



Universidade do Minho

Escola de Economia e Gestão

Mohammad Eslami

**Strategic Culture and Iran's Foreign and
Defense Policy towards the Ballistic
Missile Program**



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Defense Policy towards the Ballistic Missile
Program**

Ph.D. Thesis in Political Science and International Relations

A research conducted under the supervision of

Professor Alena Vysotskaya Guedes Vieira

And

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Mohammad Eslami
Spring 2023

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Strategic Culture and Iran's Foreign and Defense Policy towards the Ballistic Missile Program

Abstract

While arguing that Iran's defense policy pillars are built upon Shia provisions, the present contribution sets out to investigate how the main Shia principles have been informing the development and employment of strategic culture of Iran, underpinning the employment of Iran's strategic weapons and in particular Iran's ballistic missile program (BMP). It is argued, accordingly, that Iran's approach to the BMP is inseparable from *qisas* (retaliation), while obeying the overarching principle of *maslahat*, but also characterized by the varying importance of the principles *zarare aghall*, *ezterar* and *nafye sabil*.

Drawing on the analytical framework which combines the Strategic Culture Theory (SCT) with the narrative analysis, this thesis explores the recent evolution of Iran's ballistic missile program (BMP) (2015-2022). While Iran's strategic culture dictates a key role for the BMP, it nevertheless allows for a particular room for maneuver. In this sense, the principles of Shi'a Islam form a particular discursive habitat in which Iran's strategic actions are framed and rationalized (something that also explains multiple and sometimes contradicting visions on the BMP in Iran). Against this background, the thesis demonstrates how Iran's approach towards the program is enveloped by political discourses, shifting with the direction of Iran's international relations and domestic politics. I distinguish two competing narratives, the 'revolutionary' originated from the principle of *nafye sabil* and the 'moderation' rooted in the principle of minimum loss, and demonstrate how they define the opportunities and constraints of Iran's military behavior in two different ways. Moreover, I show a change towards a more confrontational approach, reflected in the consolidation of the 'revolutionary' narrative. This thesis contributes to a more fine-grained understanding of Iran's policy towards its BMP, which remains central to Iran's strategic culture.

Keywords: Ballistic Missiles, Iran, Strategic Culture, Ways of War

Cultura Estratégica e Política Externa e de Defesa do Irã para o Programa de Mísseis Balísticos

Resumo

Ao argumentar que os pilares da política de defesa do Irã são construídos sobre as disposições xiitas, a presente contribuição propõe-se a investigar como os princípios fundamentais xiitas têm informado o desenvolvimento e o uso de armas estratégicas no Irã, nomeadamente do Programa de Mísseis Balísticos do Irã (PMB). Nesse sentido, a tese explora a mudança no emprego do Irã do seu PMB (uso/não, uso) a partir de uma perspectiva de cultura estratégica. Em particular, argumenta-se que, a abordagem do Irã ao PMB é indissociável de *qisas* (retaliação), enquanto obedece ao princípio abrangente de *maslahat*, mas também caracterizada pela importância variável dos princípios *zarare aghall*, *ezterar* e *nafye sabil*.

Com base no quadro analítico que combina a Teoria da Cultura Estratégica (SCT) com a análise narrativa, esta tese explora a recente evolução do Programa de Mísseis Balísticos do Irã (PMB) (2015-2022). Embora a cultura estratégica do Irã determine um papel fundamental para o PMB, esta permite uma particular margem de manobra. Nesse sentido, os princípios do islamismo xiita formam um habitat discursivo particular no qual as ações estratégicas do Irã são enquadradas e racionalizadas (algo que também explica visões múltiplas e por vezes contraditórias sobre o PMB no Irã). Perante este cenário, a tese demonstra como a abordagem do Irã em relação ao Programa é envolta por discursos políticos, mudando com a direção das relações internacionais e da política interna do Irã.

Distingo duas narrativas concorrentes, a ‘revolucionária’ originada pelo princípio de *nafye sabil* e a ‘moderação’ enraizada no princípio da perda mínima, e demonstro como ambas definem as oportunidades e restrições do comportamento militar do Irã de duas formas distintas. Além disso, mostro uma mudança para uma abordagem mais conflituosa, refletida na consolidação da narrativa ‘revolucionária’. Esta tese contribui para uma compreensão mais refinada da política do Irã em relação ao seu PMB, que permanece central para a cultura estratégica do Irã.

Palavras-chave: Cultura Estratégica, Irã, Mísseis Balísticos, Modos de Guerra.

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List of acronyms

BMP	Ballistic Missile Program
IR	International Relations
IRGC	Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps
IRI	Islamic Republic of Iran
ISIS	Islamic State of Iraq and Syria
JCPOA	Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action
NPT	The Nonproliferation Treaty
SCT	Strategic Culture Theory
SIPRI	Stockholm International Peace Research Institute
UAE	The United Arab Emirates
UCAV	Unmanned Combat Aerial Vehicles
UNSC	United Nation Security Council
US	The United States
WMD	Weapons of Mass Destruction

List of Persian and Arabic terms

<i>Adl</i>	Justice
<i>Aql</i>	Wisdom/Logic
<i>Bazdarandegi</i>	Deterrence
<i>Edam</i>	Execution
<i>Entezar</i>	Waiting
<i>Ezterar</i>	Emergency
<i>Fatwa</i>	Religious Order
<i>Hadith</i>	Quote, Tradition
<i>Halal</i>	Lawful
<i>Haram</i>	Unlawful
<i>Hejabe Ejbari</i>	Compulsory Hijab (Islamic Dressing)
<i>Ijma</i>	Agreement/Admission
<i>Imamaite</i>	Leadership
<i>Khalgh</i>	People
<i>Ma'ad</i>	Resurrection
<i>Mafsadeh</i>	Inexpedient
<i>Majles</i>	Parliament
<i>Majmae Tashkhise Maslahate Nezam</i>	Expediency Discernment Council
<i>Makruh</i>	Abominable
<i>Maraje'e Taghlid</i>	Religious Reference
<i>Mardom Salari</i>	Democracy
<i>Maslahat</i>	Expediency
<i>Mojahid</i>	Striver
<i>Mostazafin</i>	Deprived Nations
<i>Mubah</i>	Permissible
<i>Nabuwat</i>	Prophecy
<i>Nafye Sabil</i>	Banning the Way
<i>Qisas</i>	Retaliation
<i>Shuraye Negahban</i>	Guardians' Council
<i>Towhid</i>	Monotheism

Velayate Faghih

Zarare Aghal

Rule of Jurist

Minimum Loss

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Dedication

“Women are like flowers” (Ali Ibn Abi Taleb)

As women in Iran have raised their voices to defend their rights some have questioned whether women are valued by men in Iran. As an Iranian man, I would need to underscore that in my culture and within my family, women are the most precious and valuable beings in the world.

I dedicate this thesis to influential women of my life:

- The hero of my life, my mother (Marzieh Khanoom), a single mom who sacrificed her life to bring me up. The one who taught me how to stand stronger every time I fall.
- The love of my life (Samira Joon), a patient mate accompanying me in all ups and downs of life without complaining. The one who gave me loving care and happiness during the past ten years.
- The role model of my professional life (Prof. Alena), a supportive teacher, and a compassionate friend being with me shoulder by shoulder every single day of my Ph.D. journey, supporting me to “either find a way or build one” to get wherever I want.
- My sweetheart sisters (Mina and Nazi), and my best female friends (Zahra and Maria), all have a special place in my heart.

Mohammad Eslami
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1. Introduction

1.1. Why study Iran's defense and security policy and the BMP?

Due to its geopolitical, geostrategic, and geo-economic position, West Asia¹ is at the crossroads of international crises, confrontations and conflicts (Müller, 2016). This instability provokes perpetual competition and confrontation among the countries of the region, and this volatile regional and international context highlights the need to analyze Iran's security policy (Ghanbari Jahromi, 2015; Ostovar, 2019). At the heart of these deep-seated conflicts in the Middle East is the fear of destruction or irreparable damage inflicted by some countries onto others, something that is intertwined with one of the central phenomena of regional and global politics, namely deterrence, with direct implications for the present dissertation.

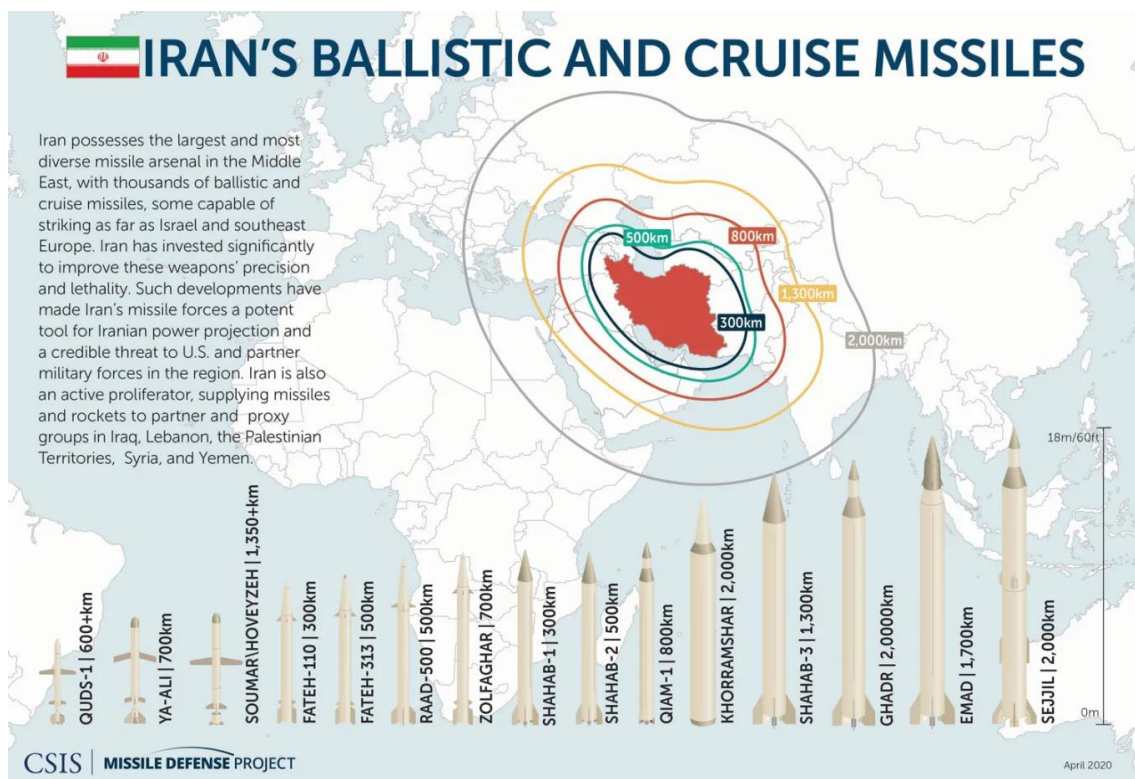
The Iranian leadership, traditionally claiming that Iran's military strategy is, essentially, defensive in nature (Ajili and Rouhi, 2019; Eslami and Vieira, 2020), has been nevertheless perceived by other actors, such as US, Israel, and some Arab countries around the Persian Gulf, as their main geostrategic threat (Takeyh, 2003; Ghanbari Jahromi, 2015; Tabatabai and Samuel, 2017). This perception was reinforced with the development of Iran's nuclear program and its uranium enrichment, to 60 percent in 2021, as well as its intercontinental ballistic missile program (Eslami, 2021). Urged by these developments, these actors have actively been seeking for a way to deter Iran from acquiring a nuclear weapon (Edelman et al., 2011; Mandelbaum, 2015; Dalton, 2017; Hicks and Dalton, 2017; Byman, 2018; Tabatabai et al., 2019; Katzman et al., 2020; Alcaro, 2021).

Aiming to contribute to this overarching theme, but paying attention to a conventional (non-nuclear) deterrence, the present thesis aims to explore *how strategic culture has been informing Iran's foreign and defense policy towards its ballistic missile program (BMP)*.

¹ The current thesis employs a relatively narrow definition of the Middle East that also corresponds to the term 'the West Asia', and includes the states of the Levant region, all members of the Gulf Cooperation Council as well as Iran, Turkey, and Yemen (contrary to the broad definition of the Middle East referring to 22 members of the Arab League in addition to Israel, Iran, Egypt and Turkey).

While it is undeniable that Iran's BMP experienced a rapid expansion since 2003, this evolution was preceded by 29 years of non-use of the missiles that Iran has always had in its possession. The present dissertation aims to solve this puzzle by turning to Iran's strategic culture.

The rapid expansion of the BMP dates back to 2003: only a few months after the Iraq war in 2003, Iran unveiled its first ballistic missile, Shahab-3. Iran's BMP was thus introduced as a deterrent, the idea that was to become entrenched over time (Elbahtimy, 2022). In the span of just a couple of decades, Iran was in the possession of the largest and the most diversified number of ballistic missiles arsenal, both regionally and internationally (see Appendix 2), and these weapons have become pivotal in Iran's defense and deterrence strategy (Ostovar, 2006, 2019; Eslami and Vieira, 2020).



Source: Missile Defense Project, "Missiles of Iran," *Missile Threat*, Center for Strategic and International Studies, June 14, 2018, last modified August 10, 2021, <https://missilethreat.csis.org/country/iran/>.

Iran has increasingly employed the BMP, in spite of the international pressure and regardless of the consequences inherited from their use to the regional volatility, traditionally, bedeviling the Middle East as well as international stability, in more general terms.

During the mid-2010s, Iran's development of the BMP was intertwined with its military support to Hezbollah, as well as to the Houthis of Yemen, (since 2015). Something that ended up with the attacks on airports and oil companies in Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates with missiles, (including Aramco in 2019), a set of events that have been severely condemned by the Persian Gulf states, including Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates.

Iran's BMP was also a central issue in the JCPOA negotiations. Throughout this process, Iran displayed strong reluctance towards negotiating any compromise regarding its BMP program. The connection between the BMP and Iran's nuclear program has been raising concern of the international community, leading to attempts to include ballistic missiles discussions in an agreement over Iran's nuclear program. Such attempts have been, thus far, successfully resisted by the Iranian establishment, despite the mounting pressure (Izewicz, 2017). As a result of nuclear talks held since 2006 further restrictions were imposed on Iran by United Nation Security Council (UNSC) Resolution 1929 (2010), followed by the Resolution 2231 (2015,) and Iran was banned to sensitive technologies and components essential to the development of its ballistic missile program, and to test ballistic missiles. Iran, however, ignored these restrictions imposed on its missile program, and as a result, Iranian BMP was almost unaffected by sanctions.² Ballistic missile tests (and military exercises) continued also after the conclusion of the JCPOA.

While Iran's missile program has generated strong criticism from some members of the 5+1 format and Israel (claiming that Iran has violated the JCPOA and urging the UNSC to impose further sanctions), Iran has considered the tests beyond the framework of the UNSC Resolution 2231 (2015). This reasoning relied on the idea that was twofold: on the one hand, Iran's missile tests have been carried out for defensive purposes; on the other hand, the fact that conventional weapons were used, made the tests an issue beyond the framework of the aforementioned UNSC 2231 Resolution (prohibiting the development of ballistic missiles capable of delivering a nuclear warhead). Indeed, as mentioned above, Iran has never admitted that the missile debate was ever part of the 5+1 negotiations process, striving to make it clear that its missile program (and development of conventional nuclear power) was outside of the framework and objectives of the JCPOA. While the US negotiators hoped that the missile program

² The only exception is the short period of time when Iran was involved in negotiations about the text of the nuclear agreement in the second half of 2014.

would be the subject of discussion in the next round of negotiations, after the US withdrawal from JCPOA in 2018, President Trump's repeated appeals to Iran were rejected and Iranian authorities have called Iran's missile program non-negotiable in future negotiations.

A critical turning point in Iran's approach to its BMP took place during the period of 2017-2018, when Iran employed its BMP against ISIS, which had previously attacked Iran: in response to terrorist attacks employed by ISIS, Iran deployed its six mid-range missiles in one occasion and seven more missiles in another. Subsequently, BMP was employed again in June 2019, when one of the US's largest and most advanced UCAVs, the Global Hawk RQ4, used to record information and spy on Iran's waters and terrestrial borders, was shot down by the Iranian air defense system. Brian Hook, US Special Representative for Iran, condemned Iran's act as a "mistake" that would only reinforce further diplomatic isolation of Iran, while President Trump stated that 'the US was cocked and loaded to retaliate against Iran on Thursday, but I changed my mind 10 minutes before planned strikes' (Marcus 2019; Eslami, 2021).

Iran's BMP once again became a center of international attention following the US withdrawal from JCPOA in 2018, when Iran declared its intention to breach the 3.67 percent uranium enrichment limit in mid-2019, as stipulated by the agreement. Iran's leadership also declared that it had exceeded the three-hundred-kilogram ceiling for stockpiled fuel, thus breaching the negotiated limits on uranium enrichment, a factor justified by Iran with the fact that it was not with the intent of producing weapons-grade uranium. Nonetheless, despite its official position, Iran was severely criticized by the Western countries, who were concerned about the links between Iran's nuclear and BMP program and Iran's attempts to develop a nuclear deterrence strategy. These concerns were only reinforced as the regional volatility grew with the US assassination of General Qasem Soleimani in 2020, resulting in Iran's retaliatory attack on two US military bases in Iraq (Ain Al-Asad and Al Taji bases) using 13 mid-range ballistic missiles (Eslami and Vieira, 2020), followed by Iran's reduction of its commitments under JCPOA and by the aforementioned increase in enrichment of uranium to 60 percent (Eslami, 2021).

In 2022, Iran conducted two missile attacks outside of its borders. Accordingly, in March, using 12 mid-range ballistic missiles, Iran attacked an Israeli intelligence base in the city of Erbil, in Kurdistan part of Iraq. Furthermore, in November 2022, following the protests within Iran, Iran conducted an unprecedented missile attack, using 73 ballistic missiles, on the military bases of the Democratic Party

of Iranian Kurdistan (DPIK) and other Iranian Kurdish military groups in Iraq, considered terrorist organizations by the Iranian leadership.

Remarkably, while Iran's missile attacks have clearly become more frequent starting from 2017, this was not the case of Iran's previous military actions: despite mounting regional tensions, Iran had at several critical occasions abstained from employing its BMP in the course of 29 years: the BMP was therefore not used since the end of Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988), until 2017. The return to the use of the BMP was all the more surprising as Iran could have opted for alternative means to pursue its military goals since 2017, in line with its 'forward defense doctrine' (Connell, 2010), a concept relying on the use of proxies, combined with its rapidly growing UCAV program, naval warfare capabilities and cyber technologies (Olson, 2016; Ajili and Rouhi, 2019). These alternative means could have, arguably, reduced international pressure on Iran, but they were eventually not the choice of Iran's leadership. It was clear that the ballistic missiles were a prime factor in Iran's defense policy, something that was conveyed by Ayatollah Khamenei, Iran's Supreme Leader, in the following terms:

"Our missiles are able to hit the target a few yards away from a distance of several thousand kilometres. We got this with power. We keep it upright. We will develop it with strength. Because it is the source of national pride. Because it is the 'source of legitimacy'" (Ayatollah Khamenei, 2019).

The present dissertation turns to strategic culture to ascertain the special meaning attributed to the BMP in Iran.

1.2. Research question and objectives

Mainstream IR scholars assessing Iran's BMP have long argued that the ideology and rhetoric of the Islamic Revolution illustrate that Iran is an irrational actor, driven by a revolutionary Islamic ideology that would use Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD) to annihilate Israel and plunge the Middle East into a cycle of death and destruction if given the chance (Sagan, 2006; Sagan and Valentino, 2017).

Aiming to understand *how strategic culture has been shaping Iran's foreign and defense policy towards the ballistic missile program*, this dissertation intends to explore the source of allegedly unpredictable behavior and decisions of Iran as an important political actor in the Middle East. At the

same time, it is important to address the place of BMP in Iran's foreign and defense policy, from the standpoint of strategic culture.

Looking at the BMP, I will demonstrate how Iranian elites have been trying to overcome Iran's current insecurity (related to the ongoing arms race in the Middle East and the existence of Israel in the neighborhood as well as the current tensions between Iran and Saudi Arabia) by carrying out an analysis of the official foreign and defense policy narratives, underpinned by principles of Shia emphasizing the importance of possessing and developing of a BMP program, related to the existential provision of security and deterrence against probable enemies (see Annex 1).

The present thesis places special importance to the (re)interpretation of the narratives by the leadership of Iran. The latter has the capacity to filter narratives, change and shape them, adding new meaning, and eventually, these changes can alter the strategic culture. This is especially the case in countries of dominant authoritarianism like Iran, whose leadership controls IRI's legislative, executive, and judiciary powers and even the military forces, be it directly or indirectly, in addition to administering television canals, media networks, and Friday prayer platforms, which are crucial sources of the narrative strategy of Iran (Adib-Moghaddam, 2005).

It has been argued that Iran's military behavior is rooted in Islamic thought (Taremi, 2005, 2014) and such behavior was labeled as a 'Quranic way of war' (Adair, 2022). I offer a new argument in which the Quran and the religious ideology of political elites are combined with other elements including historical experiences, geographical position among other factors which together shape Iran's strategic culture. In this vein, Quran or Islam is not a causal variable for Iran's military behavior and use of force. However, it is safe to argue that Shia Islam is the most influential element of Iran's strategic culture which informs the country's way of war and its style of using force.

1.3. Theoretical approach: strategic culture theory

Strategic culture is a theory that can be viewed as associated with two different International Relation theories, most notably (Neo) Realism (Glenn, 2009) and Social Constructivism³ (Lantis, 2009). The

³ Constructivism is one of the approaches in Social Sciences and in the analysis of political trends, which sits in the middle of rationalist and postmodern approaches (Hopf, 1998; Farrell, 2001; Das, 2010). Its adherents claim that

present thesis adopts the latter position. Constructivism and strategic culture received a lot of attention in the post-Cold War era, and it is on this basis that contemporary thinkers claim that emphasis on strategic culture provides a valuable perspective on the role of culture in international security (Lantis, 2002, 2009; Meyer, 2005 and 2011). Today, this literature has expanded to such an extent that even the security studies scholar are often looking for the root of many security challenges in developing countries in their cultural and identity foundations (Glenn, 2009; Das, 2009; Lock 2010).

The strategic culture the special attention to non-material, internal factors which shape the identity of state elites as well as the country's population, which allow for the understanding of the reasons behind the course of individual countries' foreign policies (Gray, 1999; Meyer, 2005). This is in line with the objectives of this dissertation that pays attention to non-material, internal factors, which shape identity, and as a consequence, the attitude of individual actors, including elites.

Strategic culture theory is in its essence constructivist and offers a particular analytical perspective to understand and even predict the behavior of actors. In fact, Social Constructivism can be viewed as the theoretical basis for the definition of strategic culture (Lantis, 2005). An expanded focus requires research on strategic culture to draw on concepts, hypotheses, and terminology from several academic disciplines (IR, Area Studies, and History) so as to contribute to a better understanding of human societies and communities as they relate to one another and to their respective environments.

In this line, Wendt (1994) states that the 'culture, religion, and ideology' which are belonging to mass identity in a society, can be all considered as a social construction; therefore, I follow Wendt in this thesis and assume that 'strategic culture' to be socially constructed the extent that it intertwined with the specific identity of Iran. This specific identity shapes Iran's national interests, including its conception of

Constructivism can set off the deficiencies found in the two other approaches in the understanding and explanation of national and international policies (Meyer, 2005; Johnson, 2006; Lantis, 2009). Constructivist researchers consider that since Constructivism replaces instrumental rationality with proportionality logic, taking advantage of both the Neo-realist and Neo-liberalist perceptions and considers the interests and objectives of the states subject to the states' norms and identities and their changes (Guzzini, 2000; Adler, 2013; Mingst et al., 2018).

Based on the principles of Constructivism, the identity and interests of individual actors are not given in advance, and for this reason, the strategy of countries depends on the dynamic cultural and identity foundations that are being changed continuously. The implication of such propositions is that in the analysis of countries' strategies, one should refer to their specific cultural and identity foundations. Wendt (1994), Katzenstein, Keohane, and Krasner (1998) also tried to emphasize the importance of "intersubjective structures" including norms, culture, identity, and ideas affecting the behavior of the state or generally on international relations that give meaning to the material world (Katzenstein et al, 1998).

security and deterrence, which is also determined by a particular context. Thus, based on the related definition of Iran's national interest, Iran's leadership undertakes allegedly unpredicted or irrational political decisions, such as developing and using the BMP, in spite of the growing concern of the international community.

