emerge, states' balance themselves via catch-up and compensation mechanisms, including rational action and decision rules. Therefore, a lack of fulfillment of needs or interruption and slack of routines are considered to be of a temporary nature. Certainly, interruption and slack in these routines would result in mistrust, doubt and consequently ontological insecurity. A state with sound and normal trust and confidence basis could tolerate it since it is confident and sure that routines are reproduced or materialized and gained through creating new routines. In other words, these states do not consider their habitual practices and routines as goals on their own, or do not direct their actions intentionally towards them.

On the other hand, those states that attach vital value to their identity, with a hard, racked and blistered basic trust system, cannot keep critical distance from their routines and habitual practices. They consider these routines as their ends, and not means for realization

and achievement of their purposes. When a state is committed to daily routines and habits in such a strong manner, it will consider the most miniscule interruption and hesitation as a threat. Therefore, the response given by these state to such interruptions consists of loyalty and compliance with their routines. Sometimes fixation to these practices and routines endures at the cost of creating physical security threats. Thus, when a state is faced with a hostile environment with its security needs not met, it blindly and unintentionally attaches itself to its routines as if they are goals being stirred with them. As a result, routines replace actions and real choice(Mitzen, 2006: 347).

Therefore, as Mitzen holds, the theory of ontological security distinguishes a type of security dilemma which is different from the physical security dilemma. This dilemma suggests that ontological security can be contradictory in regards to physical and material security. This, since even a confrontational and self-contradictory relation with another actor could ensure ontological security. Thus, the state can depend on a dispute and attach itself to conflict. In other words, states may, intentionally and practically, prefer sustained and definite conflict to the fragile situation of mistrust and doubt. In fact, the dynamics of dependence and attachment of ontological security-seeking reverse the security dilemma relation between mistrust and conflict. Conflict and hostility might not be the result of mistrust and doubt due to the confidence that such a state of relations with other actors create for states (Mitzen, op.cit, 2006:343). As a result, under circumstances which lead to the continuance of disputes due to the identity needs of a state, intentional and voluntary interruption and cessation of conflict may lead to the very insecurity which states are always seeking to prevent.

The ontological security theory also hypothesizes on the state and conditions for terminating sustained and long term conflicts. Conditions for the possibility of termination of enduring and recurring conflicts are latent in routines, so that as a result of change and development in these routines, the possibility of identity

modification and subsequent termination of conflict is provided. These changes and developments are rendered when states attain the normalization process and a flexible basic and primary trust system. Achieving these objectives requires being confident of one's own and other's identities and having the feeling of identity and ontological security.

Emphasizing the social genesis of state identity, the theory of ontological security considers the impact of the structure within the framework of interactions among states on behavioral patterns. This does not, however, amount to ignoring the decisive role of the accomplisher and causal variables at national levels. Keeping the role of all types of basic and primary trust and confidence as an influential variable in mind, the theory of ontological security considers the features and specifications of states as decisive factors. Therefore, the type of basic trust is rooted in domestic sources as well as features of a state which shapes the chosen and adopted mechanisms and means for pursuing ontological security. Therefore, in analyzing the causes and motives of ontological security-seeking, one should also pay attention to determining factors of basic trust. Causes and factors like wars, devastating disasters, and bad memories erode and destroy states' basic trust and put them in a state of ontological security-seeking. Spiritual and psychological circumstances lead states to severely attach themselves to habitual daily practices and routines (Krolikowski, 2008: 109-133).

2. Ontological Security in the Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran

The theory of ontological security bears various theoretical arguments and consequences for the Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy. The decisive place and role of ontological security in Iranian foreign policy can be examined via four dimensions. Each one of these four fields includes decisive factors and elements, the result of which shapes ontological security as the behavioral motive of the foreign

policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran. These four conceptual fields are: identity of the Islamic Republic of Iran and its identity-building discourses; Iran's basic and primary trust system; the interactions and habits of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy behavior; and, factors and reasons for why ontological security has been prioritized in Iranian foreign policy.

Identity as the character of the Islamic Republic's political system is at the core of the ontological security concept. With this identity, endurance free of perturbation - ontological security - is materialized. Therefore, an exploration of the meaning and place of ontological security in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran requires a definition, determination and explanation of its nature and identity. Meaning, the characteristics and the nature the Islamic Republic sees in itself, other recognize too.

The identity of the Islamic Republic is the awareness and notion of "self" based on other states' conception and imaging of Iran. The latter is constantly reproduced in daily political life and supported and authenticated through Iran's efforts and behaviors (Giddens, 2000:81). Thus, the identity of the Islamic Republic is a cognitive issue based on a common understanding of "self" and other states, which indicates the feeling of internal independence and continuity, and external difference. This common understanding is always formed around a focal concept and value in such a way that at different times, different concepts and values - even contradictory and heterogeneous - may find themselves at the heart of this common understanding. This shows the diversity and plurality of identity making sources (AliKhani, 2004). Due to the aforementioned, Iran can simultaneously have various identities even as each separate identity is shaped around a focal value and element. It should be noted that plural identities also requires and leads to the establishment of different roles.