1.4. Literature gap and research innovation

Aiming to understand how strategic culture has been informing Iran's foreign and defense policy towards its ballistic missile program, the present literature review explores two distinct research streams. First, it explores the literature on Iran's strategic culture and demonstrates the limitations of the current state of the art in relation to the puzzle of the present thesis; and second, it investigates Iran's foreign and security policy with a particular focus on the BMP.

Regarding the first of the two research streams, overall, the existing literature on Iran's strategic culture has received more attention since 2018, evolving in an especially dynamic way (Parchami, 2022; Valizadeh and Kazemi, 2022; Eslami and Vieira, 2020 and 2022). This is contrary to the fact that between 2008 and 2018, only one contribution has been published on the topic, namely of Kamran Taremi (2014). More recent contributions, although drawing on such critically important concepts as the 'ways of war', have not systematically employed a strategic culture perspective, using this concept interchangeably with other concepts, such as 'deterrence' or (nuclear) 'strategy' (Cain, 2002; Knepper 2009; Torabi and Rezaei, 2012).

In addition, the existing literature on Iran's strategic culture can be divided into three main sub-streams. The first substream intends to analyze Iran's foreign policy through the lens of strategic culture. This includes the contributions on Iran's relations with the neighboring countries (Mkrtchyan, 2014; Masoud et al, 2020) or the world's major powers (Juneau and Razavi, 2013; Taremi, 2014; Goudarzi et al, 2017; Valizadeh and Kazemi, 2022), with some of them paying attention to Shia Islam. These studies combine the strategic culture with individual principles of Iran's foreign policy: for instance, studies conducted by Juneau and Razavi (2013), as well as Valizadeh and Kazemi (2022), draw on the geopolitical status of Iran as a cornerstone of Iran's strategic culture and as the main driver of Iran's foreign policy.

In this vein, there is research referring to Shia Islam in Iran's foreign policy. However, the respective studies do not demonstrate in-depth knowledge about Shia Islam, its jurisprudence, or principles inferred from Shia jurisprudence for specific time frames and situations. There is an established research field investigating the role of Shia religion and its principles in Iran's foreign and defense policy (Arjomand, 2009; Ghadir and Sarikhani, 2011; Thaler et al, 2010; Ostovar, 2019). Scholars have analyzed the role of *maslahat* principle in Iran's foreign policy (Kazemzadeh, 2020; Thaler et al, 2010; Abedin, 2011), defense policy (Zarif and Sajadieh, 2014) nuclear strategy (Thaler et al, 2010; Eisenstadt and Khalaji, 2021) domestic crises (Ghiabi, 2019) and also explored how *maslahat* has been informing individual sectors of public law, such as the law regulating the use of drugs (opium) (Figg-Franzoi, 2011, Sheidaeian et al, 2019). Still the existing contributions have paid attention to *maslahat* exclusively, and in isolation from other rules and principles, such as *qisas*, while also leaving aside the inferential principles, such as *zarare aghall* (minimum loss), *ezterar* (emergency), *nafye sabil* that are critical to the understanding of Iran's defense and security policy. Thus, the existing studies do not elaborate upon how exactly strategic culture has been informing Iran's military behavior and its foreign policy towards its adversaries (Taremi, 2016). These contributions offer a rather broad and, sometimes, even superficial perspective on Shia Islam, that is to say, without pointing out what its principles are and how those principles act as a driver of Iran's foreign and defense policy (Mkrtchyan, 2014; Forough, 2021; Rivera, 2022). As a result, these studies do not help to solve my research puzzle: Iran's abstaining from employing BMP for 29 years and its subsequent and continuous employment since 2017.

The second substream has addressed Iran's nuclear strategy through the lens of strategic culture theory. For instance, Knepper (2008) has evaluated the possibility of Iran's developing nuclear weapons, drawing on a combination of three key elements of its strategic culture. The respective elements correspond to Shia Islam, Iran's history, and the geopolitical status of the country (an associated research stream in Iran's foreign and security studies often focuses on the post-1979's period and the dramatic change of Iran's foreign and defense policy) (Adib-Moghaddam, 2005, 2006; Wood, et al., 2009; Kevin, et al., 2009; Ghamari-Tabrizi, et al., 2019; Olson, 2016). This line of research is also close to other existing studies on strategic culture and WMD, in more general terms (Cain, 2002, Knepper, 2008; Gerami, 2018). In the contributions of these scholars, however, Iran's strategic culture often appears to be static. This is to say, the approach appears to rely on a combination of a number of key elements of Iran's strategic culture and does not allow for the possibility of strategic culture change. Consequently,

Iran's military behavior is also assumed to be evolving in continuity with regard to these elements. In this dissertation, the point of departure, however, is the change of Iran's strategic behavior regarding the BMP, reflected in its incremental use as opposed to almost three decades of refraining from such usage. Therefore, the existing literature, again, does not answer my puzzle.

Finally, the third sub-stream investigating Iran's strategic culture aims more specifically at identifying some of its individual elements and principles (Torabi, 2014). And once again, the state of the art does distinguish Shi'ism, as a determining set of norms and values defining most of its foreign policy (Stanley 2006; Haynes, 2008a; Barzegar, 2010), referring to the Islam and Sharia law, the principles and rules of morality, as well as jurisprudence . Importantly, it is highlighted that Shi'i religion has a number of guidelines regarding the use of warfare, including the prohibition against the use of mass destruction weapons (Smith, 2012). At the same time, it is underscored that the deterrence strategy is an important feature of the Shia religion, allowing for deterrent strikes to take place, thus preventing enemy attacks and for a war on the aggressor's soil to take place (Taremi, 2016). Another perspective on the elements of Iran's strategic culture, concerns an ideology (Taremi, 2016; Stanley, 2006), in the sense of a very fixed set of views of Iran's leadership (e.g., Iran's representation as a victim of the Western imperialism). For instance, Kinch (2016) emphasizes that Iran's post-1979 foreign policy is strongly affected by the individual leaders' views, as of Ayatollah Khomeini and its conservative supporters, which has been bringing Iran-US relations to the point of extreme hostility, a reflection which can be found in more recent US relations with Iran under Ayatollah Khamenei (Adib-Moghaddam, 2005). Finally, scholars have often adopted a more comprehensive approach, exploring the strategic culture as a result of multiple and mutually reinforcing elements, as well as factors belonging to Iran's history, starting from the role of ancient civilizations and Mongol invasions, geopolitics, identity and religion (Stanley, 2006; Thaler, et al, 2010). The present thesis aims to contribute to this latter research stream.

Regarding the second of the two research streams, on Iran's BMP, one can say that this research stream has been dynamically evolving in the last twenty years (Taremi, 2005, Rezae, 2014, Bahgat, 2019). More recently, the research on the BMP has been conducted inter-related with Iran's military doctrine. These respective studies are mainly either policy papers that consider Iran's ballistic missile program as one of the five pillars of Iran's military doctrine, especially after 2003 and the US attack on Iraq (Connell, 2010; Czulda, 2016; Ajili and Rouhi, 2019; Bahgat and Ehteshami, 2021). More broadly,

the five main dimensions are distinguished in Iran's hybrid deterrence approach: ballistic missiles, proxies, drone and naval guerrilla warfare, and the cyber dimension (Cronell, 2010; Aminian and Zamiri-Jirsarai, 2016; Olson, 2016; Ajili and Rouhi, 2019). However, the BMP has a special role in this hybrid way of war. From this point of view, the evolution of Iran's so-called "mosaic defense" doctrine and adoption of a hybrid deterrence is due to the increasing sense of threat within Iran's military elites (Chubin, 2009; Ghanbari Jahromi, 2015; Yossef, 2019; Tabatabai, 2019). Iran's deterrence strategy, more recently labeled "forward defense" doctrine, implies that Iran should fight its opponents outside its borders to prevent conflict within its territory, a position that owns its origins to a sense of threat and insecurity (Chubin, 2014; Eisenstadt, 2017; Ajili and Rouhi, 2019; Eslami, 2021).

However, and even though the BMP research streams include very recent contributions (for instance, Hiim, 2022), they are not always informed by theory. There is a tendency to rely on individual concepts of Security Studies and Strategy Studies, such as deterrence or strategic parity (Bahgat, 2009; Olson, 2016; Ajili and Rouhi, 2019), with most of the contributions remaining descriptive in nature (Rubin, 2006; Hilderth, 2009, 2012; Eisenstadt 2011; Elleman, 2015). Furthermore, the contributions often draw on a very specific event (such as for instance the 1980-1988 War of the Cities) (Taremi 2005; Tabatabai and Samuel 2019) as well as on the 1987 War of Tankers (Murray, 2009; Connell, 2010; Chubin, 2014; Barzegar, 2014; Ghanbari Jahromi, 2015). This research stream also includes contributions that usefully highlight important historical experiences of Iran, such as the Iran-Iraq war (Taremi, 2005, Rezae, 2014; Tabatabai and Samuel, 2019); and thus, are highly relevant to the present study. Nevertheless, they do not always adopt a strategic culture perspective, and a picture of the rationale behind Iran's ballistic missile program and a national perspective upon it remains unexplored, including the logic and justification of Iran's massive investments in the BMP⁴.

Finally, there is another line of argument viewing Iran's foreign and defense policy towards its BMP from the lens of threat perception and a sense of insecurity (Taremi, 2005). These studies consider the spread of terrorism in the region and the existing threats posed by the US and Israel as the main drivers of Iran's foreign and defense policy, particularly towards its ballistic missile program. (Connell,

⁴ The experience of the eight-year war with Iraq during the 1980's and the lessons acquired from such experience are explored in Tabatabai and Samuel (2019). This is especially the case of Iraq's missile attacks on Iranian cities and the inability of Iran to repel the missile attacks and even respond to them due to lack of technology and the existence of international sanctions on Iranian military sectors (Taremi, 2014, Rezae, 2016; Bahgat 2005, 2019; Adib-Moghaddam, 2021).

2010; Chubin, 2014; Barzegar, 2014; Ghanbari Jahromi, 2015). Nowadays, Iran is surrounded by several US military bases and many warships and submarines stationed in the Persian Gulf (Ahmadian and Mohseni, 2021). Iran's BMP is considered its main instrument to deter any possible attack (Eslami and Vieira, 2020). However, and echoing the previously cited contributors, Iran-Iraq war remains still the most important military experience of contemporary Iran (Ward, 2005, Ajili and Rouhi, 2019), something that allows to consider the BMP as Iran's main deterrence instrument against its adversaries. The existing sense of threat and insecurity pushed Iran to pay close attention to the consolidation of its defense infrastructures. This includes identifying actual and potential enemies and planning to deter any possible threat, perceived or otherwise (Aminian and Zamiri-Jirsarai, 2016; Tabatabai et al., 2019).

The present thesis intends to contribute to the aforementioned literature by drawing on the strategic culture theory. By focusing on strategic culture and, while agreeing on the importance of historical events such as the Iran-Iraq war, the present thesis aims at placing special attention on the place of Shia Islam and its individual principle on Iran's ballistic missile program, something that has been referred to but not explored in depth in the current state of the art.

1.5. Methodological approach

The present thesis complements the strategic culture with the narrative analysis, which is especially promising given its potential of unpacking the process of construction and evolution of strategic cultures. While not assuming objectivity but rather privileging positionality and subjectivity, narratives provide a comprehensive account of the behavior of actors (Riessman 2008). Due to their capacity of offering a way of understanding the world in which political action takes place while, simultaneously, providing a means for political actors to construct a shared meaning of the past, present, and future, narratives can influence, manage expectations, and change the discursive environment in which actors operate (Miskimmon et al, 2014). Narratives are considered as tools that individual countries use to extend their influence. They are about both states and the system itself, cutting to the core of how a country like Iran wants to be perceived when it comes to its BMP, and the importance that Iranian leadership gives to ballistic missiles in Iran's strategic culture.

This allows to unveil possible multiple perspectives on the BMP, something that is in line with the emphasis on the duality of Iran's foreign policy and complexity of Iran's 'corporate and social identities'

in more general terms (Akbarzadeh and Barry 2016, 614; Colleau 2016), reflected such concepts as 'pragmatism' versus 'conservatism' or 'revisionism' (Takeyh 2003, 2004; Tarhalla 2009; Yazdani and Hussein 2006); the opposition between 'normalisers' and 'hardliners' (Rezaei and Moshirabad, 2018); or between the 'revolutionary' and 'liberal' positions (Adib-Moghaddam 2012; Akbarzadeh and Barry 2016; Colleau 2016). As a result, in this contribution, strategic culture is viewed as an ongoing interplay between discourse and practice (including military doctrine) (Neumann and Heikka 2005, 10). In this perspective, which perceives the language as a site where a struggle for meaning is taking place, the central concepts are the narratives, which are capable of meaning-making. To borrow the terms of Glenn's typology of strategic culture, the present contribution subscribes to the perspective on strategic culture as a 'meaning' rather than 'form' or 'toolkit' (Glenn, 2009). Such an interpretivist analytical perspective, which remains underdeveloped in contemporary strategic culture debate, has an important advantage: it allows to account for a change of a particular strategic culture.

The present thesis intends to review narratives about Iran's policies towards its ballistic missile program. I have selected the topics that are inclusive of the entire spectrum of debates about the ballistic missile program which represent major ongoing debates on the following key themes: (i) current elite views and discourses in Iran regarding its deterrence strategy; (ii) the role and place of religion in shaping Iran's military behavior; (iii) Tehran's understanding of ballistic missile roles in its defense industries; (iv) Iran's views about the regional security and its adversaries.

The research draws upon narratives of Iranian high officials, as well as their speeches and official and semi-official statements and declarations. The centrepiece of this chapter is the analysis of 120 official statements of Iran's high officials, including the Supreme Leader and his Senior Advisors, Iran's President, members of Majlis (National Parliament), Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) officials, Defense Ministry, Ministry for Foreign Affairs, Imams of Friday Prayers, individual political strategists and experts which delivered statements at crucial moments, between 2014 and 2022: (1) the signing and implementation of the JCPOA (2014); (2) Yemen's war with Saudi Arabia (2015); (3) Iran's missile attacks on ISIS bases in 2017 and 2018, corresponding to Iran's first military use after 29 years of non-employment (4) US' withdrawal from JCPOA under the President Donald Trump, in 2018; (5) the shooting down of an US stealth drone by an Iranian missile (2019); (6) Iran's attack on the US military bases in Iraq following the assassination of General Qasem Soleimani (2020); (7) Iran's decreasing its

commitments under the JCPOA and uranium enrichment at the level of 63% and above, after the assassination of Iranian nuclear scientist Professor Mohsen Fakhrizadeh (2021); and (8) Iran's missile attack on the military bases of Iranian Kurdish military groups in the north of Iraq, following their military activities inside of Iran's borders (2022). It is worth noting that, although there are some contributions from different political actors within Iran's political system, there is no research engaging with the discourse of 12 Imam of Friday prayers and Religious Leaders (*marj'e taqlid*)⁵, who represent crucially important actors, highly relevant to the understanding of Iran's strategic culture.

Statements of Iranian elite representatives are retrieved from the official websites of the Government, the Ministry of Foreign Affairs, the Ministry of Defense and Armed Forces Logistics, as well as the official website of the IRGC and Army (Artesh). The statements are triangulated with official documents in addition to publications of official newspapers which are crucial in the present thesis. These are both the newspapers that are close to the Armed Forces, and often Iran's government such as 'Nournews', 'Keyhan', 'Fars', 'Tasnim', 'Mashregh' and 'Tabnak', and traditionally more conservative, as well as those newspapers with more liberal and reformist views such as 'Arman', 'Shargh', 'Hamshahri', and 'Etemad' (corresponding to the position of conservative and reformist parties such as Paydari, Jamna, Azadi and Kargozaran were reviewed for the period of 2015-2022).

1.6. Structure of the thesis

This thesis is structured as follows: with the Introduction as the first chapter, the following chapter initiates a discussion about strategic culture theory. In this chapter (chapter two), I discuss four generations of strategic culture. Additionally, I address the origins of strategic culture theory and, most importantly, national ways of war and the political culture of individual states. Finally, I address the ontological and epistemological debates over the strategic culture and determine the approach of the present study.

The third chapter analyzes Iran's strategic culture. Drawing on the state of the art and reviewing existing literature on Iran's strategic culture, I elaborate upon main elements of Iran's strategic culture, including a) the national historical experiences, most importantly the Iran-Iraq war and the war of cities

⁵ In Shia, following a Grand Ayatollah (*marjae taqlid*) in religious and political issues is mandatory and all Shia people in the world obey religious orders of the *marjae taqlid* they have chosen at the age of maturity (nine years old for women and fifteen years old for men).

(1980-1988) b) the country's geopolitical position, and its location at the crossroad of the world and the so-called “Middle East’s geography of threat and insecurity”, c) social and cultural factors, and national identity elements such as cultural ethnic, religious and linguistic varieties in the country and d) Shia religion and the ideology of political elites. At the end of this chapter, I present a redefined concept of Iran’s strategic culture in what concerns the underdeveloped Shia dimension.

Chapter four of my thesis explores the ways of war under the light of Shia Islam. Aiming at understanding how Iran’s ways of war have been informed by Shia Islam, this chapter draws on the religious narratives on the use of force in Islam and, particularly Shia Islam. In this vein, after reviewing the concept of war in the Holy Quran, I focus on the Shia interpretation of Quran verses and introduce several Shia principles (including *maslahat* (expediency), *qisas* (retaliation), *ezterar* (emergency), *nafye sabil* (preventing the domination of non-Muslims over Muslims), and *zarare aghal* (minimum loss) that determine the military orientations of the Islamic Republic of Iran. The findings of the fourth chapter demonstrate important constraining force of Shia Islam on Iran’s way of war. Additionally, while starting a war is prohibited by Shia Islam, and therefore armed conflict in Iran is limited to defense and deterrence, Shia still reserves the right to a preemptive attack.⁶

Chapter five discusses the role and place of the ballistic missile program in Iran’s strategic culture. Drawing on the history of the eight-year war with Iraq and the evolution of Iran's BMP policy in the post-1979 revolution, this chapter creates an opening for two narratives, namely the “revolutionary” and “moderation” narratives on BMP and their relationship with Shia principles, mentioned in the previous chapter. The findings of this chapter demonstrate Iran’s leaning tendency towards a “revolutionary” narrative regarding its BMP and, therefore, reveals a shift towards a more offensive military stance, especially following the assassination of General Qasem Soleimani and Professor Mohsen Fakhrizadeh.⁷ At the end of this chapter, I demonstrate that, contrary to pre-2017, the employment of ballistic missiles

⁶ An important portion of this chapter complemented by additional empirical analyses of Iran’s ballistic missile deployments in certain turning points has been published in “International Affairs” corresponding to the number-one journal in the field of International Relations with an impact factor of 7.91 (according to Clarivate, in 2021).

⁷ A part of chapter five was also published in 2020 in the Journal of “Third World Quarterly” a top-tier journal in the field of Middle Eastern studies. This thesis uses only some specific parts of the mentioned published articles. The time frame and data used in the articles and the present thesis are also different and the thesis draws on a wider time frame and more comprehensive data.

has become a more frequent military option in Iran and that all political elites support the ballistic missile program.

The final chapter concludes on the importance of the BMP, which remains a cornerstone of Iran's foreign and defense policy (implying its continuous use regardless of growing importance of Iran's air force and its drone program) (Eslami, 2021), while also demonstrating the relevance of the strategic culture approach, underpinned by individual Shia principles in responding to the originally chosen research question: *how strategic culture has been informing Iran's foreign and defense policy towards its ballistic missile program?*

2. Theoretical framework: strategic culture

2.1. Strategic culture definition

Culture had generally attracted little interest in security studies until half a century ago, where tendency of using the cultural variables to explain the behavior of states was established (Nye and Lynn-Jones, 1988). The strategic culture approach uses the notion of cultural orientation to explain that different governments have different strategic priorities and such priorities have been rooted in their experiences since they were formed. Also, it was influenced by the political, cultural, and cognitive features of the state and the elites (Godarzi, et al., 2017).

Strategic culture is a concept that emerged in the 1970s in the works of Jack Snyder (1977a, 1977b). This theory explains why different actors can make different strategic decisions in similar conditions, and therefore, it allows to argue that the source of every state's strategic action can be found in non-material elements of its identity (Doeser, 2017, Libel, 2018, 2020, Eslami and Vieira, 2020, Eslami, 2021). Strategic culture can be seen as an attempt to find the impact of institutionalized values and beliefs when it comes to decision-making on security issues (Gray, 1988). The logic of strategic culture is intertwined with the idea that, "collective ideas and values about the use of force are an important fundamental factor in the design of "implementing government security policies" (Hoffmann and Longhurst, 1999, Longhurst, 2000 and 2018).

In the analysis of strategic behavior, the Strategic Culture Theory (SCT) emphasizes the importance of unique experiences and language for justifying certain state actions, including the acquisition of nuclear weapons. These unique experiences and language amount to 'culturally endowed ways' (Kartchner, and Jonson, 2009, 60), which define the costs and benefits of certain decisions, and which create their own rationality. Certain alternatives or results eventually emerge as the only appropriate options, under their specific terms, as a 'corridor of "normal" or "probable"' (Meyer 2005, 528) states' behavior (Eslami and Vieira, 2020).

Some scholars believe that the bearers of the strategic culture of the countries are their elites (Smith, 2005; Lane, 2006, 76; Altuntas, 2010: 433; Eslami and Vieira, 2020), while others believe that the whole society can be the bearers of the strategic culture of society, and the root of this culture can be found in the national myths of the historical experiences of political discourses and the like (Mahnken,

2006; Roussel and Boucher, 2008). These common norms between the elites or the whole society can be found in the constitution, legal order, public or political culture, and the like. It should also be acknowledged that the strategic cultural components of countries can change or convert (Bloomfield, 2012; Libel, 2018 and 2020). The components (elements) of any strategic culture correspond to a set of sustained components, but it should be kept in mind that during the time other elements emerge, some of the blemishes disappear or their significance changes.

2.2. Origins of strategic culture

While the concept of “strategic culture” has, as mentioned, been shaped by Jack Snyder (1977), a cultural approach to the strategy of states has set the background for what was to become the strategic culture debates. Prior to this, the impact of culture on warfare and strategy of states and the ‘national ways of war’ had been reflected in the works of Liddell Hart (1932). Accordingly, in order to understand the historical roots and strategic culture, the studies that existed since the beginning of the twentieth century on the national ways of war need to be taken into consideration. It is also important to briefly address the political culture debates (Almond and Verba, 1963a and 1963b).

2.2.1. National ways of the war and strategic culture

National ways of war explore the cultural and social contexts of national style, character, or behavior through the investigation of language, religion, customs, and historical commonalities (Hart, 1932). World War II gave a special significance to this type of study. The countries involved in the war were trying to find a tool to assess the threats (Macmillan, 1995). In other words, World War II urged Western scholars to identify socio-cultural contexts influencing the formulation and implementation of their enemies' strategies (Sondhaus, 2006). The consequence of these studies was growing attention to the national behavior based on the knowledge of particular cultural contexts (Chew, 2014). That is why, culture has been considered as a model for the historical transmission of meanings embedded in symbols and concepts that could make knowledge development relevant to attitudes about provided life (Geertz, 1973; Kennedy, and Waldman, 2013).

As mentioned, the concept of ‘national ways of the war’ was coined by Liddle Hart in 1927. However, a more developed version of this concept entitled “the British ways of warfare” was presented by him in 1932, attracting the attention of many scholars and strategists in the world (Weigley, 1973;

Howard, 1984; French, 1990; Strachan, 1994; Freedman, 1995; Macmillan, 1995; Hoffman, 1996). Subsequently, the issue of national warfare was not limited to British historical and new war experiences, and gradually expanded to include many countries around the world, including the United States, China, the Soviet Union, France, Germany, and even India, Iran and South Africa (Kierman and Fairbank, 1974; Bayter, 1986; Kier, 1995 and 1997; Jordaan, 2000; Showalter, 2000; Harrison, 2001; Citino, 2005; Hull, 2005, Kennedy, and Waldman, 2013; Chew, 2014; Hoffman, 2017; Ostovar, 2019).

While assessing Snyder's definition of strategic culture as "the sum total of ideas, conditioned emotional responses, and patterns of habitual behavior that members of a national strategic community have acquired through instruction or imitation and share with each other with regard to nuclear strategy" (Snyder, 1977) as well as Gray's definition as "referring to modes of thought and action with respect to force, derives from perceptions of the national historical experience, aspirations for cultural conformity" (Gray, 1988), one can conclude that the studies conducted by Snyder and Gray have been influenced by the notion of "national ways of war" (Sondhaus, 2006; Uz Zaman, 2009; Hoffman, 2017).