The identity of the Islamic Republic, as a political system stretched over the territorial boundaries of Iran and originated from

the Islamic Revolution which moves towards development, could be defined and determined within an identity framework of being Iranian, Islamic, non-aligned and revolutionary; the four sides of the identity square of the Islamic Republic. This quadrilateral identity explains both this state's conceptions and images of "self" and "other", which are credited and supported in practice and in its behaviors. Of course, these strengthening elements of the identity of the Islamic Republic of Iran do not have the exact same weight. Undoubtedly, the Islamic aspect of Iran's identity is at the top. One could even argue that attributes as Iranian, revolutionary and non-aligned are placed under the Islamic attribute. In other words, being Islamic, involves being Iranian, revolutionary and non-aligned. Therefore, the identity of the Islamic Republic of Iran as the title is self-explanatory could be summarized as "being Islamic"(Dehghani FiruzAbadi, 2007: 124-135). It is noteworthy that in the twenty year outlook plan, "Iran" is defined as "country … with an Islamic and revolutionary identity...".

Henceforth, the Islamic Republic is an Islamic government and authority which is established within the geographical and territorial boundaries of Iran. This government, contrary to national secular governments which are based on the ideology of nationalism, is formed upon the foundation of Islam. The Islamic Republic does not have a secular and customary nature, but is fully religious and Islamic in its character. The most important feature and strengthening element of this political system, which derives its legitimacy from religion, is being Islamic, as "the government is the government of Islam"(Imam Khomeini, Sahifeye Nur: 129). Therefore, the Islamic Republic's most important commitment and function is to protect religion, being liable to Islamic values and ideals, and putting such thought into practice. In this system, interests and goals are also defined and determined based on Islamic ideals and values. In fact, the best and most important values which should be pursued by the Islamic Republic in the area of foreign policy are the same values and

ideals which are envisaged by the school and sharia of Islam. Above these values lies the commitment to protecting the "Islamic and revolutionary identity" of Iran (Dehghani FiruzAbadi, 2005).

Based on the definitions explained in the first part of this article, the basic trust system of the Islamic Republic of Iran is the set of habits and routines with which it deals in the form of normal and sustained relations in the arena of international relations and foreign policy. This trust system enables the Islamic Republic of Iran to define itself as unitary and consolidated and as a "self" with a specific identity and clear interests which should be pursued and materialized via its ties and links with other international actors. This trust system acts like a defense shield for Iran against identity and psychological anxieties. In fact, this trust system reflects and explains the potential attitude towards habits and routines and the character of its accomplishment. Consequently, the primary and basic trust of the Islamic Republic also represents confidence in the steadiness and continuity of others and the objective and real world.

The basic trust system of the Islamic Republic of Iran, based on the two sources explained in the first part of this article, is unalterable and inscrutable. This unalterable system makes the Islamic Republic pursue its normalized routines and habits in its foreign relations as goals of foreign policy. Any kind of interruption and slack in these routines and habits are considered to be a threat. Therefore, any distancing from these habits and routines - including those that incur material costs and reduce physical security - are worrisome and constitute ontological insecurity. As a result, since foreign interactions are normalizing, stabilize identity and bring about ontological security, Iran has developed a fixation towards them and maintains them. In fact, to cope with ontological insecurity and identity anxiety, the Islamic Republic has resorted to fixed and unchangeable behavioral patterns which appease psychological distress and preserve its identity.

Ontological insecurity motivates Iran to highlight and

demonstrate a series of behaviors which show its Islamic revolutionary identity in its foreign policy. These specific behaviors and routines could be of a cooperative or confrontational nature since they are relevant for the stabilization and strengthening of Iran's Islamic and revolutionary identity. Thus, in some thematic areas, insistence on the Islamic identity of the political system in Iran leads to confrontational ties with other states dragging on, as their continuity is essential and vital for preserving the identity of the Islamic Republic.

The basic trust system of the Islamic Republic is characterized by the nature of its international interactions in the stages of its formation and foundation as well as worrisome historical experiences. In its history, which is full of ups and downs, Iran has always been facing foreign threats, invasions and occupations. Therefore, the historical memory of the Iranian nation is full of occupations and foreign aggression from the time of Alexander the Macedonian to Mahmud Afghan and the World War Two Allies. This phenomenon culminated with the presence of colonial European powers, especially Russia and Britain in the 19th and 20th centuries. Pervasive interference by these two colonial powers in Iran not only pushed the country from the focus of international relations to a remote periphery, but also distorted the independence, national sovereignty, territorial integrity and national identity of Iran.

Due to Iranian weakness and inability to resist and confront the superior military and economic power of the colonial powers, many colonialist agreements were imposed on the country due to which, the colonial states were bestowed with unjust privileges and monopolies. This led to the humiliation of the ancient and civilized nation of Iran, disturbing and denting its national identity and prestige. American interventionism, especially its role in the 1953 coup d'etat which toppled democratically-elected Iranian Premier Dr Mohammad Mossadeq, and subsequent support for the reinstated Pahlavi regime, intensified the extent and severity of Iranian opposition and struggle

against foreign powers. Defensive attitudes and confrontational inclinations caused by unjust links with major Western powers led to the formation of a sense of xenophobia among Iranians. The logical result of the unjust relations with foreign powers was xenophobia and animosity, particularly, towards the West. Therefore, these historical experiences, which led to the creation of a basic and primary trust system of a racked nature, are the reason why ontological security is prioritized in Iranian foreign policy.

The most important causes behind Iran's basic trust system and motive of ontological security seeking in its foreign policy gaining importance and priority are the developments and threats following the Islamic Revolution. These developments and interactions took place at accomplishment and structural levels, and were followed by ontological threats. At the accomplishment level, the nascent Islamic Republic was faced with vast physical and identity threats. From one side, secessionist inclinations among ethnic, racial, linguistic and religious minorities put the territorial integrity and security of Iran at stake. This development amounted to a threat against the social and identity security of Iran. Meanwhile, disputes between the Islamic Republic's Islamic ideology and competitive political ideologies such as secularism, liberalism, nationalism and communism threatened its identity, leading to Iran's prioritization of the pursuit of ontological security. Specifically, the Islamic Republic was of the belief that foreign forces and states are involved in creating both types of threats.

At the structural level, Iran's interactions with other states, and particularly the major powers, were faced with measures that helped shape the Islamic Republic's basic trust system, highlighting ontological security in its foreign policy. The Islamic Republic, which came into being in the arena of international politics with an Islamic revolutionary identity, had to behave in accordance with the pillars of its identity requirements. However, on the other hand, regional and internal actors who assumed identities different from that of the

Islamic Republic acted in such a way that intentionally or otherwise, severely endangered and threatened the identity and ontological security of Iran. This led the Islamic Republic to seek to defend its own identity and ontological security in a serious manner.

American support extended to liberal forces and the USSR's backing of socialist elements, both bearers of ideologies contradictory to that adopted by the Islamic Republic, and the two superpowers' blessing of Iraq's invasion of Iran played a decisive role in forming the basic trust system of Tehran (Mottaghi and Koolayi, 2000). The Iraqi Ba'athist regime's invasion of Iran, with comprehensive support from conservative Arab regimes, appear as other factor in creating ontological anxiety in Iran. All these negative interactions and developments, for the Islamic Republic, were considered as negation of its revolutionary and Islamic identity.

Another important factor which helped shape Iran's basic trust system, and led to ontological security gaining importance in Iranian foreign policy, was the denial of the Islamic Republic's identity as a constructive actor at the regional level, in the Muslim world and at the global stage. At the regional level, not only did competing states refuse to recognize the Islamic Republic as a positive and active actor, but they also started to confront and combat it. The establishment and strengthening of the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council was a vivid expression of this reality. In the Muslim word, the identity of the Islamic Republic of Iran caused a confrontation with non-revolutionary conservative regimes. Moreover, at the global level, the Islamic and revolutionary identity of the Islamic Republic also led the conservative international system and major powers to insist on the status quo. This meant that there was a refusal to recognize the identity of the Islamic Republic as a regional power, (Dehghani FiruzAbadi, 2005: 44-85) a fact that pushed Iran towards fortifying and defending its identity, even at the cost of confrontation and physical security threats. This motive, as explained above, is clearly seen in Iran-U.S. relations.

As explained above, based on the theory of ontological security as explained by Mitzen, one of the most important mechanisms and approaches for combating identity threats and anxiety is the normalization of certain specific routines and practices to stabilize and strengthen state identity. The Islamic Republic, which has faced many threats to its ontological security, has adopted a series of certain types of interactions and behaviors in its foreign policy as routines and habits in order to ensure its ontological security. Any interruption or hesitation in regards to the aforementioned patterns and routines is considered as an identity threat by the Iranian state.

The most important routinized behavioral patterns which have mitigated existence anxiety and ontological threats in foreign policy, and that have strengthen Iran's Islamic revolutionary identity, could be summarized as follows: a) Extending support to Muslims and the oppressed through active participation in Islamic and international organizations and backing liberation movements; b) Countering arrogance through combating or resisting hegemonic powers led by the United States. This behavioral pattern can clearly be recognized in Iran-U.S. ties; c) Fighting against Zionism and declining to recognize Israel through support for Islamic resistance forces in Palestine and Lebanon; d) Revisionism as an effort to change or reform the international order through expanding ties and cooperation with revolutionary and revisionist states at bilateral or multilateral levels. Expansion of ties between the Islamic Republic of Iran with Latin American states in recent years and North Korea and Cuba in the early years of the revolution serve as displays of this behavioral pattern (Dehghani Firuz Abadi, 2009).

These behavioral patterns and current practices in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic will remain, except for in some occasions. First, the continuity and endurance of these behaviors and practices are effective in stabilizing and strengthening the Islamic revolutionary identity, consequently ensuring the ontological security of the Islamic Republic. Second, a change in the aforementioned

patterns would not weaken the identity of the Islamic Republic or threaten its ontological security. Third, the identities of states and related actors change in the event of a change in their objective behavioral patterns; for Iran, this would mean that other states would relinquish their anti-Islamic and anti-revolutionary identities. Fourth, if the basic trust system of the Islamic Republic would change from static to flexible, other actors would validate and verify this change.

3. Case Studies: Iran-Iraq war and Iran-US confrontation

Could one explain Iranian foreign policy, especially its long-standing and sustained conflicts with other states, based on deductive theories of ontological security theory? In this part, we try to answer this question through examining the foreign policy behavior of Iran in two cases of conflict. These two case studies are: the behavior and actions of Iran during the Iraqi Ba'athist regime's war on the country as well as the continued hostility and conflict between the Islamic Republic and the United States.