2.2.2. Political culture and strategic culture

Besides the research studies on national ways of the war, the literature on political culture also had a remarkable influence on the formation of strategic culture theory. Almond and Verba (1963a), first developed a political culture in 1960 and defined political culture as a set of beliefs and values of the society related to the political system. Accordingly, they were the first scholars considering a political value for the culture of individual states. Although they never mentioned the concept of strategic culture or the influence of political culture on the formation of strategic culture theory in their subsequent works (Almond and Verba, 1963b), some scholars such as Gray (1984) and Berger (1990) built their definition of strategic culture upon the concept of political culture. Gray (1984) considers strategic culture as an "inseparable part of political culture". Similarly, according to Burger (1990), strategic culture is considered in the form of a political-military culture. In his view, strategic culture is a set of cultural values and beliefs that influence the views of members of a community about national security, the military as an institution, and the use of force in international relations (Bloomfield, 2012; Glenn, 2018).

2.3. Evolution of strategic culture theory

In general, strategic culture is an examination of how cultural factors affect the strategic behavior of actors. However, “there is, a great deal of confusion over what the strategic culture is supposed to explain, how it is supposed to explain, and how much it explains” (Libel, 2018). Overall, the central issue of the strategic culture is the distribution of cultural factors affecting the choice of strategies and how to use force (Johnson, 2018; Ghiselli, 2018; Doeser, 2018).

2.3.1. Foundational debates on strategic culture theory

Traditionally, there are three different debates referred to as generations about strategic culture. However, more recently the fourth generation of strategic culture emerged. The first generation emerged in the early 1980s (Kari, and Pynnöniemi, 2019) and mainly explains the apparent difference between the Soviet and US nuclear strategies (Johnson, 2018). The second generation, which emerged in the mid-1980s, takes a relatively different approach to strategic culture (Ghiselli, 2018): it sees strategic strategy as a declarative strategy and a tool for realizing and advancing the actual strategy that is being called operational (Doeser, 2018). The third generation emerged in the mid-1990s and considers strategic culture to be independent and extends its functional areas from the disciplinary to other parts of the system (Beeson, and Bloomfield, 2019). The fourth generation argues that the process of change of the strategic culture is more important than the nature of strategic culture. In addition, strategic culture is viewed as a result of the competition among subcultures (Bloomfield, 2012). All four generations have tried to show that strategic behavior is not necessarily and exclusively underpinned by material structural factors, but also a set of factors that can be associated with culture (Rosa, 2018; Libel, 2020).

2.3.1.1. First generation

The first generation of strategic culture focuses its efforts on explaining differences in the US-Soviet nuclear strategy. It states every strategic behavior always comes from a strategic culture, to the extent that it forms part of the strategy (Snyder, 1977a). The first generation also believed that it is possible to analyze or predict the strategic culture of states in their countries (Snyder, 1977b; Booth, 1979). However, political results have shown that these types of predictions have been misunderstood by US scientists (based on the paradigms of the rational actor and the theoretical modeling of the game in analyzing the relationship between superpowers). As a result of this inability to anticipate the Soviet

Union's reactions, they concluded that each country has its own interpretation, analysis, and response to international events (Snyder, 1977a, and 1977b and 1990; Booth, 1994). This brought back the issue of state / national culture the agenda and created a wave of new literature that focused on creating and developing new analytical tools, especially strategic culture.

Snyder, as one of the first generation scholars of strategic culture argues that strategic culture can be described as "a set of ideas, emotional responses, and patterns of habitual behavior in which members of a strategic society share a common strategy" (Snyder, 1977a; Margaras, 2004). Gary in his study of nuclear strategy and the causal model of strategic culture, points to ways of thinking and acting that stem from an understanding of national historical experiences (Gray, 1981). Therefore in his opinion strategic culture is "A collection of insights and beliefs from the military about the political purpose of the war and the most effective strategy and operational method to achieve it" or "ideas and constellations, traditions, mental habits, and preferred methods of operation that are more or less specific to the security community in terms of geography that have benefited from a unique historical experience" (Gray, 1981).

Gray also points out that the historical-national experience of the United States is based on "their way of thinking and acting according to force". These ideas have led to the emergence of a special American approach to nuclear strategy. The strategy emphasizes that in a nuclear war, one cannot win; because the human loss of such a war destroys the effect of any concept of victory (Gray, 1981). Therefore, the United States must maintain a technological capability to deter effective nuclear detentions against any numerical superiority of the Soviet Union's weapons of mass destruction (Booth, 1994; Abdollah-Khani; 2006). Gray concludes that this relative homogeneity in American strategic culture is fundamentally different from what the Soviet Union thinks. He believes that the Americans are incapable of thinking strategically about planning, war, and victory in war (Gray, 1981).

One of the prominent scholars who is considered as an adherent of the first generation is David Jones (1990). He believes that strategic culture can be found in three different levels of government. This firstly concerns the macro-level environment that includes geography and is ethno-cultural and historical; secondly, the social level that includes the social, economic, and political structures of society; and thirdly, the micro-level that includes military institutions and the characteristics of civil-systemic relations. In this context, strategic culture in the Soviet Union is not entirely limited to strategic choices; rather, all levels

of choice, from macro-strategy to tactical levels of influence, are influential (Jones, 1990; Johnston, 1995).

Despite the innovation of thinkers of this generation in terms of culture and strategy, their work has some shortcomings. One of these shortcomings is the definition of the problem; because the concept of strategic culture - presented by them - includes technology, geography, organizational culture and traditions, historical strategic pragmatism, political culture, national determination, political psychology, ideology, and even the structure of the international system. This is extremely controversial. The mentioned variables represent a different class of inputs and each can provide an independent explanation of strategic choice. As a result strategic culture would originate from almost all related explanatory variables, and this leaves very limited space for conceptualizing factors pertaining to non-strategic culture and eventually, explaining the strategic choice.

2.3.1.2. Second generation

The second generation of strategic culture emerged in the mid-1980s. They began their analysis by pointing out that there are significant differences between what leaders think or believe or what they are doing, and stronger stimuli (driver) that require them to do something (Gray, 1986). According to this generation, strategic thinking is considered as a tool of political hegemony in the field of strategic decision-making and provides the possibility of full orientation towards violence, based on which the government provides the necessary legitimacy to use violence against specific enemies (Klein, 1988).

The second generation, while endorsing the relationship between strategic culture and strategic behavior as it was in previous generation, did not believe in a causal relationship or mutual influence; rather it believed to contain a strategic culture within the framework of the political strategy to cover or hide the fact or justify its vital strategy (Gray, 1999; Johnson, 2006). Consequently, the second generation basically viewed strategic culture as a tactic or tool.

In this vein, according to Klein's (1988) view on US politics, the real operational strategy is based on the struggle to defend the hegemonic interests of the United States of America. Second-generation thinkers believe that although strategic culture does represent a 'tool', political and military elites of an individual country may well choose to ignore it. Moreover, it is generally believed that strategic culture is

the product of historical experience (Doeser, 2017). The latter is different in different governments, and different states have different strategic cultures (Klein, 1991).

There is a fundamental difference between strategic culture and behavior. On this basis, behavior is a reflection of interests of hegemonic groups, and the strategic choice depends on the interests of these groups, rather than being limited to strategic culture. As a result, it is possible for governments to speak different strategic-cultural languages; but the main language of governments (operational doctrines) is going to be tend to be essentially the same.

However, the thinking of the second generation is not without its flaws. In terms of the key reasoning, it is about the relationship between symbolic discourse, strategic culture, and behavior. From this position, it is not clear whether we should expect strategic discourse to influence behavior (Hollander, 1985). The argument is that the decision-making elites can go beyond the limits of the strategic culture they have set for themselves. However, research on leadership shows that there is a kind of dialectical relationship between strategic culture and operational behavior. Elites are compatible with the strategic culture they have created, and are therefore limited by the symbolic myths that their predecessors created (Khalili, 2013).

2.3.1.3. Third generation

The third generation of thinkers emerged in the 1990s. This generation has moved towards an improved precision and composition in the conceptualization of the ideas strategic culture, as an independent variable and has paid more attention to specific strategic decisions, as dependent variables (Libe, 2016).

Analysis of strategic culture can be seen as an attempt to ascertain the impact of institutionalized values and beliefs when it comes to decision-making on security issues. The logic of strategic culture is based on the basic belief that, as Hoffman and Langherst argue, "collective ideas and values about the use of force are an important fundamental factor in the design of "implementing government security policies" (Hoffmann and Longhurst, 1999).

Lord (1985) considers strategic culture not only on the basis of military function, but also on the basis of the social, political, and ideological characteristics that shape the state. According to Lord,

strategic culture corresponds to traditional functions and intellectual habits by which military forces are organized and used by the society to serve political purposes. Lord identifies six factors that make up strategic culture: geography, military history, international relations, culture and political ideology, the nature of military-civil relations, and military technology (Lord, 1985).

In this generation, beliefs, feelings, fears, goals, and ambitions are unseen aspects of any strategic culture (Legro, 1995). They are values that form the basic elements of strategic culture and give it its own quality and character (Doeser, 2017). These basic elements derive directly from the initial experience and become an internal factor, and then create a relatively centralized nature for strategic culture. More importantly, if all members of society do not accept them, they are still signs of the community's commonalities (Scobell, 2005). These elements shape the strategic culture of any country. As a result, functions and policies are direct results of these fundamental elements. It has also been argued that strategic culture creates tendencies and influences; but because sometimes external factors act as a barrier to government priorities, they will not always determine behavior (Margaras, 2004).

The third generation that is most applied tried to take advantages of the two previous generations and avoid their disadvantages. The main difference between this generation and the first generation resides in the analysis and the relationship between strategic culture and behavior (Moore, 1998). This generation refers to strategic culture to provide elements of good behavior and not to the goals or behavior that the first generation emphasizes (Abdullah Khani, 2007). Therefore, according to this generation, any strategic behavior has some cultural elements that move toward the failures or realization in accordance with the capabilities of such elements of strategic behavior. However, Swidler (1986) makes the third generation very precise in terms of the relation between strategic culture and strategic behavior. On this basis, he endorsed that there is a widespread relationship between strategic culture and strategic behavior in societies that have sustainable life (Swidler, 1986). The goals of strategic behavior and how it is implemented is fully influenced by the strategic culture. In societies that are illiterate, more strategic culture provides a part of the elements and context of behavior. On the basis of what became the main indicators and criteria of the three generations in a more strategic culture, it can be seen that the first and second generation's perceptions of the subject matter of culture are a form of a military system and the third generation with some modifications have changed it from military to the force components (Libel, 2018).

In general, it seems that explanations of the third generation are fairly more precise than the other two prior generations due to three main reasons. First of all, this generation avoids the first generation's determinism. The main part of this is due to abandoning the idea to feature as an independent variable and a part of it is because some researchers conceptualize culture in a way that can be altered and consider the possibility of change between cultural variables and non-cultural variables. For instance, Jeffrey Legro (1995) creates the possibility of change in variables because in his opinion, instead of having roots in historical pragmatism (as the first generation assumed), culture is the product of contemporary experiences. Similarly, Elizabeth Kier (1995) believes that the military-political culture is the result of the evolution in domestic political affairs. Therefore it changes, like it happens in the domain of domestic political affairs. She also points out cases and occasional tendencies over the course of time and demonstrates how strategic culture changes throughout the years and in different societies (Kier, 1997).

Secondly, this generation is precisely committed to testing and comparing various theories and alternative explanations to each other. Legro (1995) tends to test the Realism model versus institutionalist explanations and organizational culture. Kier compares structural Realism to organizational bureaucratic models and the concept of military culture. This methodological strength speaks to the weakness of the first generation.

Finally, the third generation does not provide a standard definition of culture. As a result, this definition requires the existence of other variables to explain why certain options are ultimately selected. This raises the following issue: if strategic culture limits the available options to the decision-makers in the decision-making process, where does the ranking of options ruling priorities stand among these limited choices? Furthermore, if culture is not a reflection of an individual's beliefs, then no one could ever adapt fully to a culture and also no one could participate completely in other's orientations (Abdollah Khani, 2007).

Since in a foreign policy crisis a certain group of officials usually make strategic decisions, if these people do not entirely reflect military values or strategic culture, the connection between these values and behavior is reduced, and this communication reverberates on those who are not perfect representatives of that culture. In this case, the capability of culture as an independent variable (which can affect particular policies) is under question (Doeser, 2017).

2.4.1.4. Recent debates: the fourth generation and a turn towards quantitative studies

The fourth generation of strategic culture emerged to provide the opportunity to overcome this theoretical deadlock (Bloomfield, 2012). It is notable that the fourth generation is not widely accepted in academic literature. However, a number of emerging and mid-career scholars have identified themselves as the fourth generation (Kari, 2019).

Libel (2016) claims that recent strategic culture studies share two underlying epistemological and ontological characteristics that set them apart as a new distinct generation in literature: on the one hand, contrary to the first three generations that evolved around a "shared epistemological core" or one major "epistemological schism", (Libel, 2018) the fourth-generation scholars were working during the era of 'analytic pluralism'. The fourth-generation claims that the previously used empirical methods were often opaque or non-transparent about how they have been and thus cannot solve the problem of strategic culture. Hence, they approached the strategic culture research with the non-positivist methods (Burns and Eltham, 2014). On the other hand, the fourth generation pays attention to the change of strategic culture rather than its stability. They accept that multiple strategic subcultures exist within a strategic culture (Libel, 2020; Burns and Eltham, 2014). Unlike previous generations, the fourth generation tries to explain the change in strategic culture, often by relying on the hegemonic epistemic communities (Cross, 2013).

Libel (2018) introduces Alan Bloomfield as one of the leading scholars of the fourth generation. Bloomfield (2012) explicitly defined the two mistakes that prevented previous generations from overcoming the inability to explain change conceptualizing strategic culture as "homogenous" and "temporarily continuous". Therefore, he brings the context of competition among subcultures as a key mechanism for strategic cultural change (Burns and Eltham, 2014). However, the mechanisms of the subculture's competition remain ambiguous.

Table 1: Strategic Culture Generations

Generation	Scholar	Key claim
First generation (1970s)	Jack Snyder David Jones Colin Gray	Strategic behavior always comes from strategic culture
Second generation (1980s)	Stephan Johnson Bradley Klein Edward Lock Colin Gray	Endorsing the relationship between strategic culture and strategic behavior but, not a causal relationship or mutual influence
Third Generation (1990s)	Elizabeth Kier Jeffrey Legro Alastair Johnston Kerry Longhurst	Any strategic behavior has some cultural elements (cultural elements are necessary but they are not sufficient)
Fourth Generation (2000s-present)	Alan Bloomfield Tamir Libel Mai'a Davis Cross Burns and Eltham	The process of strategic culture change is more important than the nature of strategic culture. Strategic culture is the result of the competition among subcultures.

Source: Author's compilation

2.3.2. Strategic culture: prevailing ambiguity and the present approach

Currently, almost all of the four generations of strategic culture co-exist and there is no consensus about the nature of strategic culture in ontological and epistemological terms. These different approaches suggest that strategic culture can be considered as an independent variable, as a dependent variable, and even as a mediating variable, pointing at a varying relationship between strategic environment, strategic culture and strategic behavior (Doeser, 2018).

This pluralism of views has hindered the evolution of SCT. One of the prevailing issues in the current debate is related to the aforementioned idea of the strategic behavior as a dependent variable. In this regard, as the representative of the third generation, Johnston has been reiterated that the third generation has several key strengths over the first generation (Graham, 2011). Accordingly, he argued that behavior cannot be considered as an independent variable, because it avoids the 'determinism' that permeates through first-generation literature. In addition, he claims that the competitive theory testing nature of the third generation has the upper hand over the methodological weakness of the first generation (Johnston, 1995b). He therefore, seeks a concept of strategic culture that is 'falsifiable, or at least distinguishable from non-strategic cultural variables' (Johnston, 1995b). For Johnston, the original generation is either unwilling or unable to use the concept in a testable form (Greathouse, 2010).

However, in response to Johnston's criticism, Gray always reaffirmed (repeated) his earlier conceptualization of strategic culture. In Gray's point of view, the methodological assumption of Johnston that cultural variables can be separated from non-cultural variables is under question. While this premise initially appears convincing, Poore (2003) claims that there is a huge deal of confusion in Gray's discussion of independent material variables, which is inconsistent with his contextual interpretive framework and there are some problems in Gray's usage of "culture as a context" (Poore, 2003; Libe, 2018). It is notable that Poore states that the epistemological and conceptual problem of this theory would not be solved with more empirical work. Therefore, he agrees with Johnston in confronting Gray and states: "materialist versus ideational' juxtaposition might not be tenable since materialist hypotheses are 'ontologically and epistemologically problematic'" (Johnston, 1996).

In addition and apart from Gray-Johnston's debate, there are other discussions about the ontology and epistemology of strategic culture. Most theorists believe that strategic culture is influenced by cultural and identity principles (Farrell 2002:50–56). From their point of view, it is the internal cultural and identity foundations that form the strategic culture. In other words, those who consider culture as an independent variable and strategic behavior as a dependent variable, believe that the culture and identity of each country determine its strategic behavior. They are therefore implicitly siding with the first generation of strategic culture debate. In addition to this approach, there is also another viewpoint that, while adhering to the relationship between the independent and dependent variable, assumes the strategic culture in the position of the dependent variable and other factors as an independent variable (Doeser, 2017), therefore implicitly siding with the third debate. Recently, some researchers have also considered strategic culture not as an independent or dependent variable, but as a mediating variable (Glenn, 2009). According to this view, strategic culture, while being affected by a series of external factors, determines strategic behavior. The present thesis draws on this position and considers strategic culture as a mediating variable in which is informed by Shia and informs Iran's foreign and defense policy towards BMP.

Regarding the varying relationship between strategic environment, strategic culture and strategic behavior, the first and second generations emphasized mainly the effect of domestic culture on strategic behavior and consequently the strategic environment. However, the priority of the strategic environment was also discussed besides the importance of local political culture. Nevertheless, some, who are more inclined to neo-realist foundations, have claimed the role of the structure of the international system in

shaping strategic culture. According to what has been discussed in previous sections, the strategic culture of each country is unique. Although some countries may have similarities in strategic culture, the strategic culture of countries cannot be completely similar to each other. Therefore, to analyze the strategic behavior of individual countries, their strategic culture and its specific elements and principles need to be investigated.

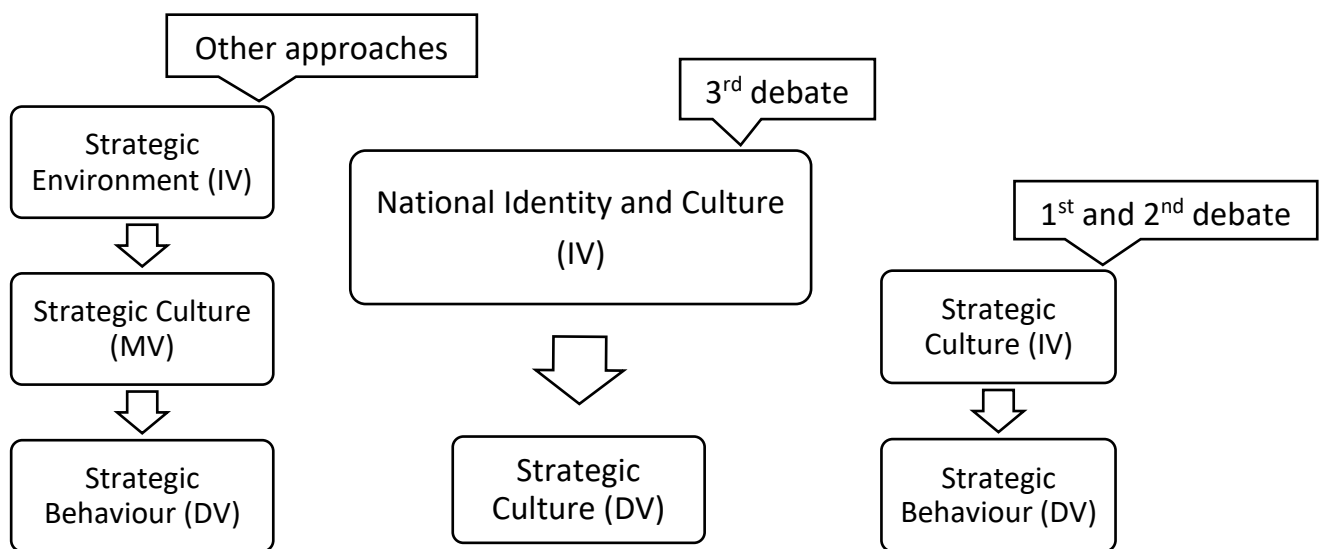


Figure 1: Three different approaches toward strategic culture as a variable

3. Redefining Iran's strategic culture: the elements, and the missing Shia dimension

Irrespective of its particular affiliation with one of the four strategic culture debates, the contributions of strategic culture focusing on the analysis of a particular case, or country, have traditionally included the identification of the strategic culture elements.

There is a great debate about the elements that shape and form strategic culture. Generally, the scholars of all mentioned generations agree on history, geopolitics, ideology and national identity (Snyder, 1977; Gray, 1981; Johnston, 1994), as the main elements which shape the strategic culture of each country. In addition, religion (Taremi, 2014), leadership (Doeser, 2017), organizational culture (Johnston, 1995), and the narrative of officials and political elites (Ben-Ephraim, 2020) also have been introduced

as the elements of strategic culture of some countries. It is notable that the elements of strategic culture would mainly be similar in countries around the world.

Relatedly, David Jones (1990) examines the constituent elements of strategic culture at three levels: macro-environmental, social, and micro. At the macro level, factors such as geography, ethnic and cultural characteristics and history, at the social level, political, economic and social structures, and at the micro level, military institutions and the characteristics of military relations with civilians are considered (Jones, 1990). In general, different authors have considered various elements related to strategic culture, from technology, geography, organizational culture, political culture, national determination of political psychology, ideology and even the international system to factors such as the nature of civil, military and military history relations. Therefore, the principles of strategic culture in each country are different (Doeser, 2017).

In another example of the focus on strategic culture elements within a particular country, namely the Republic of Korea, Jiyul Kim (2014) claims that the strategic culture of the Republic of Korea is based on three main pillars including prosperity and power, the threat of North Korea and the American alliance. Therefore, the country has always been taking its strategic decisions according to these three principles. Similarly, Burns and Eltham (2014) mentioned the main security risks of Australia including espionage and foreign interference, instability in developing countries, malicious cyber activity, the proliferation of WMD, terrorism, and violent extremism, and other factors which are affected by its historical experiences and its geopolitical factors. In addition, they claim that the principles of Australia's strategic culture are: a) alliance with the US b) sense of threat and elite challenges and preserve regional security (Burns and Eltham, 2014).

Against this background and in the light of the importance of strategic culture as mentioned above, the present chapter aims to identify and revise the elements of Iran's strategic culture.

3.1. Iran's strategic culture: an overview

Iran is one of the most important political actors in the Middle East which with a military presence in Lebanon, Syria, Iraq, and Yemen (Ahmadian and Mohseni, 2019). Moreover, aiming to consolidate its role, the country has increased its economic and military cooperation with other states of the world such as Russia, China and Venezuela (Goforth, 2011), in addition to supporting financial military and

paramilitary movements and groups both inside and outside the Middle East (Manni, 2012). Nowadays, and contrary to the past, strategic challenges Iran deals with are thus far beyond Iraq's attack. Saudi Arabia's assertiveness as a regional power and Israel and the US increasing military and political domination over the Middle East, and the emergence of terrorist groups in the region can be all considered major Iran's strategic challenges (Ahmadian, 2018). This reality has moved the country's elites to describe the conflicts and hostility with the United States and Israel as part of its national interest (Ahmadian and Mohseni, 2019).

There is a long list of studies on Iran's strategic culture published in both Persian and English languages (Torabi, and Rezaei, 2012; Walizadeh et al., 2015; Askari, 2018; Salimi and Hejazi, 2019; Ghahremaninezhad et al. 2019). However, the previous researchers have not always identified the elements shaping the strategic culture of the Islamic Republic of Iran. As a result, there is a great deal of confusion over what elements are supposed to shape the strategic culture, how they are supposed to shape it, and how much they influence strategic culture. Aiming to understand what are the elements that shape Iran's strategic culture, this research set out to investigate the elements of Iran's strategic culture which have already been identified in the literature including, history, geopolitics, ideology, and social-cultural elements (Cain, 2002, Stanley, 2006; Matsunaga, 2012; Taremi, 2014).