The common approach within the framework of realist theory tries to explain and analyze the behavior of the Islamic Republic during its war with Iraq based on the motive of physical security-seeking. Although the motive of preserving military security and territorial integrity could explain some dimensions and aspects of Iranian behavior during the war with Iraq, it fails to explain the entirety of the situation. Hence, some of Iran's behavior during the war cannot be explained by realist theories and hypotheses. Specifically, Iranian foreign policy vis-à-vis the two superpowers, the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council and continuing the war even after the liberation of Khorramshahr cannot be explained on the basis of the logic of balance of power and instrumental rationality to ensure mere physical security.

After the Iraqi invasion of Iran on the 22nd of September 1980, ties between Tehran and Washington became severely hostile due to the hostage taking crisis at the American embassy in Iran. The

physical security of the Islamic republic was threatened in its military and economic dimensions by the United States. However, the Islamic Republic of Iran, contrary to the logic of balance of power, did not turn towards the USSR in order to balance out the United States (Sick, 1985: 1110-1111). Vice versa, after the occupation of Afghanistan by the USSR and the confrontation between the two superpowers, the Islamic Republic, instead of forging an alliance with Moscow, condemned Soviet policies and adopted an offensive foreign policy towards both the U.S. and the USSR(Yodfat, 1984). Moreover, instead of moving closer towards the Arab states of the Persian Gulf to undermine their coalition with Saddam Hussein's regime, Iran chose to challenge the legitimacy of these conservative political systems and directly addressed their peoples' and dissidents so that those states started to spare no effort in extending any kind of support and backing to Iraq during its war against Iran (Chubin and Tripp, 1988). The result of the Iranian confrontation-mongering policy towards the superpowers and members of the Persian Gulf Cooperation Council was the disturbing of the balance of power in the region to the benefit of Iraq. Another consequence was the triggering of physical insecurity for the Islamic Republic of Iran. Therefore, the logic behind the foreign policy behavior of Tehran at the time cannot be explained on the basis of assumptions about motives and goals solely aimed at fulfilling phhysical security requirements.

Iran's continuation of its war against Saddam's regime following the liberation of the Iranian town of Khorramshahr in 1982 and the entering of Iraqi territory, even as the Ba'athist regime and its supporters offered a cease-fire, cannot be explained hrough the logic of mere rationality based on a cost and benefit analysis. This is so because through the prism of realism, a continuation of war involved continued material costs and physical security threats. In particular, following the beginning of Iranian operations on Iraqi soil, the international support extended to Iraq intensified and within the

framework of a no-win war strategy, many states practically started to directly confront the Islamic Republic(Hiro, 1989). This confrontation culminated in direct military confrontation between Iranian and U.S. forces towards the end of the war, undermining the physical security of the Islamic Republic. Therefore, the continuation of the war cannot be explained through a mere focus on a physical security seeking motive without paying attention to the impetus of the identity security theme.

Realist theory's inability to explain and analyze Iranian foreign policy during the war with Iraq directed some analysts towards applying cultural theories. For them, an Islamic ideology and worldview were the most important identity element serving as the cause and stimulus for the foreign policy behavior of the Islamic Republic during the war. Undoubtedly, such cultural theories offer a better explanation of Iranian foreign policy at the time in comparison by realism, through its highlighting of the inherent of Islamic outlook and identity of the Islamic Republic (Ollapally, 1998).

However, despite recognizing the decisive role of Islamic ideology and identity, these theories are not able to specify and determine the basic motives of Iranian foreign policy. In other words, they are unable to find the answer to this question: What is the goal and motivation of the Islamic Republic's foreign policy within the framework of Islamic ideology and worldview?

The theory of ontological security, while accepting the decisive role of the Islamic Republic's identity, paves the way for answering the question through determining motives driving Iranian foreign policy during the war with Iraq. This theory explains the decisive role of identity in Iranian foreign policy within the framework of a wise actor model. That is to say, without denying the role of physical security and the preservation of territorial integrity, it considers ensuring ontological security through stabilizing and strengthening its Islamic revolutionary identity as the most important motive for the foreign policy behavior of the Islamic Republic. Therefore, through a

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cost and benefit analysis, Iran sustained policies which ensured its ontological security, even though its physical security saw a decline.

The simultaneous confrontation with both superpowers at the time, challenging the legitimacy of the conservative Arab regimes of the Persian Gulf and continuing its defense against Ba'athist forces can be explained based on the logic and motivation of ontological security seeking. Iran's confrontation with the U.S., which led to the seizing of the American embassy in Tehran, resulted in physical insecurity. However, Iran's confrontation with the United States was driven by the motive of ontological security seeking, since the adoption of the policy of looking towards the West, and particularly at the U.S., by the interim revolutionary government hurt the anti-imperialist ideals of the Islamic Republic ; the most significant aspect of its Islamic revolutionary identity. The latter amounted to creating security concerns and ontological insecurity, which could have been prevented by the Islamic Republic through continuing the behavioral routine of combatting the United States. Based on the same logic, an Iranian policy of tilting towards the USSR to balance the United States would also make its Islamic revolutionary identity and consequently its ontological security vulnerable. Thus, the motive of ontological security seeking required a simultaneous confrontation with both superpowers, within the framework of a behavioral pattern emphasizing a stance against arrogance.

The challenging of the legitimacy and policies of the conservative Arab regimes during the war with Iraq was also rooted in Iran's ontological security seeking; i.e. efforts to preserve and maintain its Islamic revolutionary identity. The Islamic Republic supported Islamist and revolutionary opponents of these secular and conservative regimes in order to maintain its Islamic revolutionary identity and ensure its ontological security. Any gap or interruption in this stance on behalf of Iran might have been to ensure the physical security of the Islamic Republic; however, at the risk of destroying or weakening its Islamic revolutionary identity. Thus, the motive of

seeking ontological security made the Islamic Republic continue its practices and routines in its foreign policy, despite the resulting threats to its physical security.

The Islamic Republic's continuation of its defense following the liberation of the border town of Khorramshahr could also be explained and analyzed based on the motivation of ontological security seeking. Firstly, based on its inflexible basic trust system, Iran did not have confidence that the identity of the Iraqi Ba'athist regime would change from being greedy actor to being a peaceful actor that seeks security. Hence, the pacifist gestures and words of Saddam Hussein concerning the cease-fire he offered did not convince Iran that the aggressive Ba'athist regime had changed its nature and sought real peace. Therefore, one of the most important reasons for Iran's decision to continue its defense is its doubt and uncertainty concerning its interactions and severe mistrust vis-à-vis Iraq. For Iran, the main goal of Saddam Hussein's proposition of a cease-fire was to prepare for more aggression.

Secondly, the Islamic Republic was worried about its ontological security, since it considered the Iraqi aggression as the embodiment and manifestation of war between good and evil, or Islam and infidels. Hence, ending the war would mean forging a peace deal between Islam and infidels, which was seen as impossible. Therefore, any interruption in the war with Iraq dented Iran's Islamic revolutionary identity, ultimately leading to ontological insecurity. Therefore, as Iran witnessed no change in the aggressive and anti-Islamic revolutionary nature and identity of Iraqi regime, it continued fighting to preserve its physical and ontological security. In particular, the leader of the Islamic Revolution of Iran enumerated the destruction of the Islamic Revolution and overthrowing of the Islamic Republic as among the most important goals and reasons for the Iraqi invasion of Iranian territory. Therefore, although the continuation of the defense was possibly failing to fully ensure the physical security of Iran, it played a decisive and highly important part

in stabilizing, strengthening and sustaining the Islamic revolutionary identity of the Islamic Republic (Collection of Imam Khomeini Works, Vol. I, p. 239).

The confrontation between Tehran and Washington is the longest-running conflict Iran has experienced during the past three decades. Despite its ups and downs as well as tensions sometimes leading to direct military confrontation, the conflict has dragged on. This conflict has gone on even though at times, both Iran and the U.S. have had vested interests in the same situation and faced joint threats to their physical and material security. Here, a question is then raised: How can we analyze and explain the behavioral motivation for the Islamic Republic to continue this confrontation?

Based on mainstream rationalist theories, especially realism as the dominant perspective, no answer can be provided for this question. This, since the Islamic Republic, just like during its war with Iraq, does not act in accordance with the logic of balance of power and rationality in line with ensuring its mere physical security. Firstly, the Islamic Republic, despite having material interests to maintain ties and cooperate with the United States as well as American expressions of a willingness to continue normal relations with the revolutionary government of Iran, (Documents of the Espionage Nest:18-19) opted to fight and confront Washington; a policy which resulted in the capture of American embassy in Tehran, followed by severing of diplomatic relations between Iran and the United States. The leaders of the Islamic Republic, including the Leader of the Islamic Revolution, were cognizant of the material interests in carrying on normal ties with the United States. Therefore, sole material interests cannot explain and justify the behavioral motive of the Islamic Republic's stance towards American. Secondly, the logic of balance of power is also unable to explain the attitude of the Islamic Republic towards the U.S. since this logic commands that Iran should avoid getting engaged in a conflict with America, or at the least establish close ties with the USSR to balance out the United States. Of course,

Iran opted for none of the two options.

The most popular theoretical argument, other than realism, explaining Iran's behavior has been provided by culture-oriented and constructivist approaches; theories which emphasize and focus on the role of images and ideology in directing the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Based on this group of analyses, the Islamic ideology requirements as the focal element of the identity of the political system of Iran are viewed as the most important factor behind the beginning and continuation of the conflict between Iran and America (Ramazani, 2004). This argument, as explained in the previous section of this paper, accurately explains the role of identity in Iranian foreign policy, although it does not clearly explain its behavioral motivation. Based on the decisive role of identity, the motives of the Islamic Republic's continuing conflict with the U.S. should be operationalized. The theory of ontological security makes such analysis and explanation possible since this approach explains the decisive role of identity in foreign policy within the framework of the rational actor model.

To explain Iranian foreign policy in regards to its resistance against the United States, from an ontological security perspective, it is necessary to firstly explain its basic and primary trust system. The Islamic Republic of Iran's basic trust system in dealing with the U.S. is inflexible, hindering any change in behavioral patterns. The most important reasons for this inexorability is the historical background of the ties between Tehran and Washington before and after the victory of the Islamic revolution. From the Islamic Republic's point of view, the U.S. has an intrusive, hegemonic and arrogant nature which has never changed through the lapse of time. This image and perception of America as an expansionist state is certified and attested by its practices on the ground. The masterminding and execution of the coup d'état against democratically elected Iranian Premier Dr Mohammad Mosaddeq's government in 1953, subsequently sparing no effort to support the Shah's regime, backing anti-revolutionary

groups, supporting Saddam's regime during its war against Iran, imposing economic punishments and sanctions as well as attempts to deprive Iran from nuclear energy are all behaviors which, from the Iranian point of view, reproduce and attest the hegemonic and hostile identity of the United States.