In this vein, Stanley (2006, 2009) focuses on the Persian origins of Iranian culture and claims that Iran's SC is affected by its national identity as a Persian nation with a very old civilization and culture. He points to Iran's geographical position, oil-based economy, and Shia religion as influential elements shaping Iran's strategic culture. Some scholars applied strategic culture theory to analyze Iran's nuclear program. Among them, Strain (1996) claims that Iran's strategic culture is built upon its traditions, history, and religion. Knepper (2008) considers Iran's strategic culture as a function of Islam religion and argues that Iran's perception informs Iran's military behavior of threat from the US and Israel (Strain, 1996; Cain, 2002; Knepper, 2008).

In the studies conducted by Iranian researchers, there is more detailed literature regarding Iran's strategic culture, its elements, and the main principles it follows (Gerami, 2018; Mushirzadeh, and Kafi, 2018). Historical experiences, Shia religion, economic situation, geographic position, the experience of the Iran-Iraq war, and the perception of the conditions in the international system are the main elements forming Iran's strategic culture (Askari, 2018; Salimi and Hejazi, 2019; Ghahremaninezhad et al. 2019).

However, preserving independence and self-sufficiency, deterrence of possible aggressions, strategic illusion, mistrust to others, resistance and sacrifice, and fighting global arrogance are among the identified principles of Iran's strategic culture (Torabi, and Rezaei, 2012; Walizadeh et al. 2015; Gerami, 2018; Mushirzadeh, and Kafi, 2018; Eslami and Vieira, 2020; Eslami, 2021).

Against the background of what has been identified above, it is possible to distinguish four main factors that shape Iran's strategic culture: geopolitics, history, social-cultural factors and Shia Islam. In this vein, the present research reaffirms the findings of the existing studies (Taremi, 2014; Cain, 2002, Stanley, 2006).

3.2. Elements of Iran's strategic culture: the building blocks

Iran's strategic culture has deep roots in the geographic and semantic elements of its history. The essential elements of this strategic culture have always followed security as a fundamental principle. The vast territory and the heterogeneous population, and the security vulnerability have led to the establishment of a centralized authoritarian state that has kept internal tensions alive while resisting external pressures through intermittent defensive and aggressive behavior (Taremi, 2014).

3.2.1. The geopolitical position

An important element shaping Iran's strategic culture is the geopolitics of the state (Lantis and Howlett, 2009: 90). In this sense, one of the most important elements that significantly shape the strategic culture of political units is distance and proximity. Therefore, one could argue that, Iran's strategic culture is a function of its geography. Iran has always been a transit point for various ethnic groups due to its geographical location. The latter also made the external parties interested in Iran's territory, leading to constants attacks and invasions. The bitter memories of these events remain in the minds of Iranian society (Knepper, 2008; Torabi and Rezaei, 2013). This has resulted in "undeniable effects on the national soul" (Stanley, 2006).

Geographical scope and geopolitical position are thus two influential factors in Iran's strategic culture. Possessing one of the world's richest oil and gas resources and domination over the Strait of Hormuz as a vital corridor for international trade provides Iran with a unique geopolitical position (Eslami

and Sotudehfar, 2021). Although these features provide good conditions in terms of the territory and natural resources for Iran, the important point, in this case, is the unbalanced development in all parts of this region, so that areas located far away from the center are at a lower level of development (Askari, 2018; Mushirzadeh, 2018; Salimi and Hejazi, 2019).

In its view of the Middle East and especially the Persian Gulf region, Iran assumes a security-oriented approach (Adib-Moghaddam, 2005, 2006). Therefore, the country cannot ignore its security concerns on its southern and western borders and its security environment, something that is defining Iran's military and security activities within the Middle East.

3.2.2. Historical experiences and national identity

Iran's history has included many ups and downs in different centuries which each one constituting a profound impact on Iran's strategic culture. Iranians were one of the two poles of power in the world (along with the Roman Empire) before the Arab invasion of Iran (Stanley, 2006, 2009). They possessed one of the most developed civilizations at that time. In this vein, this section starts with the emergence of the Achaemenid kingdom and other Persian ancient empires and continues with the arrival of Islam to Iran as crucial events shaping Iran's cultural identity. Even though, after the arrival of Islam the war-oriented predisposition of Iranians decreased, this nation has been able to culturally influence various other civilizations with its cultural capabilities. In its turn, widespread attacks by ethnic groups such as the Mongols and Western colonialists have repercussions on the Iranian nation's culture and historical memory (Stanley, 2006). Accordingly, the chapter addresses the Mongol invasion of Iran, the most brutal defeat of the Iranian nation during its 7000 years of history, and following the emergence of the Safavid Shia kingdom and the establishment of Shia Islam as the main religion within Iranian cultural geography, also the impact of the colonization era and invasion of Portugal, England and the Tsardom of Russia and the Soviet Union on Iran. The bitter experience of facing the colonialists and the imperialist forces also left its mark on the historical memory of the Iranian nation (Behnam, 1986: 103). However, the victory of the Islamic Revolution and the Iran-Iraq war also affected the strategic culture of Iranian society in various dimensions (Strain, 1996: 19-20; Salimi and Rahmatipour, 2014).

All experiences Iran gained during its history led to the formation of a set of national heritage guiding Iran's strategic behavior, including the sense of superiority, vulnerability, insecurity, spirituality,

and mistrust. The sections below present some of the most important historical components of Iran's strategic culture:

3.2.2.1. From Persian empires⁸ to the colonization era

While the current research analyzes the time frame between 2015-2022, studying Iran's strategic culture without investigating its historical roots is impossible. Accordingly, having some flashbacks to historical turning points affecting the formation of Iran's current strategic culture is inevitable. While it is commonly accepted that more recent, contemporary history influences the formation of individual states' SC (Salimi and Rahmatipour, 2014), the place of more long-standing historical events cannot be underestimated in terms of their effect on the SC of such a country as Iran (Stanley, 2006, 2009).

The emergence of the Achaemenid kingdom in the sixth century BC, one of the largest empires in the history of the world, is considered one of the important elements of Iranian strategic culture. The great empire of Achaemenid governed Egypt and Greece in the West to East of Pakistan and the Hindu river (Stanley, 2009). The success of Achaemenid empire can be explained in the following terms: "Cyrus succeeded in establishing not only the first world state but also the first "international society" in large part because he was motivated by prudence rather than ideology in making policy decisions" (Ramezani, 2004). While other kings were killing their people and other countries, Cyrus established peace and, by liberating religion and establishing a human rights charter, took the first steps towards the promotion of human dignity (Curtis, 2013).

The Achaemenid kingdom was not the only Persian Empire before the Islamic era. Ashland and Sassanid empires were also as important, powerful, and reputable as Achaemenid kingdom, and therefore, have a remarkable place in the formation of Persian culture (Vejdani, 2014). The experience of ruling a big part of the world under these three ancient empires, alongside many wars and confrontations with other countries, has translated into the sense of national pride and a sense of superiority and consolidated nationalism in contemporary Iran (Shabani, 2005).

The establishment of the culture of peace and freedom by the Great Cyrus in Iran is one of the main elements of Iranian culture that even today is considered by especially valuable in Iran (Stanley,

⁸ Founded by great Cyrus in 550 BC and fallen by great Alexander in 330 BC.

2006, 2009; Vejdani, 2014). The formation of a sense of superiority in the past and present has been affecting Iran's strategic behavior as a revisionist power, something that is reflected in the speech of Iran's last Shah in the celebration of the 2500th anniversary of the Achaemenid Empire in stating that: "Great Cyrus, sleep tight, because we are awake" (Pahlavi, 1971)., or, one could argue in statements of IRGC officials and independent strategists claiming that "after 2500 years Iran extended its borders until the Mediterranean Sea" (Raefipour, 2017), referring to Iran's activities in Syria.

Undoubtedly, one of the greatest challenges of Iranian culture corresponded to the arrival of Islam (Ahmad, 1966) to Iran, the diminished the role of Zoroastrian religion, and the acceptance of Islam by the Iranian people.⁹ After the death of Prophet Muhammad, his Khalifas including Abubakr, Omar bin Khattab, and Othman, who are considered the "Imams of Sunni Muslims" (Zaman, 1997; Crone, and Hinds, 2003) have claimed that the only right way was to choose Islam and to for this reason, all people on the planet should have had the chance to get to know the it and to choose it (Gordon, and Gordon, 2005).

The propagation and spread of Islam through the Prophet Muhammad began with the sending of messengers to various countries. However, after the death of the Prophet Muhammad, Khalifa, and his successors started to promote Islam spread through war and hostility to neighboring countries in Iran and the Levant (Ahmad, 1966; Weitz, 2018). Finally, after various wars in different regions of the Arabian Peninsula and Iran, the Sassanid kingdom was defeated by the Islamic army (Saunders, 2002). Iran's territory fell into the hands of the Islamic Corps, and this was the turning point in the history of ancient Iran significantly affecting Iranian culture, as reflected in the change of the alphabet, among several other factors (Ahmed, 1966).

While the arrival of Islam in Iran is considered a holy event in the history of Iran, there is a great debate among historians about the way of accepting Islam in Iran (Omid, 2016). Nowadays, almost all scholars affirm that Islam came Iran with the force of a sword, and Khalifas committed serious crimes (Crone, 2012). It has been claimed that the Arabs attacked Iran in the early Islam era under the administration of Sunni Khalifas, especially Omar bin Khattab, bringin great destruction and slaughter (Turkmen, 2008). However, many 'monotheist Iranians' accepted Islam voluntarily and embraced Islam as a new religion. Nevertheless, the bitter experience of Arab's attacks on Iran formed a sense of

⁹ Islam arrived in western parts of Iran, which is currently under Iraq's control in 633 AC.

vulnerability in the historical memory of the Iranian nation (Crone, 2012). Abhorring Sunni Khalifas has been reflected in a frequent and popular metaphor of "Savage like Omar" in the Persian language (Porseman, 2011), something that has been paving the way to the acceptance of the Shia religion by Iranians 600 years later.

The Changiz attack had tremendous e consequences for the Persian civilization¹⁰ and the culture of Iran and the Islamic world. Villages were destroyed, and cities ruined, libraries and architectural and artistic works looted, while scientists, warriors, creators, and artists exiled to the mainland of the Mongols, in addition to many people killed (Stanley, 2006, 2009). One example is the city of Neyshabur, which was the center of Khorasan for centuries, which lost its many schools and mosques and numerous libraries (Asadi, 2010), almost all of the latter by the Mongols destroyed. The city was attacked several times because of the insurgency and resistance to the Mongol rule, while several other cities were looted and destroyed by the Mongols one after another (Asadi, 2010).

With all the problems that occurred after the Mongol invasion of Iran, the Iranians managed to save and develop their culture with great effort. The experience of the bitter defeat of the Mongols and the record of the brutal events of this bloody assault on Iranian people's memory and literature once again left an imprint on Iran's strategic culture (Bahnam, 1996). In particular, the Mongol's attack on Iran consolidated the sense of vulnerability in Iran's and also shaped a sense of insecurity, something that has been prompting the emergence of conspiracy theories both among the people and the elites (Boroujerdi, 1998).

A century after the collapse of Mongols (Ilkhanan monarchy) Shia religion expanded in Iran and became the national religion within Iranian territory. One of the most important events that had a profound impact on Iran's culture and history was the official establishment of Shia Islam by the Safavid Empire in the 16th century¹¹ (Ahmadi et al. 2014). Although Islam was arrived in Iran in the 7th century, the religion of the majority of the Iranian people was Sunnite. The recognition of Shi'a as the only official religion by the Safavid kings established a radically different identity for Iranians (Stanley, 2006; Levy, 2009). Furthermore, the establishment of Shia Islam in Iran changed Iran's strategic thinking and its approach

¹⁰ Mongols attacked Iran at 1219 AC and stayed in Iran for more than 100 years.

¹¹ Although Islam arrived in Iran in the 7th century, the change of Iranian religion from Sunni to Shi'i from the sixteenth to eighteenth centuries by the Safavid kingdom made Iran the center of the Shiite in the world.

towards the friend and enemy nations and therefore, constituted the most important historical turning point for the Iranian strategic culture.

The glory of the Safavid Empire lasted for around two centuries. However, the weakness and fall of the Safavid Empire was accompanied by the rise of colonial powers such as Portugal, England and Tsardom of Russia, which started several bloody wars with Iran. The memory of the Iranian people is full of bad experiences and reminiscent of frequent invasions and interference by foreign forces that have raided Iran and have made the country insecure for decades. These experiences have created an anti-foreigner culture and distrust among the Iranian people, and this also, ultimately affects the strategic culture of the Islamic Republic of Iran (Mazaheri and Molai, 2013).

As far as colonization era is regarded, there were repeated interventions of the Tsardom of Russia and Soviet Union in Iran's internal affairs, in addition to its role in Iran's losing some important parts its territory in the form of the Gulistan¹² and Turkmanchay¹³ and Akhal¹⁴ agreements during the Qajar era (Rafi'i, and Khorasani, 2013).

¹² Gulistan was a peace treaty concluded between Imperial Russia and Persia (modern-day Iran) on 24 October 1813 in the village of (Gulistan) as a result of the first full-scale Russo-Persian War, lasting from 1804 to 1813. The treaty confirmed the ceding and inclusion of what is today Daghestan, eastern Georgia, most of the Republic of Azerbaijan, and parts of northern Armenia from Iran into the Russian Empire.

¹³ Turkamanchay was an agreement between Persia (Iran) and the Russian Empire, which concluded the Russo-Persian War (1826–28). The boundary between Russian and Persia was set at the Aras River. These territories comprise modern-day Armenia, the southern parts of the modern-day Republic of Azerbaijan, Nakhchivan, as well as İğdir Province (now part of Turkey).

¹⁴ The Treaty of Akhal was a treaty signed by Persia and Imperial Russia on 21 September 1881. By virtue of this treaty, Persia would henceforth cease any claim to all parts of Turkestan and Transoxiana, setting the Atrek River as the new boundary. Hence Merv, Sarakhs, Eshgh Abad (Tajikistan, Turkmenistan, Uzbekistan, and some parts of Kazakhstan), and the surrounding areas were transferred to Russian control under the command of General Alexander Komarov in 1884.

Map 1: Downsizing of Iran's territory during the colonization era (Isna agency available at: <https://www.isna.ir/news/1401081006754>)



There is also a lasting influence on Iran's SC stemming from the perceived negative role played by Britain in the past two centuries. This role concerned Britain's intervention in the separation of a part of the territory of Iran in the North East under the Paris treaty (Milani, 2010), its frequent interference in Iran in the Qajar era, the separation of Pakistan and Afghanistan from Iran, and the separation of Bahrain (Eslami and Sotudehfar, 2021). In addition to what was mentioned above, equivalent to one-third of Iran's total population were killed in the so-called "fake famine" after the World War I (Majd, 2014; Tafreshi, 2014)¹⁵, considered as one of the most dramatic historical experience of Iran during its 7000 years of history. All of these historical experiences during the colonization era have led to reinforcing the sense of insecurity and mistrust in Iran's strategic culture.

¹⁵ There is a debate about the number of World War I victims in Iran. Majd (2014) claims 10 million out of 30, and Tafreshi (2014) claims one or two million out of 11 million population of Iran were killed 1914-1921. However, the first narrative is more popular within the social and political elites.

3.2.2.2. Contemporary history: from the coup of 1953 to the Iran-Iraq war and nuclear deal

The 1953 Iranian coup d'état, known in Iran as the 28 Mordad coup d'état, is another bitter day in Iranian historical memory (Lucey, 2019). The day that the national and popular government of Mohammad Mossadegh, with the cooperation of the US and British governments, was overthrown in an operation "Ajax", marked an important turning point in the contemporary history of Iran. This event took place in the twelfth year of the second Pahlavi regime and established the rule of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi for another quarter of a century (Gasiorowski, 1987). Although seven decades have passed since the fall of Mohammad Mossadegh's government, the Iranian people still remember it. This is another event that created a sense of distrust of the western countries in Iran's strategic culture due to their interference in domestic affairs of countries such as Iran (Ebrahimi and Yusoff, 2011).

The coup d'état of 15 August caused implications to the historical course of Iran that lasted for decades. Many scholars consider the occurrence of the Islamic Revolution in Iran as the product of this coup and the fundamental changes that resulted from it (Gasiorowski, 1987; Magliocca et al., 2019). The political atmosphere in the country was severely closed, and many of the freedoms that Iranian civil society was already seeking and strengthening were suddenly lost. What replaced the past passion for democracy was an authoritarian government that sought to empower all sections of society through security mechanisms (Gasiorowski and Byrne, 2015).

The 28 Mordad coup d'état, therefore, is an important turning point in the formation of Iran's contemporary strategic culture. The sense of mistrust and the necessity of political independence has emerged after this turning point in modern Iranian schools of thought and within the political elites. The 28 Mordad coup was the first spark of a national anti-Shah movement that eventually resulted in the overthrow of Pahlavi monarchy and establishment of an Islamic Republic in Iran in February of 1979.

The fall of the Pahlavi regime and the beginning of the rule of the Islamic Republic constituted a new chapter in the developments of Iran throughout its ancient history (Daneshvar, 2016). With the advent of the Islamic Revolution in Iran and the formation of the Islamic Republic of Iran a new identity, cultural and religious values, and norms emerged, playing an important role in Iran's foreign and defense policy (Taremi, 2014; Mazaheri, and Molai, 2013).

Thus, in the post-revolutionary period, due to the revolutionary conditions governing the Iranian society and the beliefs of the new political elites, previous Iranian identity became neglected and the Islamic principles were now the only ones defining the Iranian identity (Kamrava, 2008). Of course, the political elite's attitude to the role of Islamic values and national identity has not always been the same (Mazaheri, and Molai, 2013; Zahrani and Shirabund, 2016). Nevertheless, what was important about the establishment of Islamic ruling was the revival of the sense of greatness and superiority and consolidation of the spiritual life within Iranian Shia society and the political elites.

Undoubtedly, the Iran–Iraq War, with around 300,000 victims and one million injured can be considered one of the strategically critical experiences of Iran. When Saddam Hussein invaded Iran in 1980, the Ba'athist party's claimed three reasons for attacking. Firstly, Iraq demanded the return of the three occupied islands to the Arab nation, in addition to the independence of Khuzestan, and finally, full sovereignty of Shatt al-Arab or Arvandrud (Walsh, 2016). Therefore, this war was considered a defense of Iran's territorial integrity and the national identity of Iranians (Adib-Moghaddam, 2006; Eslami and Sotudehfar, 2021).

A harsh war between Iran and Iraq began only a few months after the victory of the Islamic Revolution of Iran. This war left crucial imprint on Iran's strategic culture (Strain, 1996; Stanley, 2006). The official Iranian government, relying on Shi'a rulings, such as fearless death and the virtues of jihad and martyrdom, managed to mobilize a large number of people to fight with Iraq on the fronts. Reinterpreting the sense of superiority of the Iranian nation through merging it with the sense of spirituality that is rooted in Shia religion, Ayatollah Khomeini, promoted the idea that the key to victory is connecting to God, which is the source of all powers (Adib-Moghaddam, 2005; Taremi, 2016).

In this vein, the Iran-Iraq War binds Iran's contemporary bitter events with Shiite history. This is also reflected in highlighting the role of Imam Hussein,¹⁶ the grandson of the Prophet Muhammad, who was killed by Muslims (Eslami et al., 2021). Reinforcing the martyrdom as one of the elements of Iran's SC (Askari, 2018). During the Iran-Iraq war, and particularly between 1984 and 1988, more than fifteen of Iran's towns and cities were attacked by missiles, causing a high number of casualties. The war of the cities is another reinforcement of the sense of vulnerability, insecurity, and mistrust which was especially

¹⁶ Hussein is the fourth Imam of the Shiite, who has been killed with all of his family and 72 persons of his followers in Iraq in 680 AC. His anniversary is the most important religious event in the Shiite religion.

exacerbated by the fact that Iran, contrary to Iraq, had no access to missiles and was not supported by powerful allies (Torabi, and Rezaei, 2012).

The War of the Cities and the closely related idea of achieving 'self-sufficiency' have informed Iran's policy towards its warfare from the 1980s through today, fueling the country's official statements with powerful motifs such as 'cities showered with missiles' or 'Saddam Hussein attacking our six-meter (wide) alleys with nine-meter (long) missiles' (Seddighi, 2016). After the end of the war, Iran's leadership took a position of systematically investing, from 1984 onwards, in their own defense technology (Zahrani, and Shirabund, 2016; Eslami, 2021). As Iraq's military attacks on Iran were driven by the goal of containing the Iranian revolution, an additional reason behind Iran's defense policy was to sustain Iran's post-revolutionary course.

Table 2: Iraq missile attacks on Iran's during the War of the Cities

Date	Attacked cities	Killed	Injured
October 1983	Dezful; Masjed-Soleiman (2)	39	111
November 1983	Masjed -Soleiman; Behbahan; Khorramabad; Andimeshk; Nahavand (5)	96	214
February 1984	Dezful; Mahabad; Islam-Abad; Abadan; Hamidieh; Ramhormoz (5)	207	145
March-April 1985	Tehran; Shiraz; Isfahan; Tabriz; Ilam; Hamedan; Zanjan; Kermanshah (8)	898	3041
January-April 1987	Shiraz; Ahvaz; Tehran; Khorramabad; Isfahan, Qom; Tabriz (7)	469	4461
February 1988	Tehran; Shiraz; Qom; Karaj; Isfahan; Tabriz; Orumieh; Borujerd (8)	627	3900
Total	23 cities	2336 ≈	11872 ≈

Source: Own elaboration

Finally, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) is arguably another important strategic experience for Iran, in the 21st century (Fitzpatrick, 2017). The issue was initiated by coming to power of the two moderate administrations in the United States and Iran and finally ended in 2014 after long negotiations between Iran and the six major powers. When, in 2015, Iran and the P5 + 1 reached the nuclear deal in the context of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, this idea has emerged both domestically and internationally that it will bring a new chapter in Iran's relations with the rest of the world

(Tabatabai and Samuel, 2017). This perception was partly due to the fact that, in the opinion of many, JCPOA was the most logical and peaceful way for Iran's evolution (Wolf, 2018; Fitzpatrick, 2019). The US withdrawal from JCPOA not only strongly reinforced the sense of mistrust to western countries within the Iranian society but also the skepticism of international cooperation, thereby changing the direction of Iran's foreign policy (Rezaei, 2019).