The endurance of this identity through American behavior towards Iran since the very beginning of the Islamic Revolution has helped form an inexorable basic trust system in the Islamic Republic which has consequently led ontological security to gain priority and importance in Iranian foreign policy. Hence, by recognizing and believing in the hegemonic and anti-Islamic nature of the United States, Iran tries to ensure and stabilize its ontological security, meaning keeping and sustaining its Islamic revolutionary identity within the framework of confronting America. In fact, confronting Washington and resisting its ambitions have become a part of Iran's basic trust system, and as a result, an element of its identity. Hence, the Islamic Republic cannot maintain and sustain its Islamic revolutionary identity without confronting America and resisting its ambitions. Therefore, the continuation of Iran's struggle against the U.S. is more than an attempt to ensure its physical security; it is a means to ensure its ontological security in the form of preserving Iran's Islamic revolutionary identity. As a result, this struggle will go on so long as the Islamic Republic maintains its images of the United States, itself and the type of ties it has or should have with Washington. The identity elements and interests of the Islamic Republic, as components of its ontological security, could be summarized as guarding and protecting Islam, the Islamic Revolution, independence and regional Islamic movements. Iran is confronting and resisting against the U.S. with a view to maintain an Islamic state based on Islam, stabilize and strengthen the Islamic Revolution in Iran and around the world, gain independence and freedom of action in foreign policy as well as getting the Islamic Republic recognized as a regional Islamic power. Iranian decision makers have believed, and

continue to believe that confronting the United States is essential in order to reach the aforementioned objectives. As a result, resistance against the U.S. will continue as long as it fulfills those goals.

It is noteworthy that Iran's pursuit and ensuring of ontological security is rendered within the framework of the rational actor model. Hence, in case of a contradiction between ontological and physical security in countering the U.S., a choice between the two approaches will be made based on a cost and benefit calculation. Therefore, as mentioned above, the Islamic Republic's leaders and decision makers maintain that the benefits of countering the U.S. to secure identity-related and ontological security-related interests are more than its material costs.

On the same basis, the Islamic Republic's sustained struggle against the United States will only end when this conflict no longer plays a role in ensuring Iran's ontological security and its identity interests. This will only happen if, firstly, Iran ceases to view America's nature as hegemonic and arrogant, after coming to the conclusion that Washington has been transformed from an expansionist and hegemonic power into a normal security-seeking state. Secondly, the U.S. will only attain such a new identity if it can demonstrate such a development through its behaviors and routine practices. America can stabilize its new and pacifist identity if, through behaviors and practices different from what they were in the past, the Iranian basic trust system can be changed. Henceforth, the Islamic Republic's decision makers and leaders have repeatedly announced that in case of a change in American identity and behavior towards Iran, there is a possibility of normalization of bilateral relations.

Conclusions

To explain motives and behavioral pattern of the Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy, particularly in sustained and durable conflicts, different analytical concepts and conceptual frameworks have been

employed. The dominant approach has tried to explain Iranian behavioral motives based on the concept of Iran seeking mere physical security, within the framework of pursuing national interests. However, by applying the theory of ontological security, this article seeks to prove that the motives and goals of Iranian foreign policy, especially in long-running conflicts, are aimed at pursuing and materializing ontological security rather than merely safeguarding physical security. This means that the Islamic Republic is mostly concerned with protecting its identity as an Islamic revolutionary state, and interacts and deals with other state actors on the same basis.

Iran's pursuit and efforts to ensure its ontological security, i.e. Islamic revolutionary identity, are rendered within the framework of the rational actor model. Moreover, in cases where there is a contradiction between ontological and physical security, the Islamic Republic may prefer its ontological security over its physical security. Therefore, if continued hostility towards a certain state may help secure and stabilize Iran's Islamic revolutionary identity, confrontation will remain the preference of Iranian decision makers - regardless of the resulting material costs and possible physical insecurity.

As a result, struggle against the target of hostility only ends when it no longer plays a role in ensuring the identity and ontological security of the Islamic Republic. This situation is materialized when the identity of the actor party to the hostility with Iran is changed through a demonstration of positive behavior and routines vis-à-vis the Islamic Republic in practice, so that the basic trust and confidence system of Iran does not consider it as an identity threat any more.

Notes

- For more study on the historical memories and experiences of the Iranians and its impact on formation of xenophobic feelings, see:
- Fuller, Graham, Center of Universe: Geopolitics of Iran, translated by Mokhber, Abbass (Tehran: Nashr-e- Markaz, 1994); Houshang Mahdavi, AbdulReza, The History of Iranian Foreign Relations from the Onset of the Safavid Era to the End of WW II (Tehran: Amir Kabir Publications, 2000); Houshang Mahdavi, AbdulReza, Iranian Foreign Policy in the Pahlavi Era: 1921-1979 (Tehran: Nashr-e-Paykan: 1998)
- For more study on vertical and horizontal threats against national identity see

Barry Buzan, Ole Waever and Joap Wilde, Security: a Framework for analysis, (Bulder: Lynne Rienner, 1998); and also see Dehghani FiruzAbadi, "The Greater Middle East and the National Security of the Islamic Republic of Iran", Vol. 7, Issue III, Fall 2004, pp. 491-493.