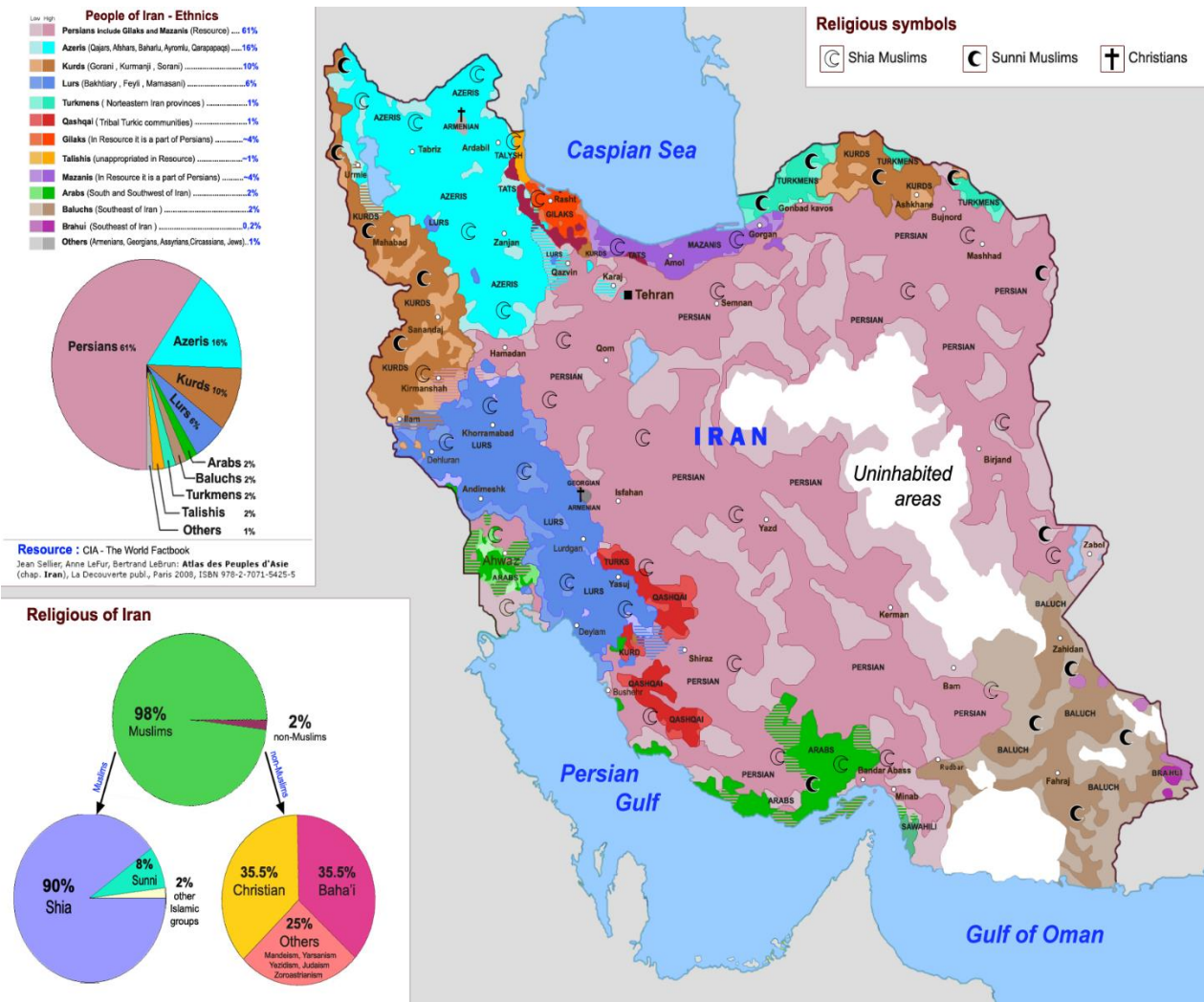
3.2.3. Social-cultural elements: the ethnic diversity

Preserving territorial integrity and resisting interference from external (kin state) influence has always been challenging for Iran especially due to the ethnic and religious diversity, and this concerns Iran's strategic culture. Although ethnic and cultural diversity for a country like Iran could have provided an opportunity for the country's development, it became an important source of insecurity and threats (Natali, 2005; Zahrani, and Shirabund, 2016) especially given the political geography of Iranian ethnic and religious minorities.

Iran has a vast territory and a large, 85 million population composed by different ethnic groups. As the heir of an ancient multinational empire that has been connecting Asia and Europe like a strategic bridge, Iran also represents a historical civilization characterized by exceptional diversity with a rich and complex culture (Kamrava, 1992). Ethnic and religious groups living in this empire were sometimes dominant and sometimes under the rule of other ethnic groups (Zahrani, and Shirabund, 2016; Amanat, 2017). Eventually, some of the tribes living in this empire have lost their distinct ethnic identity and have been absorbed and transformed by other groups, while others have retained their distinct identity and expressed it over time (Stanley, 2006, 2009).

In any case, the Persians, Azeris, Kurds, Arabs, Baluchis, Lors, Turkmens, and others have considered this land their home for many centuries and have shared in its destiny (Bradley, 2007). As a result, Iran's elites have viewed as a precondition for strategic action of Iran a strong national identity uniting the people of the different religions and ethnic identity, making the formation of a common national interest possible (Mushirzadeh, 2018).

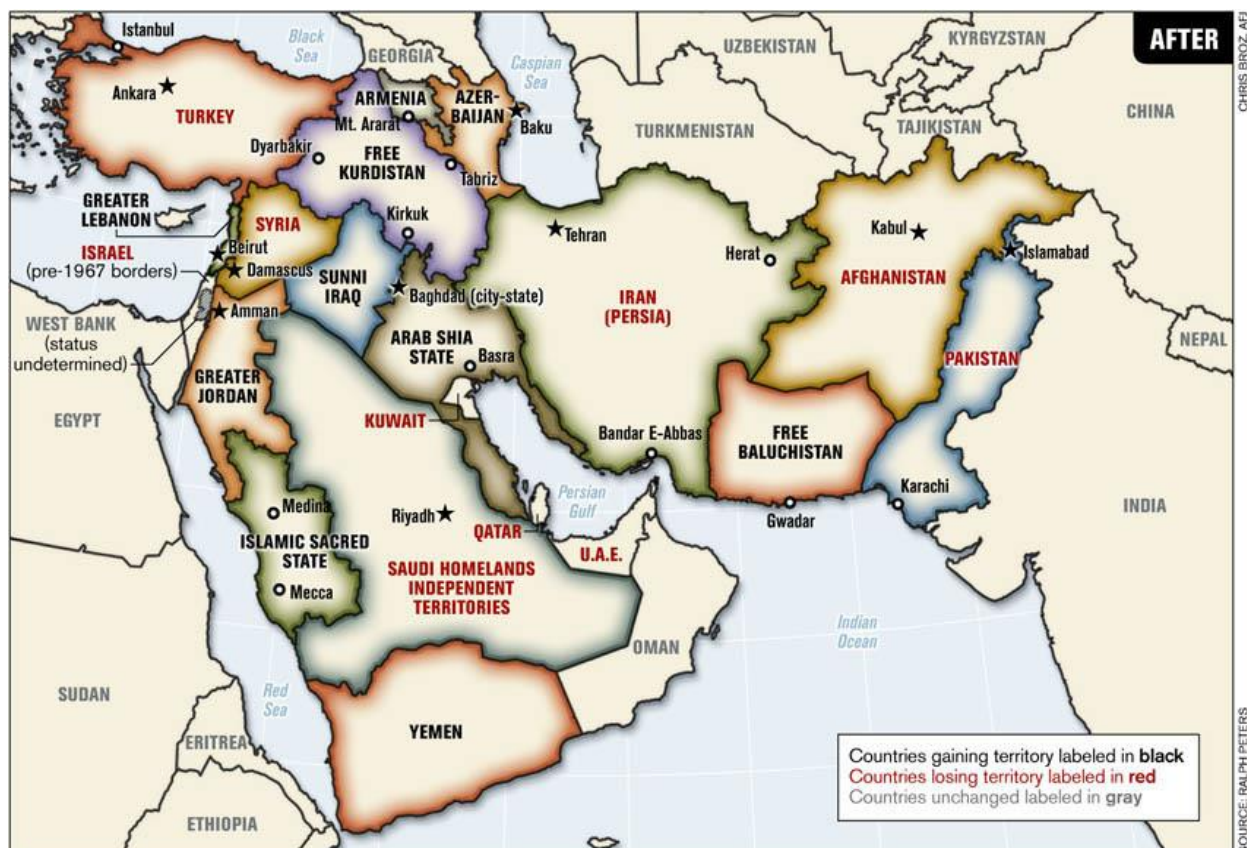
Map 2: Iran’s religious and ethnic diversity (national statistic institution)



In addition to the language and ethnic diversity, there is also a religious diversity in Iran. While the Article 12 of the IRI’s Constitution introduces the official religion of Iran as Shia (Twelver Jafari) and points out that this principle is immutable, Sunni Muslims are free to practice their religion (Article 12 Constitution, 1989). Furthermore, the Article 13 lists Zoroastrian, Jewish, and Christian as the three recognized religious minorities in Iran (Article 13, Iran’s Constitution, 1989). The implication of this principle is that the Baha’i community, the largest non-Muslim community as well as atheists and Buddhists, are not recognized as a religious minority and they do not enjoy the rights enshrined in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic (Brookshaw, and Fazel, 2012).

Therefore, the rate of protests and opposition to the Shia regime of Iran in Sunni regions, including the west and the southeast of Iran, has been always stronger than in Shia regions (Momen, 2005). These protests and opposition have been often supported by foreign actors (Milani, 2009), including Israel and Saudi Arabia, as well as the People's Mojahedin Organization of Iran who have displayed hostility or rivalry towards the Iranian regime (Jinks, 2000). Accordingly, the Sunni provinces in Iran have always been a security concern, especially after the end of the Iran-Iraq war, when some of the Sunni groups in Iran asked for independence from the central government (Zahrani, and Shirabund, 2016; Salimi and Hejazi, 2019).

Map 3: The scenario of the partition of Iran designed by Bernard Lewis, known as the 'father of the partition of Iran' (Tabnak, 2009 available at: <https://www.tabnak.ir/fa/news/99939/>)



3.2.4. Shia Islam

The strategic culture of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the foundations of political identity in Iran cannot be studied without considering the religious elements. In other words, the tendency to invoke

religion in critical situations has been one of the main building blocks of the Iranian identity and has been shaping the worldview of decision-making elites (Salimi and Hejazi, 2019). To this extent Shia religion plays a key role in Iran's strategic culture, and is responsible for the political environment centered on religious beliefs and a structure of religious beliefs. Shia is a cornerstone of Iran leadership's aspiration to gain international credibility aiming the objective of combating international anti-Islamic influence (Strain, 1996: 22-23). In this vein, Shia is one of the most important perspectives through which Iranian politicians express their views on the international system (Reis et al, 2008: 23). In other words, religious teachings in the Shia Islam guide the country's interaction with the international community through the concepts and teachings of the Qur'an (Cain, 2002).

Shiism as the ideology of the government has had a profound impact on Iran's strategic culture. This is due to two important elements of any ideology: worldview and action plan (Taremi, 2014). The first provides a picture of the world in which the government should operate, identifies friends and foes, and determines the interests of the government (Torabi and Rezai, 2013). In addition, the worldview determines what the government's goals should be in the international arena, what role the government should play in the international system, and whether it should try to maintain the status quo or try to overthrow it in order to build a new order (Taremi, 2016). The second aspect, corresponding to the action plan, contains guidelines for guiding government policy, including how to form the Armed Forces and when, where, and how to use the Armed Forces to achieve the country's goals. Iran's aspiration to guarantee its security has been consolidated with an Islamic mission in the field of expanding the scope of Islam, especially Shia (Askari, 2018). The combination of these elements exacerbates the exceptionalism of the claim that Iran must be identified as a great power in the region (Eslami, 2021).

The specific ideology of Ayatollah Khomeini as the founder of the Islamic revolution, including exporting the revolution to other countries of the world or destroying the ominous triangle of imperialism, communism, and Zionism, has been playing the key role in shaping the current strategic culture of Iran (Adib-Moghaddam, 2014; Taremi, 2016), something that has continued with the next Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, albeit with the new interpretation of Iran's strategic priorities corresponding to confronting the triangle of gold, force, and hypocrisy (*Zar o Zour o Tazvir*) referring to Saudi Arabia, the United States, and Israel (Khamenei, 2015)

In this regard, Iran, as the only religious authority based on Shia noble values and beliefs, considers that the western world has a tendency to destroy it and show its inferiority. Therefore, survival is considered the most important principle in the security discourses of the Islamic Republic of Iran (Taremi, 2014). As a result of this, western countries, which are proponents of the liberal-democratic model, are recognized as the most important enemies of the Islamic Republic of Iran and also of Islam (Giles, 2003). The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, often refers to the confrontation with global arrogance (Bahgat, 2009; Torabi, and Rezai, 2012). Also, in the military and defense programs, the readiness to confront the invasion of US-led Western countries is the most important defense component of the country. In this regard, it has been found that the Islamic Republic of Iran's attempt to acquire nuclear technology and a variety of long-range missiles has sought to strengthen deterrence based on its identity (Strain, 1996).

Thus, if we consider the strategic culture "as a set of ideas and values about the use of force" according to Gray's (1981) definition, Shia Islam is an influential element of Iran's strategic culture. Shia has a set of rules and principles regarding war and the use of force which are practiced in Iran in all military conflicts after the revolution of 1979. Shia has led Iran to choose deterrence as its military strategy to defend the country (Torabi and Rezai, 2013; Mushirzadeh, 2018). This military strategy rejects the use of force to achieve material goals and allows the use of force only when the country is under attack, or the security of the Muslim nations is endangered (Taremi, 2016; Khalili, 2018); however, it allows Iran to launch pre-emptive strikes if foreign aggression is imminent, and to invade the territory if the enemy attacks. Shia Islam has also caused Iran to consider faith and morale as the main factor of military power and not the manpower or technology per se; according to the leadership of the country, victory in the war is a divine gift that God gives to the army of Islam (Taremi, 2014).

3.3. Redefining Iran's strategic culture

Iran's strategic culture is a complex phenomenon that cannot be understood without familiarity with its characteristics. As I discussed above, the strategic culture of Iran is full of national experiences that the country gained during its long history. Sense of greatness and superiority is one of the characteristics of Iran's strategic culture, which is rooted in the greatness of Persian empires, and in spite of short interruption during the Pahlavi era, has reached its peak with the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran. A sense of vulnerability and insecurity is another feature of Iran's strategic culture which

goes back to the Arab invasion in early Islam era, to be further consolidated by Mongol attacks on the country and to eventually reached its peak with missile attacks of Saddam Hussein on the Iranian cities. Mistrust to others and more particularly, of the western countries, is another characteristic of Iran's strategic culture that has been reinforced during the occupation of Iran by colonial countries and reinforced by the coup of 1953, and recently revived by the US withdrawal from the nuclear deal in 2018. A sense of spirituality¹⁷ is yet another distinguishing feature of Iran's strategic culture, which is a function of Shia religion consolidated at a feature of Iran's strategic culture in Safavid era and its provisions extending to all dimensions of governing in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Associated features of self-sacrifice, martyrdom, fighting global arrogance, and support of mostazafin are some of the main Shia principles guiding Iran's strategic culture.

Iran's historically derived cultural senses are the sources of four enduring and fundamental principles (pillars) that affect how contemporary Iran views and acts upon strategic issues. First is the goal of self-sufficiency as well as building a powerful and independent nation (Taremi, 2014). The Islamic Republic of Iran has always been facing serious problems in international trade due to international sanctions imposed by the United Nations and western countries since the revolution of 1979 (Gerami, 2019). These sanctions restrict the exchange of gold and currency, export of medical products and technology, energy and technology to Iran, and impose wide-ranging restrictions on Iran's military programs. Therefore, not only has been the country unable to develop any cooperation with other countries, but also to buy any defense equipment to guarantee its security (Strain, 1996; Knepper, 2008). In this vein, as already mentioned in the introduction, Iran was forced to heavily invest into its military infrastructure, and especially the ballistic missile program and military drone technologies, in addition to the warship, speed-boats, and submarine projects. Eventually, this massive investment, has brought the country to the position of a top military power in the world in the past two decades (Muller, 2018), even though Iran does possess an antiquated air force that constitutes its fragility in terms of strategic capabilities.

¹⁷ The most important religious event in Shia religion is the anniversary of the martyrdom of Imam Hussein (the third Imam in Shia and grandson of Prophet Muhammad) and 72 of his companions, which takes place in Muharram (first month in the Islamic calendar). Imam Hussein and his family (including women, children, and infants) who were killed in the fight against corruption and oppression and in preventing the distortion of Islam are considered a manifestation of resistance and self-sacrifice. Shia religion and especially Imam Hussein anniversary and his role as a hero shaped a spiritual sense in Iranian culture.

The constant emphasis on deterrence as the second principle of Iran's SC took root in the 1980s with an attack of Iraq on Iran. A bloody war with 300000 victims and one million injured affected all of the dimensions of Iran's foreign policy (Giles, 2003; Eslami, 2021), eventually transforming itself into a bid for self-determination: while the international community supported or at least did not object to Iraq under Saddam Hussein, Iran was showered by Iraqi missiles for eight years, in addition to the cities in the west attacked by chemical weapons. Therefore, a sense of insecurity and threat from any external aggressor put Iran in a way to consider deterrence as a cornerstone principle of its strategic culture (Cain, 2002, Taremi, 2016).

Fighting global arrogance and the support of mostazafin is the third principle of Iran's strategic culture rooted in Shia religion, translating into an existential threat stemming from Israel and the US. This threat existed since Iran's Islamic revolution in 1979 and was revamped into Iran's collective experience and memory through the complicated conflicts in the Middle East, and especially in the Palestine Issue (Taremi, 2014) as Palestine is called the 'liver' of Iran and occupies a remarkable place in Iran's strategic thinking marked by a confrontation rooted in the contest for the mantle of legitimacy over Israel (Taremi, 2016). Moreover, the support of Iran extended to Yemen in war with Saudi Arabia is also intertwined with Iran's strategic culture to the extent that support of mostazafin is considered as one of the dimensions of the aspiration to fight global arrogance (Tabatabai and Samuel, 2017).

Mistrust in international cooperation and skepticism regarding it are other principles of Iran's strategic culture (Giles, 2003). US withdrawal from the nuclear deal and imposing new sanctions on Iran's economy by the Trump administration, as well as the assassination of General Qasem Soleimani, reinforced this sense of mistrust to western countries, especially the US, eventually interrupting the negotiation endeavors (Khalili, 2018, Eslami, 2021).

The strategic manifestation of these pillars of Iran's strategic culture has been changing over time, but they remain the foundation of how the Iranian nation and elites views and judge itself and assess its place in the region and the world.

4. Shia Islam and the narratives about the use of force

Before the revolution, Iran was one of the US's closest allies in the Middle East. The United States had considered no restrictions on the supply of weapons to Iran in order to prevent the influence of communism in Iran and the Middle East. Accordingly, the country had promised to meet Iran's defense needs, provided that Iran made no attempt to acquire a nuclear weapon. After the 1979 revolution, Iran's approach toward its foreign and security policy changed. In a way, a pro-West state with a cooperative approach has been converted into an anti-western, hardline country.

After the 1979 revolution, Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini conveyed an interpretation of Shia, which can be considered one of the world's most political religions. Bringing religion into politics - both domestically and internationally - has been one of the hallmarks of the Iranian revolution in 1979 (Ostovar, 2016), something that resulted in the term "political Islam" entering the vocabulary of the Political Science and International Relations (Mirsepassi-Ashtiani, 1994; Afary & Anderson, 2010). Political Islam aspires to challenge tyranny domestically and colonialism internationally, and from this perspective, liberal democratic thought and its manifestations, including the West-centered international political order, contain colonial aspects and must therefore be confronted by Iran (Lewis, 1996; Hashemi, 2009; Al-Khazendar, 2009). To this end, the proponents of the Iranian revolution should fight the "US-Israeli international order" (Barlow and Akbarzadeh, 2008). The domination of the revolutionary ayatollahs, who defend the influence of Shia religion over all of the dimensions of human life in Iran, has attracted the attention of scholars to the changing political dynamics in the country.

The Islamic Revolution, which is underpinned by the idea of religious democracy (*mardom salari dini*), is associated with the central role of *velayat e faqih* (the rule by jurisprudence), leading to the emergence of the political elites that have been inherently denying the interests of the great powers and opposing the existing world order (Adib-Moghaddam, 2005, 2006, 2021). While considering the strategic culture as a set of norms, ideas, and traditions regarding the use of force, it is deemed necessary to investigate the place of the Shia religion in Iran's strategic thinking and security policy-making, a cornerstone of the contemporary identity of the Islamic Republic of Iran. This is because, in Iran, the nature of war and military ethics is inevitably informed by 'Shia jurisprudence', stipulating religious standards on the war and use of weapons (Ayubi, 2003; Haynes, 2008b; Jeffrey, 2008; Arjomand, 2009; Adib-Moghaddam, 2012; Fox, 2018; Ostovar, 2019; Eslami, 2021).

4.1. Shia and Sunni: the roots of sectarian divergence

During the recent rivalries and conflicts in the Middle East, scholars consistently referred to "Shia" and "Sunni" as the two main branches of Islam, using these two concepts to clarify the roots of some existing political differences. Although these two concepts are familiar, there are several ideas related to the Shia-Sunni divide that are still less known and thus merit attention (Gause, 2014, 2017).

The Qur'an is the central axis of the teachings of Shiites and Sunnis. The second important source of the religious knowledge for both branches of Islam is the "traditions of the Prophet," which, from the general point of view of Muslims, shows the main path of Islamic life and an important part of it is called "*hadiths*" by Muslims. However, Shiites also consider the words of Shiite Imams as "narrations" to have a value equal to hadith (Esposito, 1998; Gilsenan, 2013).

All Muslims (regardless of its branches) believe in Islam as the last divine religion and, therefore, Prophet Muhammad as the last messenger. Islam has three main principles. These include monotheism (Towhid), prophecy (Nabowat), and resurrection (Ma'ad), shared by both Shia and Sunni. However, in addition to the previous principles, Shia Muslims also consider justice (Adl) and Imamate as cornerstone principles of their religion. These two principles constitute major differences in the political and strategic actions of Shia and Sunni actors (Sheikhazrani, 2016).

Imamate is the most important difference between these two branches of Islam and the root of the main conflicts between them. Shiite is a sect in Islam that has mostly political origins, although the difference between Sunni and Shiite in the discussion of Imamate also have theological dimensions. Sunnis believe the Imam is an ordinary Muslim elected by the people and is the community's political leader (Lalani, 2000). For Shia in its turn, the concept of Imamate is the same as that of prophecy: the Imam is the Muslims' Guardian and the Prophet's successor and is considered a continuation of prophecy. Over the centuries, religious differences between Shiites and Sunnis have developed along with early political distinctions (Carney, 2005). Shiites who comprise 10 to 13 percent of the world's 1.8 billion Muslims, consider Imam Ali to be the true successor of the Prophet and the divine caliph.

After the death of the Prophet of Islam in 632 AC, a group known as the Shiites wanted to transfer political power to Ali, the Prophet's son-in-law, and cousin, and later to Ali's male children. Shiites call the successors of the Prophet "Imams" who have divine knowledge. Contrary to Shia that believes in the

Prophet of Islam specifying his successor, Sunni adopts a different perspective on this claim. Shiites believe the Prophet Muhammad introduced Ali as his guardian and successor during the Ghadir e Khom event in 632 AC. However, since the Arab tribal community that had recently converted to Islam after Prophet Muhammad's death was very fragile, the Prophet's followers hurriedly tried to appoint a successor (Momen, 1987), choosing, by consensus, Abu Bakr, one of the Prophet's close friends and Prophet Muhammad's father-in-law, as the first "Caliph" (Carney, 2005). This event led to the emergence of the protests of Ali's proponents, especially Fatima, the prophet's daughter, and Ali's wife, something that led to Fatima's assassination and ignited the enmity between the two groups. After Abu Bakr, Umar bin Khattab and Uthman bin Affan arrived to power based on the same method for selecting the Caliph. Despite all these disputes, Ali was the advisor of the first three Muslim caliphs, Abu Bakr, Umar, and Uthman. After Uthman was killed, he was elected the fourth Muslim caliph in 656 AC and held power for around five years (Rizvi, 2014).

The dispute between the two large groups of Muslims began at this historic moment, and those who defended Ali against Abu Bakr became known as Shiites. The Arabic word "Shiite" means "follower" and refers to those who supported Ali's succession after the Prophet and are known as Ali's Shiites (Carney, 2005). The rift between the two main branches of Islam widened when Imam Hussein, the son of Ali, alongside his family and 72 of his followers, were assassinated and shredded in Karbala in 680 AC by the forces of the ruling caliphate. After Imam Hussein's assassination, the Sunni caliphs seized political power and, by consolidating their position, pushed the Shiites to the margins of political life (Nasr, 2007).

Both Shia and Sunnis believe in a savior (Monji) who is going to save the world in the apocalypse. This savior is known as Mahdi in both Islam branches. However, there is a difference between the specific personality of Mahdi (Ahdiyyih, 2008). Many Sunni scholars consider that the name, parents, and time of the advent of Imam Mahdi are not clear and definite. However, the Imami Shiites believe that the Mahdi is a known and definite person (the son of Imam Hassan Askari) who was born before and is currently living his life. *Entezar* (waiting) for the emergence of Imam Mahdi is one of the principles of Shia Islam. Mahdi is supposed to come and save humanity through the establishment of Justice relying on Shia governance. Paving the way for his global governance is associated with the principle of *entezar*.

Therefore, fighting the enemies of Imam Mahdi as "*jihad*" has a significant role in Shias security actions (Anderson, 2014; Sheikhizazrani, 2016).¹⁸

Jihad is also a controversial issue among the Shia and Sunni Muslims. Generally, all military conflicts are defined under "*jihad fi sabilillah*" (fighting for God's sake). Some Sunni branches among the Hanbalis and Wahhabis (the Hanbali in Saudi Arabia, Syria, and Iraq and from the fourth century onwards) have an extremely violent approach toward *jihad* (Lynch, 2010). This hard-line approach is precisely the reason behind the formation of Islamic Salafi groups and the spread of Islamic terrorism in the world and the Middle East (Hasan, 2006).

Islamic thinkers have distinguished jihad towards the (self) soul and with enemies, which is done to get closer to God. In various Islamic sources, "*jihad* with the (self) soul" is mentioned as the greatest jihad. Second, jihad against external enemies aims at defending Islam, which can be accompanied by the use or non-use of violence (Aydin, 2012). In Shia, jihad is limited to self-defense and retaliation (Taremi, 2005, 2014); However, Jihad for the means of defense and retaliation can take place upon the fatwa of the leader of the Islamic society, confirming the necessity of war. Notably, Jihad has been the last option of Shiites in confronting their opponents. Shia refers to negotiations, compromise, and even enduring hardships, against adversaries, but when there is no other option but to fight against the opposing side Shia raises the issue of jihad.

4.2. The concept of war in Islam: the Holy Quran and its interpretations

For all Muslims (both Shias and Sunnis), the sacred text (Quran) is equally important. All traditions and branches of Islam accept the Quran. Hence, they have a common text on the use of weapons. The verses of the Quran refer to the context of the time of early Islam (the Prophet's era), and since there were many wars at the beginning of Islam, there are several verses about war and conventional weapons (Ibn Ishaq, 1978; Waqidi, 1989). Moreover, narration from the Prophet, so-called "hadiths," complements the verses (See Ibn Mubarak, 1972; Ibn Abi Asim, 1988; Ibn Battah al-Akbari, n.d.).

¹⁸ This is contrary to existence of a debate among scholars claiming that, making the surface for Imam Mahdi's global governance is a goal that justifies the means for Shia people, and therefore, for making the governance of Imam Mahdi strong, making nuclear bombs is also permissible (Crytzer, 2007). It is notable that this claim is refused by Shia jurisprudence.

Since the social structure of Islam was tribal in the early Islam era, civilians and noncombatants had always been involved in wars due to nomadic life. In these cases, regardless of power relations, morality was an important variable in the actions of the Prophet of Islam. Hence, several verses and hadiths forbidding the killing of civilians have become sources for inferring new rulings on war and the use of weapons of mass destruction (Siouti, 1983).

Conflict in Islam is a function of religious precepts. The goal of this religion is the victory of monotheism (Sura Al Baqarah, verse 193). Although there might be some disagreements among the Muslims, most of its hostility is directed at the infidels. To understand the permissible ways of war in Islam, the first and the most important source that has to be investigated is the holy Quran. There are verses in the Qur'an that do not prohibit the use of any kind of weapons (Sura Al-Anfal Verse 60; Sura Al-Tawbah Verse 5). Therefore, the permission or non-permission for the employment of weapons of mass destruction is dependent on the interpretation of Muslims from the following verses:

In the name of God—the Most Compassionate, Most Merciful: Prepare against them what you believers can of military power and cavalry to deter Allah's enemies and your enemies as well as other enemies unknown to you but known to Allah. Whatever you spend in the cause of Allah will be paid to you in full and you will not be wronged (Al Anfal 60).

And,

But once the Sacred Months have passed, kill the polytheists who violated their treaties wherever you find them, capture them, besiege them, and lie in wait for them on every way. But if they repent, perform prayers, and pay alms-tax, then set them free. Indeed, Allah is All-Forgiving, Most Merciful (Al Tawba 5).

However, several verses impose moral and jurisprudential restrictions on the previous verses (Sura Al-Baqarah Verses 11, 27, 30, and 205), which advise the Muslims to observe morality and human dignity in the wars and ask Muslims to avoid corruption (Fisad).

Remember when your Lord said to the angels, "I am going to place a successive human authority on earth." They asked Allah, "Will You place in it someone who will spread corruption there and shed blood while we glorify Your praises and proclaim Your holiness?" Allah responded, "I know

what you do not know, And when they leave you, they strive throughout the land to spread mischief in it and destroy crops and cattle. Allah does not like mischief (Al-Baqarah 205).

Consequently, based on the interpretation of Shia political leaders, including Ayatollah Khamenei and Ayatollah Sistani, the nuclear bomb is prohibited, but Sunnite leaders such as Recep Tayyip Erdogan (President of Turkey) and Mohammad Bin Salman (Prince of Saudi Arabia) consider development and employment of WMD possible based on their own interpretations of the same verses of the Quran. However, some Shia religious leaders claim that the restrictions are only imposed on the employment of WMDs, and possessing them for the means of deterrence is permitted (Fazel Lankarani, 2018: 79).

Another instance of the Quran's restrictions of armed conflicts is reflected in those verses addressing the retaliation (Sura Al-Baqarah, Verse 194). However, due to preventing the killing of civilians (women, children, and the elderly), the use of WMDs is subject of some limitations by the other verses (Sura Al-Baqarah Verses 11, 27, 30 and 205).

There will be retaliation (qisas) in a sacred month for an offense in a sacred month, and all violations will bring about retaliation. So, if anyone attacks you, retaliate in the same manner. But be mindful of Allah, and know that Allah is with those mindful of Him. Spend in the cause of Allah and do not let your own hands throw you into destruction by withholding. And do good, for Allah certainly loves the good-doers (Al-Baqarah 205 and 206).

The place of retaliation in Islamic armed conflicts is projected in the statement of one of the Sunni religious leaders in 15th century stating that "however retaliation is permitted in Islam there are some limitations in retaliation. Hence the one who is committing a crime has to be punished and not the others" (Suyuti, 1983: 1/205). Therefore, it has been argued that the use of nuclear weapons, in retaliatory operations, or defensive military actions is not permissible. This challenges the quest of Turkey and Saudi Arabia's officials to possess nuclear bombs as two Muslim countries.

4.3. Shia principles informing military conflicts and the use of force

In Iran, the only Shia regime in the world, Shia jurisprudence provides a foundation of contemporary Iran's strategic culture, is centered on the principle of *maslahat*, which offers an inferential

tool of the jurist (Supreme Leader) to “decide about the destiny of Islamic society” in strategic dilemmas including the issuing fatwas to temporarily suspend some of Islam’s provision. Decision making in Shia jurisprudence is thus based on the Supreme Leader’s understanding (diagnosis) of conditions in the Islamic state which leads to a specific strategic action (prescription). Nevertheless, and as already mentioned above, there are a number of Shia principles that are crucial to understand Iran’s strategic action.

4.3.1. Maslahat (expediency)

Since the formation of the Legislative Assembly (December 1906) in Iran, according to the second principle of the Constitution: a group of religious jurists who are aware of the requirements of the time, should control and reject the laws are in opposition to the Sharia law, so that the title does not find legitimacy in the parliament (Khalaji, 2011).

After the establishment of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 1979, the new Iranian leadership had to choose among three approaches and corresponding vision the modern world: 1) fundamentalism and reliance on Islamic principles while denying the reality of the modern world and rejecting the existing international order 2) secularism, implying a separation of religion and politics and 3) jurisprudential governing drawing heavily on *maslahate jame’e ye eslami* (expediency of Islamic society) (Zarif and Sajadieh, 2014). While promoting Islam as an inherently political religion (Fuller, 2010), Iranian revolutionary elites led by Ayatollah Khomeini developed a dynamic political jurisprudence in service of the expediency of the Islamic society, which implied refusing ‘western secularism’ on the one hand and avoiding fundamentalism on the other hand. In the chosen approach, which acknowledged the fact that the traditional Shia was unable to cover challenges faced by the modern society due to lack of fixed rules about modern and contemporary issues (Saniei, 2013) the maslahat (the expediency) principle has become a cornerstone of Islamic governance of Iran (Javadi Amoli, 2009). As a result, Shia jurisprudence is divided into two different types of decrees: a) real rules (ahkam e vagheie), fixed and permanent, such as the prohibition of alcohol, b) governmental rules (ahkam e hokumati) which are issued by the religious leader in an emergency situation (ezterar), especially in the situations not covered by a fixed rule (real rule). Thus, by nature, governmental decrees cannot be fixed and prefabricated (Zarif and Sajadieh, 2014). Vali e faghih must identify public expediency (maslahat) considering the time, place and other conditions, and infer and induce the rulings of the Islamic state based on them.

Contrary to a widespread misconception (Kazemzadeh, 2020; Saraei, et al 2016), the 1979 Islamic revolution has not introduced *maslahat* as a cornerstone in the Shia jurisprudence system; it was not the innovation of Ayatollah Khomeini. Throughout history, for inferring the Shia laws and religious commends the Shia ruling in Iran, jurists relied on the Quran, tradition (hadith), and *aql* (intellect of religious leader) (Alihosseini and Keshavarz, 2016; Ghadir and Sarikhani, 2011)¹⁹. While considering *maslahat* as a fundamental and important principle in Shia religion, the latter has a strong link with *aql* as the main inferential tool of the jurist to “decide about the destiny of Islamic society” in strategic dilemmas including the issuing fatwas to temporarily suspend some of Islam’s provisions (Ghiabi, 2019). Decision-making in Shia jurisprudence is based on the leader's understanding (diagnosis) of conditions in the Islamic state which leads to a specific strategic action (prescription). The opposite of ‘*maslahat*’ is ‘*mafsadeh*’ (inexpediency), and it is the responsibility of the Supreme Leader to establish expediency and avoid the inexpediency (*mafsadeh*) (Alihosseini and Keshavarz, 2016; Sarrafi, 2004; Ghadir and Sarikhani, 2011).

The importance of *maslahat* is reflected in two critical institutions in Iran. The first is *shuraye negahban*, ‘Guardians’ Council’ (Samii, 2001; Barlow and Akbarzadeh, 2008; Takeyh, 2003, 2009), which approves all the resolutions of the Parliament (*majles*) before they become enforceable, in order to prevent any inconsistency with the norms of Shia jurisprudence (Tamadonfar, 2001, Arjomand, 2009; Samii, 2001; Barlow and Akbarzadeh, 2008; Takeyh, 2003, 2009). The second institution is *majmae tashkhise maslahate nezam*²⁰, the ‘Expediency Discernment Council’ (Abedin, 2011), which serves as an advisory institution consulting the Supreme Leader for determining the expediency (*maslahat*) of Islamic Society, and has as its main responsibility the resolution of potential disputes between the Parliament and the Guardians’ Council (Zibakalam and Haghgoo, 2011). The role of ‘Expediency Discernment Council’, in strategic decision making is reflected in its Resolutions, as for instance the Resolution 3299/11 on the refusal of the US proposal for Iran’s joining to Financial Action Task Force (FATF) and Palermo Convention as well as negotiation on the ballistic missile program (Amoli Larijani, 2020).

¹⁹ *Ijma* (unanimity of jurists) is one of the other inferential sources which is accepted in some of the Shia debates but is not approved in Iranian political and religious system.

²⁰ At the beginning of the Islamic Revolution, following the disputes between the parliament and ‘the Guardian Council’ over the approval of some laws and the need for their compliance with Islamic law, Ayatollah Khomeini ordered the establishment of a new supervisory council called *majma’e tashkhise maslahate nezam* the “Expediency Discernment Council” (Abedin, 2011)

4.3.2. Qisas (retaliation)

Shia's prohibition to start a war, has brought the principle of *qisas* (retaliation) to the forefront. *Qisas*, a retaliatory act in Islam, is originally related to murder or intentional physical injury (Ghodsi, 1995), known as 'eye for eye' principle in non-Muslim countries (Lieberman, 2006). Recognized as a legitimate act, *qisas* is present in many Quran verses, hadiths, and fatwas, in parallel with the recognition of respective actions in the international ethics and law (Guzman, 2008). In Shia, *qisas* can be discussed at both micro and macro levels (Moradi, 2017), namely as a punishment of someone who intentionally kills another person, resulting in *e'dam* (execution), or as a legitimized defense and to the right to respond to enemies' attacks, respectively.

Regardless of whether a micro or macro dimension is at stake, *qisas* needs to meet the standards of Shia jurisprudence (Bagheri, and Janipour, 2018) in order to avoid further sinful acts (and especially the spread of violence). This happens on the basis of the overarching principle of *maslahat*, and a set of other inferential religious principles (*zarare aghall, ezterar, and nafye sabii*), something that explains Iran's (immediate) retaliation of the assassination of IRGC General Qasim Soleimani, by launching of 13 ballistic missile attack at the US military bases in Iraq, contrary to the lack of such actions following the retaliation of the assassination of Mohsen Fakhri-zadeh, an Iranian nuclear scientist.²¹ The difference in Iran's approach to retaliation of both attacks resides in the fact that, according to the standards of Shia jurisprudence, *qisas* cannot compromise the public expediency (*maslahat*). Effectively, this means that the Supreme Leader (*vali e faghih*) decides about the timing, place, instruments and the eventual format of the *qisas*.

4.3.3. Inferential principles

While *maslahat* is a cornerstone principle of Shia, there are a number of other inferential Shia principles that are critically important for the understanding of Iran's strategic choices, as they are allowing the Supreme Leader to infer his religious order (fatwa) about *qisas* to reach the level of public expediency (*maslahat*): *zarare aghall, ezterar, nafye sabii*.

²¹ Some have considered the death of Israeli nuclear and missile scientist Aya Har Even, in June 2021, following the attack of anonymous troops at his hotel, as Iran's act of *qisas*, retaliating the death of Mohsen Fakhri-zadeh (Times of Israel, 2021).

4.3.3.1. Zarare aghal (minimum loss)

Zarare aghal (minimum loss) stands out as an important principle for the Supreme Leader to decide about individual strategic decisions related to the war (Rizvi and Alam, 2012; Alidust and Ehsanifar, 2018). Existing Shi'a resources allow us to distinguish three rules (dating back to the beginning of Islam era) controlling the employment of weapons (especially WMD). These rules are confirmed by a collection of narrations that forbid killing women, children, the elderly, and the insane in war. In explicit narrations from the Prophet to his commanders, he forbade them from killing these people (Al-Kulayni, 1986: 29/5; Shaykh Tusi, 1986; 6/138). Commanders were banned from cutting down trees and destroying infrastructure altogether (Fayz Kashani, 1985: 15/92; Al-Hurr al-Amili, 1988: 15/58). Thus, the text that is the basis of ijtihad in Shiite jurisprudence explicitly forbids a weapon that leads to the killing of civilians.

Taken together, they constitute '*zarare aghal*': firstly, it is not permissible to kill innocent children, women, madmen, and other innocent people in war; secondly, any weapon that kills civilians is prohibited; and thirdly, inducing poisoning which kills civilians, trees, and animals is prohibited (Alidust and Ehsanifar, 2018; Aghajanpour, 2016; Akrami, and Zarrini, 2015). The 'minimum loss' principle has been already found to inform Iran's strategic action, namely in regard to Iran's nuclear program. *Zarare aghal*, drawing on the interpretation of individual Shia provisions, has as a result a certain stigmatization of individual strategic options including the non-use of ballistic missiles. This stigmatization, which classifies certain strategic options of using the BMP as *haram*, is related to the prohibition of poisoning, drawing on early Islam's *hadith* in which Prophet Mohammad prohibits poisoning the water sources of Islam's enemies (Rizvi and Alam, 2012).

Since the issuance of verses and hadiths is related to the pre-modern era, Shia leaders have issued fatwas on modern weapons based on the Qur'an and Hadiths. The fatwas of previous leaders such as Ayatollah Khomeini (Khomeini, 1989: 372-373) did not correspond to a direct fatwa on nuclear weapons (because it was not a problem for Shiite scholars at that time), but one of the other rulings of his jihad can be the prohibition of nuclear weapons.

Nevertheless, the leaders of the Islamic Republic of Iran have directly issued fatwas in this regard. Ayatollah Khamenei has explicitly stated three times in his statements that "we consider the production, maintenance and use of nuclear weapons to be haram" (Khamenei, 2020). Other religious leaders

(Maraje'e taghliid) have issued fatwas banning nuclear weapons. Some, such as Ayatollah Vahid Khorasani and Ali Sistani, have not issued explicit fatwas in this regard but have commented on a jurisprudential tradition similar to that of Ayatollah Khomeini. Since both in jurisprudential principles and in the effects of the use of nuclear weapons, a negative view of Shiite thought prevails, this fatwa cannot be considered a type of political behavior because to change this negative view, an important part of the verses, jurisprudential narration and tradition need to be ignored.

Table 3: Shia religious leaders' fatwas regarding the weapons of mass destruction

Religious Leader	Employment Fatwa	Possession Fatwa	Description
Ayatollah Sayed Ali Khamenei	Unlawful (haram)	Unlawful (haram)	Killing civilians in war is prohibited. Therefore, possessing, development, and employment of WMD is haram.
Ayatollah Abdollah Javadi Amoli	Unlawful (haram)	Unlawful (haram)	Defense is legitimate. Mass destruction is haram. No difference between possession and employment.
Ayatollah Jafar Sobhani	Unlawful (haram)	Unlawful (haram)	Possession of WMD is prohibited even for deterrence. If nuclear science leads to human corruption (fisad) is haram.
Ayatollah Naser Makarem Shirazi	Unlawful (haram)	Unlawful (haram)	Killing civilians, animals, and cutting trees in war is prohibited. Employment of weapons that shreds the body of enemies is haram.
Ayatollah Hossein Noori Hamedani	Unlawful (haram)	Unlawful (haram)	Military employment of nuclear energy is haram. However, peaceful employment of nuclear energy is lawful (halal) and necessary.
Ayatollah Javad Fazel Lankarani	Unlawful (haram)	Lawful (halal)	Employment of WMD is prohibited, but possession of WMD for deterrence is permitted and halal.
Ayatollah Mohammad Alavi Gorgani	Unlawful (haram)	Unlawful (haram)	Killing civilians, animals, and cutting trees in war is prohibited. Employment of nuclear bombs is a great damage to humanity.
Ayatollah Vahid Khorasani	-	-	Issuing political and military fatwas is under the control of the Supreme Leader.

Source: Official websites of religious leaders (Appendix 4)

4.3.3.2. Ezterar (emergency)

Another important principle is *ezterar* (emergency). Imperatives of saving human life, preserving Islam and ensuring the survival of Islamic rule justify strategic actions that may imply material loss, damage to the environment and the loss of human lives (Alidoust and Ehsanifar, 2018), thus overruling the principle of *zarare aghall*. In this vein, losing a substantial number of IRGC troops in Syria and Iraq during the war with ISIS has been justified as “preserving Islam and survival of Islamic ruling” (Zarif and Sajadieh, 2014).

Ezterar is a principle underpinning Iran’s heavy weapons employment²². Accordingly, the employment of ballistic missiles during the war with Iraq and afterwards, has been mainly justified by *ezterar*. Iran’s 1980s missile employment was therefore not supported by *zarare aghall* alone: other principles, although far less prominent, were also present, informing Iran’s strategic actions in a different manner than the most recent use of the BMP: As Iraq’s military attacks on Iran were driven by the goal of containing Iran’s revolution, missile employment against Iraq was justified by the principle of *ezterar*.

4.3.3.3. Nafye sabil

Nafye sabil (Bidar, 2013) can be distinguished as another relevant principle underpinning Iran’s way of war and its style for the use of force. From the Islamic point of view, maintaining the superiority and supremacy of Muslims and the Islamic religious system is considered a fundamental principle and an important goal. In Islamic jurisprudence, especially Imamiyyah (Shia) jurisprudence, the domination of infidels over Islamic society and Muslims is unacceptable. According to this belief, any relationship or cooperation that increases and expands the influence of non-Muslims in Islamic society so that they can interfere in the affairs of Muslims is prohibited.

The principle of *nafye sabil* emphasizes preventing the domination of non-Muslims over Muslims in all political, economic, social, cultural and military domains and draws on an interpretation of verse 141 from the Sura Al-Nissa of the Quran stating that: “*Allah will judge between you (all) on the Day of Resurrection. And never will Allah grant to the disbelievers a way (to triumph) over the believers*” (Zare'e et al 2014). In a more narrow definition; *nafye sabil* also restricts all unconventional and unusual relations

²² Heavy weapons stand for those conventional munitions that are capable of killing more than one persons. Thus, we consider missile, drones and rockets as heavy weapons.

of Islamic societies with non-Muslims and infidels on order to prevent Muslims to be similar to non-Muslims even in social behavior. To this end, *na'fye sabil* is taken into account in all of the dimensions of Iran's foreign and defense policy as the primary measure for legislation of a political or military act.

While *na'fye sabil* establishes the imperative to "ban all material and non-material ways" for the domination of non-Muslims over Muslims (including trade and international cooperation), the Supreme Leader can compromise *na'fye sabil* for as a more expedient issue. Following the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the narrative of 'fighting global arrogance' was shaped in Iran, conveying a modern, fixed interpretation of the principle of *na'fye sabil*, assuming the shape of a guiding principle for Iran's foreign and defense policy (Rezaei, and Hashemi, 2013; Jafari, and Qorbi, 2014; Khajesarvi, 2019). A case in point is the signing of the JCPOA on the part of Iran in 2014, which was referred to by Ayatollah Khamenei as "heroic flexibility" (Khamenei, 2014).

4.4. Shia's way of war

Based on the prohibition of WMDs and nuclear weapons in Shia religion, Iran's way of war has been limited to development and deployment of weapons that meet ethical standards of Shia. However, there is a debate among religious scholars (Ulama) about the nature of permissible weapons inside Iran. Analyzing the fatwas of Shia leaders regarding the permission or prohibition for employment of different types of weapons will allow for a better understanding of Iran's future military acts. In this regard, the opinions of the main religious leaders of Iran regarding the employment of heavy weapons, including missiles, ballistic missiles, and UCAVs, should be investigated.

Based on the fatwas of Shia leaders in Iran, the employment of heavy weapons, including BMP, UCAVs, rockets, and other strategic weapons in the Shia religion does not have any restriction (see Table 2). Therefore, according to the majority of religious leaders, it is permissible (mubah), meaning that there is no reward for doing it and no torment for not doing it. There are some of the fatwas arguing the employment of heavy weapons is abominable (makruh) since "it is unlawful to shred the body of enemies" and "violence in war should not tarnish the image of Islam." The latter claim that the ideal way of the war in the Shia religion would be the war of proxies and troops. However, based on the current interpretation of Shia in Islam, the Supreme Leader is responsible for the expediency of Islamic Society and according

to Ayatollah Khamenei, ballistic missile deployment is permissible. Accordingly, the ballistic missile program has a central role in Iran's current way of war.

Table 4: Religious leader’s fatwas regarding the conventional weapons

Religious Leader	Heavy weapon	Inaccurate heavy weapons	<i>Fatwa</i>
Ayatollah Sayed Ali Khamenei	Permissible (mubah)	Unlawful (haram)	Fighting global arrogance is necessary. Killing civilians is prohibited. Accurate weapons preserve the security of civilians.
Ayatollah Javadi Amoli	Abominable (makruh)	Unlawful (haram)	Violence in war should not tarnish the image of Islam.
Ayatollah Jafar Sobhani	Abominable (makruh)	Unlawful (haram)	Defending Islamic society is necessary and killing the unbelievers who fight with Islam is permissible. Shredding the body of enemies is haram.
Ayatollah Makarem Shirazi	Abominable (makruh)	Unlawful (haram)	Shredding the body of enemies is haram. Violence in war should not tarnish the image of Islam.
Ayatollah Noori Hamedani	Permissible (mubah)	Unlawful (haram)	Armed conflict is only permissible in defense.
Ayatollah Fazl Lankarani	Permissible (mubah)	Unlawful (haram)	The environment, animals, and trees should not be damaged in the war.
Ayatollah Alavi Gorgani	Abominable (makruh)	Unlawful (haram)	Shredding the body of enemies is haram.

Source: Official website of religious leaders (Appendix 4)

As I mentioned above, Iran’s BMP has a central role in Iran’s strategic culture and thus in its way of war. Tehran’s BMP is considered as a threat that expands Iran’s geopolitical influence and military power projection (Walt, 2012). Drawing on the fatwas of religious leaders inferred from Shia principles, warfare is limited to the use of very accurate weapons that pose little risk for non-combatants is permitted in Iran. Accordingly, it is safe to argue that Iran’s strong reliance on the ballistic missile and UCAV programs have a strong link with the issue of accuracy of weapons and avoiding killing non-militaries.

The precision and the destructive power of the ballistic missiles have, therefore, continuously informed Iran’s position on accuracy. Accordingly, “the employment of accurate missiles has no

associated ethical and religious problem” (Khamenei, 2019) because it minimizes the risk of killing innocents in the war. However, it is destructive and instructive for the enemies. Something that is in line the Quran, says: "Those with him are stern against the disbelievers."(Surah Al-fath, Verse 29).

It is notable that, although the employment of BMP and heavy weapons are permitted in the interpretation of Ayatollah Khamenei, missile employment has always been Iran’s last resort on the military battlefield. The fact that Iran has used its BMP rarely during the past four decades is also rooted in the Shia religion and its principles about the use of force and deserves further attention.