- For example Imam Khomeini stated:-

"In case we surrendered to the U.S. and superpowers there might have been superficial security and welfare… the nation will not sell out itself to the U.S. and superpowers for welfare and lower prices of goods.", Ettela'at Daily, 5 October, 1982

- For example Imam Khomeini stated that- "Expelling the U.S. government does not amount to getting it replaced with the USSR.", The Collection of Imam Khomeini Works, Vol. XI, p. 158. In a reaction to rumors of an Iranian request for help extended to the USSR to resist against the U.S., His Eminence wrote: "the USSR's charge d'affaires in Mexico announced that the USSR is ready to help Iran resist American impositions against Tehran… the Iranian government and I never allowed the USSR government and others to touch these baseless things which is blasphemy against our sanctities and the noble nation of Iran.", Ettela'at Daily, 14 January, 1980, p. 12

- For a further explanation about Iran-U.S. relations before and after the Islamic Revolution see: Kenneth M. Pollack and Suzanne Maloney, "Behind The Scenes of a Tumultuous Relationship: The United States and Iran", (New York: Council of Foreign Relations, 2004); also: Jamshidi, Mohammad Hossein, Examining the Behavior of the US towards Iran's National Movement (Tehran: The Center for Islamic Revolution Document, 1999); Kadivar, Jamileh, Confrontation: Islamic Revolution in Iran, and the US (Tehran: Ettela'at Publications, 1993); Reviewing the History of Iran-US Relations, Yad

special Issue, Vol. 13, Issues 51-52, Fall and Winter 1999

- The reflection of such identity for the U.S. on the side of Iran could be seen in its leaders' words. For instance, Imam Khomeini said: "The U.S. is the number one enemy of the deprived and oppressed peoples of the world… I have said repeatedly that links with the U.S., is the link between an oppressed nation with devouring forces.", Ettela'at Daily, 3 January, 198. On the occasion of the severance of diplomatic relations with the U.S., he also wrote: "The relations between a nation raised to freedom from the claws of an international looter and a devouring looter is always to the detriment of the oppressed nation and to the profit of the looter.", Jomhuri-e-Eslami Daily, 19 April, 1980, p. 11.

- This image and treatment of American identity and ties with it, continued by the leaders of the Islamic Republic, after the demise of His Eminence, so that since 1989, Ayatollah Khamene'i has repeatedly indicated this. For instance, only after a few days of being elected as the Supreme Leader, he said: "… Since the very moment of the victory of the Islamic Revolution, the global arrogance has never failed to pursue the whim of eliminating, not just weakening the Islamic Republic and so long as the nation and the officials of the Islamic Republic adhere to principles of independence, national dignity and Islamic doctrine [Islamic revolutionary identity], it will keep up such a motive.", Ettela'at Daily 9 June, 1989. On another occasion he reiterates that: "The reason for the U.S. being up to this scuffle in the world… is that it attaches a superpower right to itself. It wishes to keep the world at its disposal … wishing to determine the fate of the world.", Ettela'at Daily, 4 March 1996, p. 2. In the same vein, he addressed the U.S. president as follows: "you are an imperialist and you get out of your borders for this purpose… for the same reason, the Iranian nation would never feel a sense of reconciliation towards the hegemonic and colonial power of the U.S. Rather, they believe that this state is for aggression and invasion.", Ettela'at Daily, 6 June 1995, p. 2. Iranian leaders' perception of the U.S. did not change during the reformist era that began on 4 November, 1997 defined the U.S. as an international dictator and a symbol of arrogance throughout the world, calling every day a day of countering arrogance for the Iranian nation and everywhere a fortified front for this struggle: Ettela'at Daily, on 4 November, 1997. On another occasion he reiterates: "The Iranian nation breaks the awe of the US… ties and talks with the U.S. are fruitless for the Iranian nation.", Ettela'at Daily, on 17 January, 1998. He also stated that "Our problem with the U.S. is not about détente … therefore the arrogant policy of the U.S. is based on disturbing the Islamic Republic of Iran and hindering economic advancement of our country.", Ettela'at Daily, on 17 August, 1999, p. 2. Hence, he expressly states: "… a conclusion of existing realities and reflecting on explicit and implicit stances and propagation of the western media system shows that a comprehensive American plan which is in fact a reconstructed plan of the collapse of the USSR with a view to destroy the Islamic Republic system, rests on the agenda of the enemies of the Iranian nation and the world hegemonic system tries to simulate, somehow, the trend of the USSR collapse in

Iran, materializing its frustrated goals of the past through supporting its intended reforms.", Jaam-e-Jam Daily, on 10 July, 1997, pp. 2 & 9. Just as before, the U.S. continues to be the symbol of arrogance, hegemony and hostility with the Islamic Republic so that the Leader of the Islamic Revolution addressed the U.S. administration as a rebel and reiterated: "The indicator of Iranian foreign policy is the negation of the relation between the dominant and the one who accepts domination as well as wise and sagacious struggle against the world hegemonic system… we never accept the hegemonic system's behavior … and in no area surrender to hegemony as we consider confrontation with the global behavior of the hegemonic system and exiting from dominant-dominated relations as the indicator of our diplomacy.", 22 August, 2007, p. 10