4.5. *Zarare aghal, ezterar, and nafye sabil*: discursive habitat for BMP employment

Having established that, military conflict in Iran is primarily associated in self-defense and retaliation, I argue that the Shia principles shape a discursive habitat in which Iran’s strategic decisions are defined. I analyze instances of Iran’s missile employment: firstly, on Iraq, during the Iran-Iraq War (1984-1988), secondly, on ISIS bases in Deir ez zur and Hejjin in Syria and in the North of Iraq (2017 and 2018), thirdly, on US military bases in Iraq following the assassination of General Soleimani (2020) and finally, Iran’s 2022 missile operations in Iraqi Kurdistan against Israeli intelligence house and forces of Iranian Kurdish parties locating inside of Iraqi borders.

4.5.1. Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988)

The Iran-Iraq war, and especially the War of the Cities, has been shaping not only Iran’s contemporary strategic thinking but also its identity, until today (Rezaei, 2016). The beginning of the War was unprecedented in terms of Iraq’s violent missile attacks on Iran’s more than twenty towns and cities in 1983, causing a high number of casualties, at a moment when Iran, contrary to Iraq, had no access to missiles (not to mention powerful allies) (Adib-Moghaddam, 2007). The War changed the position of Iran towards the BMP: Iranian authorities, who initially had to recur to Chinese ballistic missiles in 1984 as a means of retaliating Iraq’s missile attacks, saw the urgent need to develop a stronger missile capacity (Eslami and Sotudehfar, 2021). Thus, although Iran’s first attempt to build ballistic missiles and high-level artillery dates back to 1977, it was during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) and particularly between 1984 and 1988, that the BMP experienced a breakthrough (Murray, and Woods, 2014). In this vein, the evolution of the BMP in Iran thus cannot be disassociated from the idea of legitimate retaliation and thus inherently linked to *qisas*.

In October 1983, Iraq attacked Iran's Dezful City, Masjed Soleiman, Khorramabad, Andimeshk and Nahavand (Adib-Moghaddam, 2006), employing 190 missiles, resulting in 2300 civilian deaths and a huge number of displacements, including from Tehran and Shiraz. However, Iran's leadership, already in the possession of missiles as of 1984, had continuously refrained from taking an act of symmetric retaliation. Instead, Iran's attacks on Iraq over the course of three years, the so-called '89 missile slap' (Anonymous, 2014), mostly targeted non-residential areas, thereby abstaining from systematically attacking Iraq's cities as well as its military bases. This could appear surprising, as Iraq's violent missile attacks on Iran's cities were causing an increasing number of victims, and aimed at preventing Iranian ground operations and at instilling a psychological effect of spreading fear in Iran's society, eventually bringing the Iranian people to the streets. Iran's population was urging its leadership to respond in kind, both as an act of retaliation and as a way to discourage further missile attacks on the country's residential areas. 'Missile for missile'²³ emerged as a common slogan potentially evoking *zarare aghal*. On 11 March 1984, Iran launched its first (long-range) missile attack on the Iraqi city of Kirkuk; but following several missile attacks in 1984, Ayatollah Khomeini decided to suspend the missile employment (Eslami, 2021).

Iran's restraint in employing its ballistic missiles was a result of a strategic deliberation in which a certain stigmatization of the BMP was working towards making it inadequate for *qisas* that was associated with the principle of *zarare aghall*. Iran's Scad-B missiles, were imprecise, and resulted in damage to Iraq's residential areas and the death of Iraqi civilians. Ayatollah Khomeini, therefore, abstained from a strategic option that could contradict Shia provisions of *qisas* associated with *zarare aghall*, even though the resulting restrained approach was at odds with Iranian society's expectations of a symmetric retaliation of Iraq's attacks on Iran's cities and residential areas. This strategic deliberation was reflected in the declared emphasis of Ayatollah Khomeini on reducing risk to non-combatants, as well as in the obligation to announce the targets of the attacks in advance²⁴. One could argue that such association of *qisas* with *zarare aghall* has been at least in part responsible for the BMPs not being employed for 29 years following Iran's attacks on Iraq in 1984-1988, despite Iran's strategic isolation (both economically and militarily) as a characteristic feature of its strategic culture and despite the fact that Iran was attacked,

²³ The original Persian slogan is: *Moushak javab e Moushak*.

²⁴ Due to suspension of the employment of Chinese missiles by Ayatollah Khomeini, as well as the existing sanction preventing Iran to buy new missiles to retaliate Iraq's attacks, Iran's leadership took a position of systematically investing, from 1984 onwards, in their own missile technology, eventually assuming an 'unlimited, non-nuclear missile defense strategy'. See: Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei, *Historical re-reading of Iran's non-use of weapons of mass destruction*. Tehran. Official website. (2014 November 08). <http://farsi.khamenei.ir>. (Persian resource).

by terrorist groups, leading to the estimated 17000 Iranian victims between 1980 and 2013: by the Iraq-based *monafeghin* since 1980s, or by Al-Qaeda, since 1988, as well as by the more recent fundamental Sunni paramilitary group *jundullah* (between 2003 and 2011) in the Southeast of Iran²⁵ (Anonymous, 2013).

Iran's missile employment in the 1980s was performed in a Shia Islamic mode that was not defined by *zarare aghall* alone. The latter principle coexisted with *ezterar*, to the extent that Iraq's military attacks on Iran had been driven by the goal of containing Iran's revolution. Moreover, the evolution of Iran's BMP was also associated with the aspiration to sustain and secure Iran's post-revolutionary course, which was closely associated with the aspiration to 'fight global arrogance' (Adib-Moghaddam, 2005), an idea developed by Ayatollah Khomeini as a modern interpretation of the principle of *nafye sabil* (Rezaie and Hashemi, 2013). This idea referred to the notion that some countries were suffering from the (minority of) countries exercising cultural, political and economic domination, colonization and exploitation, first and foremost Israel and the US (Anonymous, 2014; Eslami and Vieira, 2022).

4.5.2. Iran's BMP employment in response to the ISIS attacks (2017-2018)

While abstaining from using the BMP, Iran invested massively in its modernization as a means of guaranteeing its defense and self-sufficiency, between 1988 and 2017. This course assumed by Iran's leadership was conducive to reinforcement of the principle of *ezterar* in the deliberation over the strategic options surrounding the BMP employment: a defense capability to save its people's life against any possible attack, preserve Islam, and the survival of Islamic rule. A massive investment into a military program such as BMP that has not been used for almost 30 years, was thus a legitimate military and strategic option for a country with a strategic culture defined by self-sufficiency and isolation (Iran presented itself as a country surrounded by military bases) and a volatile regional environment (Ajili and Rouhi, 2019).

As the program evolved, at a certain point endowing Iran with the largest number of missiles in the Middle East (Izewicz, 2017) missile accuracy has been improving. This allowed the IRGC to announce that the missiles were "able to hit a target within a few yards from a distance of several thousand

²⁵ Iran considers Jundullah as a terrorist group related to Al-Qaeda. This group assassinated over 151 Iranians under the supervision of its leader Abdol-Malek Rigi.

kilometres” (Khamenei, 2017), and the BMP became associated with national pride, the opposite of the (inglorious) past of the War of the Cities in which Iran was a victim. Moreover, the improved accuracy allowed to claim that the risk to civilians was minimized, and the BMP employment was turning into an acceptable strategic option without compromising Iran’s deterrence and military self-sufficiency (Khamenei, 2019). The new acceptability of the BMP was a result of the fact that its potential strategic employment was performed the BMP in a Shia Islamic mode that was in line with *zarare aghall*: Ayatollah Khamenei has argued in this regard that the employment of accurate missiles was free from any ethical or religious problems (Khamenei, 2019).

The IRGC missile attacks on ISIS bases in 2017 and 2018 illustrated Iran’s changing approach. In June 2017, for the first time since the end of the Iran-Iraq War, the IRGC employed six missiles in an attack on the ISIS terrorist base in Deir ez Zor (Khamenei, 2017). The attack was carried out in retaliation against an ISIS attack on one of Iran’s *majles* buildings and the tomb of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini some days prior. The subsequent IRGC’s operation caused heavy casualties among ISIS terrorists and killed 170 ISIS affiliates while destroying their equipment and bases (Anonymous, 2017). In October 2018, the IRGC carried out another missile attack in the Hajin province on the Syria-Iraq border, once again following an ISIS attack on the Iranian city of Ahwaz, during the Holy Defense Week national parade (Khamenei, 2018). Subsequently, Iran also targeted ISIS positions in the Syrian territory to the East of the Euphrates with six ballistic missiles²⁶ and seven UCAVs in an operation that led to the death of a prominent ISIS commander, al-Mashhadani, who had been in charge of the northern Iraqi city of Mosul (Ajili and Rouhi, 2019).

Iran’s retaliation employing its BMP in 2017-2018 was celebrated and widely promoted as a ‘slap’ against ISIS: The legitimacy of Iran’s military actions was drawn from *qisas*, allowing Ayatollah Khamenei’s this time to articulate strategic options by stating “if the enemy attacks us, we will respond ten times over” (Khamenei, 2018b). By condemning ISIS terrorist acts in Iran as “fire cracking”, he maintained that the attacks “were only increasing the will of the Iranian nation to fight terrorism, including through use of its ballistic missiles”(Khamenei, 2017b) .

²⁶ The missiles employed in these strikes were of the Zulfiqar and Qiam type, with a maximum range of 750 km and 800 km, respectively.

A factor that contributed to the strategic deliberation of Iran's asymmetric retaliation of the ISIS attacks, which were carried out by gunmen and suicide bombers was the nature of the 'Iran's new enemy'. The fact that ISIS was a particularly violent terrorist group allowed Iran's authorities to, drawing on *maslahat*, and sanction the exceptional retaliatory use of the BMP. Qisas was in this instance performed in a Shia Islamic mode as associated with *ezterar*, a principle related to the protection of human life and Islamic rule. Strategic deliberation was reinforced with the argument that the international reputation of Islam was in jeopardy.

Eventually, growing missile precision on the one hand and the nature of ISIS as a terrorist group, on the other hand, led to the articulation of strategic options leading to 2017 and 2018 retaliatory employment of Iran's BMP, in a way which connected qisas, already closely associated with *zarare aghall*, with *ezterar*. The BMP employment as a means of retaliation came to be viewed as not only possible, but even necessary and justified (Eslami, 2021).

4.5.3. Attack on the US military bases in (2020)

On 3rd January 2020, General Qasem Soleimani, Head of the IRGC's international branch, *Sepahe Qods*, and Abu Mahdi Al-Mohandes, the Commander of Popular Mobilisation Committee of Iraq (*Hashd Al-Sha'bi*) were assassinated by airstrikes in the international airport of Baghdad. The strikes were launched from a drone (three drones of MQ9 type were employed in the operation), following the order of US President Donald Trump (Eslami and Vieira, 2022).

While some considered General Soleimani an international terrorist and celebrated his death, funeral ceremonies held for him in several cities in Iran and Iraq were attended by millions²⁷. Iranian population appealed to the authorities to provide a "strong military response" to what was seen as a 'heinous crime' (Rouhani, 2020). Within a few hours after the assassination, the decision on the retaliation was announced by Ayatollah Khamenei stating that 'hard revenge awaits criminal killers'²⁸. To prevent Iran's 'forbearance' in the face of the spilled blood of its heroes, it was declared that Qasem Soleimani's death would be revenged by 'hard', 'precise', 'painful' and 'decisive' military action (Larijani, 2020; Raesi,

²⁷ Official reporters from the funeral ceremony of General Soleimani reflected the participation of 27 millions of Iranians in different cities. According to official reports 60 (sixty) Iranians were killed due to crowds in Soleimani's funeral ceremony in Kerman. This demonstrates his popularity within Iranian society.

²⁸ The words "hard revenge" indexed in both Instagram and Twitter as trending hashtags in early January of 2020. <https://www.twitter.com> and <https://www.instagram.com>

2020a). Strategic deliberation identified the missile strike as an adequate response, which was in line with the expectations of the Iranian population. Indeed, such expectations were presented as a factor reinforcing the legitimacy of Iran's strategic decision: 'Iranian people's appeals for revenge were the real fuel of our missiles that destroyed the Ain-Al Asad' (Khamenei, 2020b).

The decision to attack two US military bases (Ain Al-Asad and Al Taji) in Iraq by launching 13 long-range ballistic missiles set a new precedent in the way Shia principles framed and rationalized Iran's foreign policy and defense decisions: *qisas* was now associated with *nafye sabil* (banning the pathway), corresponding to the prevention of the domination of infidels (non-Muslims) over Muslims (Zare'e et al 2014; Babaei, 2018) , and with the associated, modern interpretation of this principle corresponding to 'fighting global arrogance', a central principle of Iran's post-1979 foreign policy (Haunes, 2008), that has been specially revamped since the 2015 US withdrawal from the JCPOA. 'Fighting global arrogance' was converging with the strategic option of retaliation by relying on the BMP, as Soleimani's assassination had strengthened the voices of those in Iran pleading for "an end to the rule of global arrogance" by recurring to military actions, including the BMP (Eslam and Vieira, 2020). This new quality of *qisas* was reinforced by the notion of 'hard revenge' as well as by the recurrent statements, by Iran's authorities, that the Western/US approach of "hit and run is over" (Alam- Al-Hoda, 2020; Abbasi, 2020), as evidenced by the destroyed "US base in the eyesight of the people of the world" (Raesi, 2020b) in a "as a slap to the US" whose 'the corruptive presence of the US in the region' would be soon ended. This idea was only strengthened after the US withdrawal from the Al-Qiam, Al-Qayara and Kirkuk military bases in April 2020 (Eslami and Vieira, 2022).

With January 2020 attacks, Iran carried out missile strikes on US military bases, employing 18 missiles, which led to the estimated 285 victims, including 139 dead and 146 injured (Ahmed, 2020). Iran's traditional concern for proportionality, associated with *zarare aghall*, was sidelined (Bahgat, 2019). This disproportionate and asymmetrical response was nevertheless considered legitimate as it was performed in line with Shia Islamic principles in a way that associated *qisas* with the now dominant principle *nafye sabil*, which found its expression in the growing 'fighting global arrogance' narrative. This is not to say that any strategic considerations associated with *zarare aghall* disappeared, however: in spite of the fact that the attacks on Ain Al-Asad and Al Taji resulted in casualties, Iranian officials repeatedly claimed that Iran did not aim to kill US soldiers in the attack on the US bases (Hajizadeh, 2021). In

support of this argument, Iran's officials emphasized that, following the direct order of Ayatollah Khamenei, IRGC "launched 13 ballistic missiles, one by one, with two minutes interval, in order to give time to the US troops to escape" (Hajizadeh, 2021).

4.5.4. Attacks on Israel's intelligence base (2022)

After the assassination of General Qasem Soleimani, which resulted in a weakening of Iran's position in Lebanon, Syria, and Iraq, Israel has increased its activities in the mentioned countries and especially in Iraqi Kurdistan and Iran's neighboring areas. In line with this, Israel had established several intelligence offices around Iranian borders using them for spying and conducting counter-security operations including training and equipping paramilitary groups (PKK) taking subversive actions inside of Iran's soil.

While Iran had warned Iraq, aiming at preventing Israeli forces from using Iraq soil for their anti-Iran activities, Iraqi officials have been always disclaiming the existence of Israeli military and intelligence officers in Iraqi Kurdistan (Sadrol-Hoseini, 2022). As negotiations with the Iraqi party did not result in any agreement, Iran officially declared that if the Iraqi party has not forced all Israeli troops to withdraw from Iraqi Kurdistan, Iran's IRGC would attack the known Israeli bases directly.

Eventually, on 13 March 2022, following a subversive operation of anonymous forces in the city of Mahidasht in Iran, Iran attacked a villa located in the city of Erbil, in Iraqi Kurdistan, deploying 12 mid-range ballistic missiles (Fateh 110) that resulted in the destruction of Israeli intelligence base, killing three Israeli officers and injuring seven other intelligence officers. Justifying this operation, Iranian officials claimed that, since the attack on Mahidasht city of Iran was planned and financed by this Israeli agency in Kurdistan, Iran conducted this operation exactly against the same intelligence base.

Iran's attack on the Israeli base appears to be underpinned by the principle of *qisas*, which guides Iran to a symmetric and proportionate retaliation while also meeting the standards of *zarare aghal*. However, the main principle driving Iran's operation and the attacks at the Israeli intelligence base is *nafye sabil*: while the primary mission of Iranian armed forces is defined as a way to prevent domination of non-Muslims (especially Israel) over Iran, the employment of missiles was viewed as the fastest and the safest way to put an end to the presence of Israeli intelligence officers and agents at the borders of Iran.

4.5.5. Attacks on Kurdish military groups in Iraqi Kurdistan (2022)

2022 was a challenging year in Iran's contemporary history, and especially significant for Iran in terms of its ballistic missile employment. On 21 November 2022 and following the involvement of Kurdish Military groups in Iran's protests and insurgencies, Iran conducted an unprecedented missile attack on 40 military bases and barracks of mentioned groups in Iraqi Kurdistan. During these operations, Iran deployed over 73 mid-range ballistic missiles (Fath).

On 13 September 2022, the 22-year-old Kurdish woman and a citizen of Iran, Mahsa Amini, was arrested by the so-called "morality police" for unsuitable hijab, eventually dying in the police station. Mahsa Amini's death resulted in national protests against the "compulsory hijab" (*hejab e ejbari*) in Iran which ended in country-wide riots and insurgencies. In the context, separatist troops of Kurdish Iranian parties including DPIK, PAK, PKK, and PEJAK have been taking what Iran leadership considered subversive actions, including destroying banks, cars and state buildings, in addition to conducting violent attacks that resulted in the deaths of civilians and police officers as well as IRGC forces, mainly in the Western parts and Kurdish cities of Iran.

The so-called "Rabi operation" of the IRGC in November 2022 and its retaliatory attacks on the military groups of Kurdistan can be said to be associated with the Shia principles of *qisas* and *ezterar*. In light of the military attacks and what the Iranian government considered subversive actions that took human lives and also put the Islamic rule in danger Ayatollah Khamenei ordered a comprehensive attack, not only recurring to the ballistic missiles but also to strikes by different types of suicide and combat drones, in addition to employing the long-range artillery arsenal. "Rabi operation" can be even said to have jeopardized the principle of *zarare aghal*, to the extent that Iran came to send heavy fire to barracks very close to residential areas and towns.

Although this could appear surprising at first glance the IRGC's comprehensive attacks in November 2022 were carried out in line with the Shia principle of *nafye sabil*. This is in spite of the fact that Kurdish groups recognized as terrorists by countries Iran, Turkey, Iraq and Syria are mainly composed by the Muslims. Since these military groups such as DPIK are sponsored and trained by Israel, and other groups such as Mojahedin, they are considered to be "fighting for the interests of Israel and the US" (Sadrol-Hoseini, 2022). Therefore, the result of their activities is viewed to contribute to the predominance

of the US and Israel over Iran. To this end, Iran's fighting against these groups has a Shia-inspired justification for the Iranian Armed Forces.

5. Narratives on the BMP and the evolution of Iran's strategic culture

In the previous chapter, I claimed that Shia Islam is the primary source of Iran's strategic culture. Additionally, I argued that the Shia religion, which works as a discursive habitat for Iran's military actions, ascribes the central role to the ballistic missile program in the Iranian way of war. However, this argument does not imply that there is no debate on the missile deployment in Iran.

Iran's strategic culture creates room for maneuver for two approaches on Iran's BMP: the 'moderation' and 'revolutionary' narratives. I identify both of them in Iran's policy towards the BMP, and demonstrate how, following the US withdrawal from the JCPOA, Iran has increasingly relied on the 'revolutionary' narrative underpinned by such themes as the necessity of deterrence, fighting the 'global arrogance', and reliance on auto-sufficiency in defense policy including BMP, in contrast to the equal co-existence of both narratives before that (2015-2018). I demonstrate how the shift towards the 'revolutionary' narrative became consolidated after the downing of the US drone, and reaching to its peak after the assassination of General Qasem Soleimani, concurrently reinforcing the already central role of the BMP in Iran's strategic culture (Eslami and Vieira, 2020).

While Iran's ballistic missile program (BMP), which dates back to 1977 and currently provides the country with the most significant number of missiles in the Middle East, has always been a subject of controversy, the more recent development of the program from 2005 onwards has been referred to as an event of 'shattering geopolitical significance' (Walt 2012). The ballistic missile test conducted by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in 2015, just three months after the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and using a missile inscribed with the words 'Israel should be destroyed' (times-of-Israel 2015), underscored the volatility of the situation in the region, which was further heightened following the declarations of General Mohammad-Ali Jafari, Head of the IRGC, regarding the existence of hidden underground missile bases in 2017 (Jafari, 2018).

Despite mounting regional tensions, Iran has only employed their BMP six times in the post Iran-Iraq war, all after Barack Obama's administration. As already mentioned, the first time was in June 2017, the IRGC attacked ISIS bases and headquarters in Syria's Deir Azur in response to the ISIS terrorist attack on Iran's Parliament. The second time corresponds to the in October 2018 attack, when the IRGC used six medium-range missiles to target ISIS bases in the Eastern Euphrates in Syria as immediate retaliation

against the ISIS attack on the Khuzestan of Iran. The third time the BMP was used was in June 2019, when one of the US's largest and most advanced UCAVs, the Global Hawk RQ4, was shot down by the Iranian air defense system (Marcus 2019). The fourth time Iran resorted to deployment of ballistic missiles was during Iran's attack on the US military bases in Iraq, retaliating against the assassination of General Qasem Soleimani in January 2020. The fifth time, in March 2022, Iran launched 12 ballistic missiles to an Israeli intelligence house in Iraqi Kurdistan following Israel's subversive actions inside Iran's border. Finally, the sixth time the BMP was used was in November 2022, when Iran's IRGC conducted a comprehensive military attack using ballistic missiles, combat drones and long-range artillery to target the headquarters and military bases belonging to Iranian Kurdish parties in Iraqi Kurdistan.

While the BMP is believed to produce a 'path dependent' (Olsen 2016) Iran's military doctrine, there is a 'significant diversity' (Tabatabai 2019) of views regarding Iran's BMP, including on such critical aspects as the range of the missiles, which can be uncovered by the narrative analysis (Riessman 2008).

In this chapter I start by focusing on Iran's narratives on BMP, in the time periods of 2017-2022, while paying particular attention to the June 2019 drone incident, Iran's attacks on the US military bases in 2020 and Iran's unprecedented ballistic missile operations in 2022.

5.1. The 'revolutionary' and 'moderation' narratives on the necessity of BMP

I argue that there are two distinct narratives developed on Iran's BMP, which stem from two distinct interpretations of Iran's history, Shi'i identity, the sense of threat and the necessity of deterrence. To advance our argument, I use as a point of departure the distinction between two main currents of thought, namely the 'revolutionary' and the 'liberal' ones (Adib-Moghaddam 2012). Each adopts its own specific approach to domestic and international issues. Iran-Iraq war, for instance, in its 'revolutionary' interpretation, is considered a gift to Iranian people, to the extent that it provides an opportunity to fight for God and strengthen people's faith; while the 'moderation' narrative tends to emphasize the ensuing human and material destruction as well as the loss of economic resources. In a similar vein, the 'revolutionary' view on the sanctions is the one of a 'golden opportunity' for strengthening Iran's independence, self-sufficiency and resilience of Shi'i regime from 'others', corresponding to the anti-liberalist, anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist posture; while the 'moderation' perspective is viewing the

sanctions as isolation from other countries and the biggest threat for Shi'i regime, expecting the latter to cooperate with all actors, even the enemies.

Relying on the aforementioned literature as well as on the contributions on Iran's strategic culture, one can expect two narratives to be present in Iran's policy towards the BMP as well, attributing a different meaning to such elements as the deterrence, which draws upon the preservation of territorial integrity, self-sufficiency and independence; Iran's identity and specifically the cooperation with the West/fighting global arrogance, including themes of anti-imperialism, support for the mustazafin, and anti-Zionism; and the skepticism of international cooperation, and specifically in the matter of (any) negotiation over the BMP.

5.1.1. The 'revolutionary' narrative on BMP

The 'revolutionary' narrative on the BMP derives from a 'metanarrative' on Iran's revolutionary national identity, which relies on its own particular ontology and the complex set of narratives supporting it. Adib-Moghaddam (2012) has portrayed the essence of this metanarrative as: 'linked, with the help of an intellectual vanguard, into a strident, ideologically charged counterculture that would simulate the viability of a temporal break with everything that "is."' (Adib-Moghaddam 2012). The 'revolutionary' narrative closely links the BMP and the narrative targeting Iran's international positioning, transforming the BMP into a symbol of 'superior counter-discourse'. As it is embedded within a 'stringent, ideologically charged counterculture' (Adib-Moghaddam 2012, 278), it leaves no room for negotiation.