- The importance and priority of ontological security as the end and motive of combatting and countering the U.S. in the words of the leaders of the Islamic Revolution and the officials of the Islamic Republic has been vividly embodied. For instance Imam Khomeini said in this relation: "… our war, is the war of faith and knows no geography or borders … our enemies and devouring powers …knows nothing but negligence of all our divine and spiritual identities and values…if the Iranian nation deviates from all its revolutionary and Islamic principles and standards and destroys the home of credence and dignity of the Holy Prophet and the Imams (PBUT) with their own hands then the devouring forces may recognize you as weak, poor and lowbrow.", Ettela'at Daily, 20 July, 1988. Ayatollah Khamene'i also stated: "Combating the world arrogance is the nature of the Islamic Revolution, an integral part of it.", Ettela'at Daily, 26 June, 1988. Therefore, he considers its endurance as inevitable: "Today, the Islamic Republic of Iran's path is the avenue of Islam and countering world arrogance and oppression, and its move in this direction is unstoppable.", Ettela'at Daily, 19 September, 1992

- Imam Khomeini and Ayatollah Khamene'i on different occasions have emphasized the role and function of countering the U.S. For instance Imam Khomeini said: "We kicked the U.S. out of Iran to establish Islamic governance.", The Collection of Imam Khomeini Works, Vol. XI, p. 158. On another occasion he reiterated: "we have repeatedly announced the fact in our Islamic foreign and international policy that we are seeking to promote the influence of Islam and undermining the hegemony of imperialists throughout the world and we continue to do so… we have decided to … promote the Islamic system of the Holy Prophet (PBUH) in a world of arrogance and, sooner or later, the oppressed nations will witness it. We spare no effort to prevent U.S. blackmailing and immunities of American agents even through coercive combating.", Ettela'at Daily, 20 July, 1988. Also, Imam Khomeini wrote about the role of countering the U.S. in securing the independence of the Islamic Republic of Iran: "till the cessation of all political, military, economic and cultural dependencies on the U.S., Iran must continue its categorical struggle against this ruthless devouring." then he continues to explain the place of this struggle in completing the Islamic Revolution and reiterates that: "Till the cessation of all dependencies on any western or eastern superpowers, the inexorable struggle of our nation against the arrogance will go on. We all know that the Islamic world is

looking forward to the complete fruition of the Islamic Revolution.", Collection of Imam Khomeini Works, Vol. XII, pp. 147-148. On another occasion he stated: "For the cause of their freedom and independence, the nations should severe their relations with the superpowers especially with the U.S.", Ettela'at Daily, 25 December, 1980.

- Ayatollah Khamene'i also repeatedly indicated the role and exigency of countering the U.S. in attaining the goals related to the ontological security of the Islamic Republic. For example he said: "Our nation and authorities have categorically stood up against the U.S. and never compromised our revolutionary values.", Ettela'at Daily, 29 November, 1990. On the bond between the Islamic Republic and vitality of protecting the Islamic Revolution, he also reiterated: "The revolution is not detachable from authority, the Islamic Republic of Iran's system is the embodiment of the revolution … and the world arrogance of the US… is opposed thereto.", Ettela'at Daily, 28 June, 1989. "The Islamic Revolution was set to materialize a political, economic, social and cultural program of Islam in Iran, and in the arena of world relations rejects the unjust system and seeks the peace, security and happiness of all nations through depending on Islamic teachings.", Iran Daily, 2 August 1989, p.10. On the protection of the Islamic Republic's revolutionary identity he states: "Being revolutionary at the political arena amounts to protecting our Islamic and revolutionary stances in a decisive…manner and this is the true line of diplomacy.", Ettela'at Daily, 2 August, 1989

- For instance Imam Khomeini expressed: "In case we surrendered to the U.S. and superpowers there might have been superficial security and welfare… but undoubtedly, our independence, freedom and dignity would have been undermined. Our nation would never bear such a stain of dishonor and surrender to infamy", Ettela'at Daily, 5 October, 1982. On the basis of the same logic, Ayatollah Khamene'i argues that: "In comparison, we would see that again that the cost of resisting against the U.S. with independence, is much lower than giving up to American bullying.", Ettela'at Daily, 7 April, 1982, p.14

- For example Hashemi Rafsanjani, president at the time, expressly states: "Our problem with the U.S. is that, the Americans, from the very beginning of the revolution chose to deal with us in a hostile manner. We do not trust them. A gesture from the side of the U.S. would be releasing Iranian assets frozen in its banks and American hostility with Islamic Revolution is best marked by freezing these assets.", Ettela'at Daily, 20 April, 1995. Sayyed Mohammad Khatami, then president of the Islamic Republic also stated that there is a thick curtain of mistrust between Iran and the U.S. and in a reaction to the proposal made by President Bill Clinton regarding real reconciliation with Iran, while welcoming the mitigating language of Washington vis-à-vis Iran, expressed: "Iran expects to see American goodwill in practice not only in words.", Ettela'at Daily, 22 July, 1998, p.3. President Ahmadinejad's administration considers a change in the arrogance and behavioral pattern of this state as a condition for getting ready for talks and normalization of ties with the United States.

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