First, the 'revolutionary narrative' emphasises the theme of 'deterrence'. Following the downing of the US drone in June 2019, Imam of Isfahan attributed President Trump's alleged change of mind to dissuasion: 'the US wanted to attack Iran, but Israel prevented Trump from doing so. Israel was afraid of being eliminated from the world map by Iran' (Tabatabai-Nejad 2019). Another example is the statement by Alamal-Hoda, Imam of Mashhad, equating the BMP with the indirect possession of nuclear weapons: 'by having the missile, we do not need the nuclear bomb; if Iran decides to confront Israel, a missile strike on the Dimona reactor would be enough' (Joffere 2019).

Also reflective of the deterrence narrative are the references to the justification of Israel as Iran's main enemy. Accordingly, the range of existing Iranian missiles is sufficient to deter Israel: 'the reason we designed the 2,000 km missile was to target our main enemy, the Zionist regime' (Hajizadeh 2016).

Moreover, the 'revolutionary narrative' is resolutely against any notions of restricting or destroying Iran's BMP, as this exposes Iran to a situation of 'whenever the US wants, it can attack us' (Rahimpur 2018), drawing on the precedent of Libya. This narrative portrays strategic negotiating as a 'poison that kills' (Khamenei 2019).

Second, the 'revolutionary narrative' is highly sceptical of international cooperation. Accordingly, this narrative holds that 'missiles, not talks' are Iran's future. This narrative allows individual actors such as Ayatollah Javadi-Amoli, one of the most influential religious leaders in Iran, to scale up the 'revolutionary' narrative to an ironic-aggressive one, as he did for instance when commenting on Iran's Foreign Minister greeting Barack Obama: 'if you were shaking hands with them, count your fingers' (Zarif 2019).

A cornerstone of this narrative is the portrayal of the US as highly unreliable and untrustworthy, leaving Iran no other choice but to defend itself and other neighbouring countries. Given Iran's antiquated equipment and the impossibility of acquiring new replacements, the BMP assumes the highest level of importance in Iran's defense and deterrence.

This particular discourse is part of the so-called 'global arrogance' theme. Here, the 'revolutionary narrative' holds that 'the only way to guarantee peace and security' is to rely on one's own forces, which, in the case of Iran, is the BMP, the logic being that 'if global arrogance understands that you don't have enough power to defend your people, it will be tempted to attack you' (Rahimpur 2018).

This narrative draws strongly on the history of support and partnership between Saddam Hussain and the US. Drawing on US assistance to Iraq, the narrative develops the idea that the US will 'always find someone' to attack Iran (before, it was Saddam-Hussein, now, it is Saudi-Arabia's Bin Salman): 'The US and Israel will find a new Saddam and make him attack Iran' (Raefi-Pour 2019).

This makes Iran's BMP non-negotiable: 'Iran will not accept new western missile negotiation proposals. And no matter how much they insist, Iran will not auction off its national interests and its strategy to defend itself in the world's political marketplace.' Conveying a strong conviction in Iran's deterrence, the narrative, oriented domestically, sends the message: 'neither a war will happen nor will we negotiate' (Khamenei 2019). As the 'revolutionary' narrative implies, Iran has an existential need to develop, produce and test ballistic missiles, which it considers 'legitimised deterrence'.

Thirdly, the 'revolutionary narrative', underpinned by the 'fighting global arrogance' theme, has an expansionist orientation. It portrays Iran in perpetual opposition to the West, its 'other'; moreover, Iran is portrayed as 'the new "superpower" that has been "born"' (Abbasi 2015). There is therefore a strong link between the discourse relative to Iran's identity and its place in the world, resulting in a strong 'missionary' theme that includes converting 'the White House into a mosque' (Abbasi 2015). The importance of fighting 'global arrogance', which goes hand in hand with supporting mustazafin, has been reflected in the statements of Ayatollah Khamenei, who claimed, 'I have to say, even if the US built a nuclear plant in Saudi Arabia and provided it with ballistic missiles, I would not worry because I know in the near future they will be in the hand of Islamic strivers' (Houthis) (Khamenei 2019).

'Deterrence' as a central theme is intrinsically linked to the mistrust towards international cooperation in the 'revolutionary' narrative. Thus, the narrative holds that the 'heart of the US' (referring to Israel) has been 'taken hostage in our hand by our missile power' (Alamal-Hoda 2018). The US is portrayed as having an awareness that 'if they attack Iran, Israel will be destroyed in less than 10 minutes' (Alamal-Hoda 2018).

5.1.2. The 'moderation' narrative on the BMP

Iran's moderation narrative, embedded into a 'liberal' stream of thinking, is centered on the idea that the only way to promote national interests is via international cooperation, in line with the provisions of Islam as a peaceful religion (Islam-e-Rahmani) (Khatami, 2013) and a force for good in the international politics. It therefore advocates less conflictual relations and a 'carefully calibrated engagement' with the West (Colleau 2016, 34), which is essential to mitigate Iran's security dilemma. It is especially critical of Iran's isolation, which harms Iran's national interest by ignoring Iran's multifaceted links to other global actors, including what has been labeled as 'discursive dependency' (desire for recognition of Iran's legitimate interests) as well as 'strategic dependency' (convergence of strategic threats and interest to both Iran and other important international actors, such as the US) (Colleay 2016, 34).

The moderation narrative has acquired its tangible expression in the "Dialogue of Civilizations" proposed by Khatami in the late 90s (Mirbagheri 2007), and developed along with the Iran's nuclear negotiation process (Tarock 2016). Although this discourse was weak during the Ahmadinejad administration, it rose again under Rouhani administration (Juneau 2014), advocating 'prudence and

hope' in Iran's foreign policy (Akbarzadeh and Conduit 2016, 1), instrumental to mitigate Iran's international position, severely complicated by sanctions, regional tensions, dispute over the nuclear program and the rise of terrorist groups (Akbarzadeh and Conduit 2016). According to Rouhani, the way forward for Iran was related to the idea of: 'Let's allow Islam with its merciful face, Iran with its rational face, the revolution with its human face and the system with its emotional face still create epics' (Rouhani 2013, 2016).

Iran's 'moderation' narrative on the BMP considers the latter 'one of the enduring policies of the Islamic Republic' (Nobakht 2017), and maintains that BMP is a key deterrent. It states that 'these missiles are not for use and we will never, never, never use them against anybody unless in self-defense. And we are sure nobody has the guts to attack us again' (Zarif 2016). Similar to the 'revolutionary' narrative, it maintains that 'Iran does not need permission to build missiles' (Rouhani 2017). Consequently, 'Iran's BMP is non-negotiable' (Rouhani 2017). It strongly draws upon the Iran-Iraq war: 'In the past 300 years, Iran has only defended itself. You remember when Saddam attacked Iran with chemical bombs? [...] the US provided Saddam missiles to use against us, but nobody provided us any missiles for means of defense, and now you ask me why we develop our missiles?' (Zarif, 2019).

At the same time, the narrative holds that cooperation is possible and problems can be solved through dialogue and negotiation. The narrative places great importance on economic power and the balance between the economic and military dimensions of Iran's foreign policy, reflected in the statement: 'only when the wheel of people's lives is spinning is the spinning of centrifuges valuable' (Rouhani 2015). The 'moderation' narrative conveys the idea that 'I wish that instead of missiles and satellites Iran could make bicycles to compete with India and Turkey' (Ziba-Kalam 2019).

A case in point of the 'moderation narrative' is the critical position assumed by some of Iran's officials towards the ballistic missile tests conducted by the IRGC since 2015, after the signing of the nuclear deal. While considering it important to have missiles for defense and deterrence, the IRGC, it was argued, had to act with more caution, since 'everything has its own time' (Motahari 2018). The 'moderation narrative' thus stands in contrast with the 'revolutionary narrative', which emphasizes the urgency of developing the most strategically important program, for which there can be no time limitations; it is rather 'now or never'.

After the IRGC ballistic missile test in 2015, the narrative has become stronger and conveyed by different political actors, who raised questions such as, ‘Has a week went by that we have not proudly unveiled another of our military achievements? What is the message inherent to the missile test after the JCPOA? Why must we insist so much on showing off our military capability?’ (Ziba-Kalam 2016). In 2017, IRGC missile testing is referred to as an ‘indiscretion’, a position of ‘conservatism’ that is ‘always bad’, while noting that ‘it is always better to be moderate’ (Motahari 2018).

The ‘moderation narrative’ is especially concerned with the excessive emphasis on dissuasion, which could provoke international actors to impose even more stringent economic sanctions, leading to further tensions and eventually pushing Iran to assuming a more belligerent posture. Adherence to the ‘revolutionary narrative’ is also seen as giving carte blanche to the non-implementation of the JCPOA (Motahari 2018). Those responsible for the unstable economy of Iran and for the new sanctions imposed on the country are those who tested missiles immediately after JCPOA, effectively preventing the implementation of the nuclear deal (Motahari 2018).

At the same time, rather than focusing on Iran alone, the ‘moderation narrative’ also holds key international actors accountable. Accordingly, ‘the US is seen as an actor that must demonstrate its good intentions towards negotiations by lifting the sanctions and returning to the negotiation table’ (Rouhani 2019).

US withdrawal from the JCPOA has changed the ‘moderation’ narrative, making the theme of international cooperation and Iran’s economic development secondary ones. The moderation narrative was re-centered on statements reiterating that ‘the missile program is non-negotiable’; ‘we don’t sell our security’ and ‘it is our power of defensive deterrence’ (Rouhani 2019). Eventually, as the ‘revolutionary narrative’ grew stronger, US withdrawal from the JCPOA pushed the ‘moderation’ narrative to disappear almost completely.

Table 1 presents a summary of both narratives. It also demonstrates that in spite of all the differences in how both narratives view critical domestic and international issues, they share a common point on the BMP as being non-negotiable in the light of the precedent of Iran’s vulnerability (see Table 5), in the Iran-Iraq war; something that makes the BMP an issue of national pride and international prestige.

Table 5: ‘Revolutionary’ and ‘moderation’ narratives on the BMP

	Revolutionary narrative on the BMP	Moderation narrative on the BMP
History	Iran-Iraq war as a ‘catalyst event’, precedent of Iran’s vulnerability BMP is non-negotiable	
Threat and Deterrence	BMP quintessential to Iran’s self-sufficiency (only) BMP can prevent war	International cooperation along with the development of the BMP as the best guarantee of Iran’s security JCPOA can prevent war
Identity	Shia as a ‘revolutionary’ peacemaker: (military) confrontation considered as a means to achieve peace Iran versus ‘global arrogance’: BMP as a symbol of ‘superior counter-discourse’	Shia as a peaceful religion, refuses military confrontation Iran as a part of an international system that can promote Iran’s development

Source: Author’s compilation

5.4. ‘Revolutionary’ and ‘Moderation’ narratives on BMP deployment

While there is a debate on the nature of Iran’s BMP and the way Iran presents its defense capabilities, both revolutionary and moderation narratives share the same view about Iran’s examples of ballistic missile deployment. The present section analyzes the narratives on the BMP after Iran’s missile deployments. As I have mentioned above, the moderation narrative is rooted in the liberal thought of the Iranian reformist party, which was established on 1997 by President Mohammad Khatami. Therefore, there were no competing ideas on the necessity of ballistic missiles during the Iran-Iraq war. Attack on ISIS bases in 2017 and 2018 was also supported by both narratives as a legitimized right to defend territorial integrity. Accordingly, my analysis starts with the investigation of the US drone in 2019.

5.1.2.1. The downing of the US drone (2019)

The drone incident (June 2019) produced a new radical variation of the ‘revolutionary’ narrative informed by Iran’s strategic culture, while also making this narrative the dominant one. This contrasts with the pre-2018 time period, where both narratives co-existed on equal terms.

While both narratives were comparable in strength prior to 2015, i.e., shortly before, during, and after the signing of the nuclear deal, with the ‘moderation’ narrative being even stronger in the 2015-

2016 period, it was the continued US sanctions on Iran that raised the sense of mistrust in Iran and revived the 'revolutionary' narrative during 2016-2017. US withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018 made both narratives equally strong again, while the imposition of new sanctions on Iran and its High Officials in late 2018 and early 2019 reinforced the 'revolutionary' narrative. The latter reached its peak in June 2019 thanks to the US drone downing incident.

While Iran has traditionally declared that 'our missiles are a means of defense' (Velayaty 2017), after the drone incident in June 2019, an offensive dimension of the 'revolutionary' narrative came to the forefront. Accordingly, while it has been usually stated that, 'We will not begin any war, but we will not rely just on defense anymore' (Mousavi 2019); the discourse changed in July 2019. The drone incident was referred to as a 'clever step' by the vice president of Iran's parliament (Motahari 2019), and Iran's narrative became closely intertwined with the BMP: 'Our military forces are ready for defense. Missiles can be powers of deterrence' (Motahari 2019). In addition, the themes of 'borders' and 'sovereignty' have emerged as a justification of missile employment. By referring to borders, statements emphasize Iran's sovereignty and justify the use of missiles: 'Our borders are our red line and nobody is allowed to joke with us on our red line' (Hajizadeh 2019).

An even stronger connection is established between current affairs and Iran's past, reflected in the recurrent statement that 'hit and run is over' (Khamenei 2015, 2019). Firstly, the narrative emphasizes that Iran's position has been 'supported by God' (Abbasi 2019), as is made clear by Iran's victory over standing military powers like the UK and the US. Secondly, the narrative connects the drone incident (June 2019) to the US Navy attack on Iran Air flight 655 in July 1988, thereby reinforcing the idea of the indisputable necessity for stronger defense and self-reliance, once again reiterating the role of the BMP in Iran's strategic culture.

The power of the Iranian navy displayed in the seizure of a British tanker on July 20, 2019 is viewed as further reinforcement of the 'hit and run is over' discourse (Khamenei 2015, 2019). The seizure of the British tanker happened just a few days after a speech given by Ayatollah Khamenei emphasizing the necessity of retaliating against the Iranian tanker incident in Gibraltar. Accordingly, he stated that 'evil England' would 'have to know that the revolutionary faithful troops shall not leave this mischief without response' (Khamenei 2019). Recalling the difficult past when Iran was considered humiliated and a victim, the narrative now insists that 'if a country hits us, we will hit, if they attack, we will attack and if

they seize, we will seize.’ Eventually, Iran’s position on the missiles became consolidated, allowing Iranian leadership to state: ‘If something happens, we will not ignore it as before; our response to a missile will be a missile’ (Rezaee 2019).

The post-2018 narrative thus acquires a clear ‘revolutionary’ shape. Accordingly, Iran’s BMP is celebrated as a symbol of Iran’s national identity, reflected in the discourse of President Rouhani. ‘If we had destroyed this drone with the S300, I would not have been proud of that; however, shooting down an American drone with a completely native missile is a source of national pride. It means we searched with an Iranian radar, we locked on target with an Iranian radar and we finally hit the target with an Iranian missile’ (Rouhani, June 25, 2019).

Another manifestation of the special meaning attributed to the BMP, informed by the ‘revolutionary’ narrative, can be seen in President Rohani’s appreciation for the BMP, demonstrated as he expressed his readiness to ‘kiss the hand of the defense ministry for making the missiles and also the hand of the IRGC forces for their efforts to defend Iran’s border and establish security, and also for deploying the weapon in the correct manner’. Similarly, one reflection of the radical dimension of this narrative can be found in Ayatollah Khamenei’s reaction to shooting down the US drone, namely in the act of ‘Ayatollah Khamenei giving his own ring as an award to the officer who targeted the RQ4’ (Tavakoli 2019).

This narrative has specifically targeted Iran’s tensions with the US. Referring to President Donald Trump’s statements regarding a ‘short war’ with Iran (Trump 2019), the dominant narrative portrays such ‘short war with Iran’ as ‘an illusion’ (Zarif 2019d). The ‘revolutionary narrative’ becomes more and more important while increasingly adhering to the ‘global arrogance’ theme, in which the Global Hawk incident is presented as the ‘strong fist to the twaddling mouth of America’ (Pezeshkian 2019).

The dominant narrative has increasingly expelled ‘moderation’ from the narrative space. One of the reflections of this is the shift in the position of some of the Iranian elites, assuming ‘revolutionary’ as the only appropriate position, was reflected in the idea that ‘If the US attacks my country, I will not be the political theoretician. I will be a fighter who takes up a weapon to defend the country’ (Ziba-kalam 2019).

The shift from the ‘moderation’ to the ‘revolutionary’ narrative, is associated with a re-interpretation of the elements of deterrence, identity (fighting global arrogance), and history and

reinforcing them as BMP becomes a matter of national pride. The shift has additionally been fostered by the direct sanctions imposed on Ayatollah Khamenei in June 2019 and Javad Zarif in August 2019, as these have been viewed as a closing of all negotiation doors and conveying the idea that 'The time of the discourse of super powers is over' (Zarif 2019).

As a result, radical revolutionary narrative has become dominant, outweighing the 'moderation' narrative focusing on economic development, international cooperation and multilateralism, as reflected in the statement of Javad Zarif: 'Imposing sanctions on Iran's Leader and foreign minister means that the US does not want to negotiate. [...] Whenever they entered the Persian Gulf, they committed atrocities, the worst of which was the killing of 290 innocent people in an attack on the Islamic Republic Airlines Airbus (655). [...] The UK has blocked our tanker in collaboration with US economic terrorism [...]' (Zarif 2019).

This gives way to a particular re-interpretation of Iran's defense policy and the BMP (while juxtaposing Iran with Saudi Arabia): 'We never bought our security and we will never buy it. Our security cannot be bought and sold, because our security comes from the people. [...] We were not given whatever we wanted during the imposed war (Iraq war). We were deprived of the most basic means of defending our own people. [...] We stood on our feet and built our defenses. We developed our own missiles. We were able to shoot down the most advanced American drone with a fully Iranian missile. Now they ask, why have you made a weapon? The answer is that you cannot prevent Iranian progress through sanctions. Because you are confusing Iran with your servants who buy security from you and obey your orders. Iran is a different breed, you may be God to some but to Iran, you have never been and never will be' (Zarif, 2019; Eslami and Vieira, 2020).

Table 6: ‘Revolutionary’ and ‘Moderation’ narratives before and after drone incident of 2019

Narratives	Moderation	Revolutionary
Before Drone incident	Economy is as important as BMP	BMP is legitimized deterrence
	IRI will never use its missiles	Hit and run is over
	BMP is the most long-lasting policies	Israel has to be destroyed
	BMP prevented implication of JCPOA	A new superpower is born
After Drone incident	BMP is national pride and international prestige	Global arrogance fears to attack IRI
	The BMP is unnegotiable	IRI’s response to missile attack is a missile attack
	BMP is legitimized deterrence	2000 KM range is enough to destroy Israel
	We are kissing IRGC’s hand for producing the missiles	An attack to Dimona reactor would be enough
	BMP is national pride and international prestige	IRI’s BMP is not only defense

5.1.2.2. Toward an offensive approach: attacks on the US bases (2020-2021)

The assassination of General Soleimani was as an important turning point in Iran’s BMP evolution, opening a new chapter in Iran’s defense policy. On January 3rd, 2020, General Qasem Soleimani, the chief of Quds IRGC, was assassinated by airstrikes ordered by the President Trump on Baghdad international airport. In retaliation, Iran attacked two US military bases in Iraq –Ain Al-Asad and Al-Taji, which led to their destruction, the loss of warfare and the death of a number of troops portrayed by Iran’s media as “an attack on the US hegemony” (Ebadi, 2021). Iran’s attack represented the first official attack on US military interests since the end of the Second World War. With the assassination of General Soleimani, the revolutionary narrative surrounding Iran’s strategic culture reached its peak. Most Iranian officials condemned this act and asked for a ‘decisive revenge’ (Salami, 2021a). This was reflected in Ayatollah Khamenei’s statement that the “attack on Ain Al-Asad was only a slap given to Americans”, implying that the retaliation itself was an ongoing process. President Rouhani also condemned the assassination and stated that “the US will not achieve its nefarious goals in the region, and Iran will retort this crime” (Rouhani, 2020a).

Moreover, President Rouhani's Advisor Hesam Oddin Ashena threatened the US and stated that "any US strategic mistake will face a massive response which will turn to a full-scale war" (Ashena, 2020). Against this background, any traces of the "moderation" narrative were criticized. Thus, for example, Hassan Rouhani, Javad Zarif and their administration were criticized for the negotiation with the US and compromising on Iran's nuclear power, under the rationale that accepting the restrictions on the nuclear program made Iran weaker and now the enemies dare to attack it. That is why it was proposed that "Rouhani and Zarif as well as Larijani must be taken to the court for betraying the country" (Abbasi, 2020).

In addition, the President has been criticized for tying the destiny of the country to the US elections, something that has been considered as unacceptable by Iran's elites, viewed as threatening the independency and self-sufficiency of the country. In this connection, President Rouhani claimed that "we are not excited for Biden's winning but we are so happy for the failure of Trump in the election" (Rouhani, 2020b). Joe Biden's victory at the US 2020 presidential election has raised expectations in Iran, eventually changing Iran's policy towards its BMP. One of the President Biden's most important electoral promises was to go back to JCPOA. Therefore, his green light for negotiating with Iran and lifting the sanctions imposed by Trump came to center of attention in Tehran. Consequently, the economic pressures due to the sanctions, especially after the mid-2020, and the hope for the possibility of cooperating with the US, made the moderation narrative feasible again; as it was reflected in Mostafa Tajzadeh's statement claiming that "missile is good but peoples' livelihoods are more important, so Iran needs to negotiate with the US again" (Tajzadeh, 2020). Similarly, President Rouhani stated that: "the doors of the negotiation are always open" (Rouhani, 2021). However, some officials from the Biden administration put forward some preconditions for returning to JCPOA, including negotiation on Iran's BMP. This prompted Iran's Foreign Minister to state that "Iran will never negotiate on JCPOA again", as a result of what the project of a nuclear deal has been closed forever.

The assassination of Professor Mohsen Fakhrizadeh —the mastermind of Iran's nuclear and missile industries on November 27th 2020 raised the idea among Iranian elites that both killings were the "result of negotiation with the US" (Naghdi, 2020). In this vein, "the concrete in the heart of the Arak reactor is why the US dares to kill our heroes" (Raefi-pour, 2021). Eventually, the nuclear deal and a compromise with the US were viewed as decreasing Iran's deterrence power. After the assassination of

Fakhrizadeh, the importance of pursuing Iran's nuclear program has been reflected in the statements of several officials stating that "the enemy cannot stop our nuclear program with the terror of our scientists" (Amouei, 2020). The assassination of the two Iranian representatives changed the orientations of Iran's missile policy. General Qasem Soleimani's assassination consolidated the retaliatory aspect of Iran's missile program. Although retaliation as a fundamental principle has always existed in Iran's strategic approach, a special emphasis on it in connection with the BMP, was not usual. The urgency of retaliation has been reflected in the Supreme Leader's statement that "attack on Ain Al-Assad was not our revenge, they [US] must be always waiting for it" and "I promise to revenge General Soleimani" (Khamenei, 2020). This also conveys the message that "Iran will have a decisive and destructive response for any strategic mistake of the enemy" (Salami, 2020). The issue of retaliation has come to the center of attention with the assassination of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh. In this vein, "those who committed this heinous act must know that a hard revenge awaits them" and "We will descend like a lightning on the murderers of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh and we will revenge him" (Bagheri, 2020).

The assassination of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh had a profound influence on Iran's international cooperation, too. In late 2020, the Iranian Parliament approved two provocative laws related to the country's security policy. The first one obliges Iran's government to take some nuclear steps including the enrichment of 20 percent and adding 1000 new centrifuges to the circle of enrichment. Moreover, this law forces the government to withdraw from the JCPOA and the Nonproliferation Treaty (NPT) and "fire the inspectors of IAEA if other parties of the agreement do not perform their duties" (Ghalibaf, 2020). Reacting to the law, Zarif's stated that "we are against the aspirations of the Parliament to withdraw from the JCPOA and NPT, but we have to implement the law" (Zarif, 2020). As for the second law, it committed the Government and Armed Forces "to develop a comprehensive plan to destroy Israel by the end of 2040" (Maleki, 2020). Offensive strategic actions after the assassination of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh were not limited to the Parliament and the Government. The Judiciary Power "put a red alarm in Interpol for Donald Trump" (Esmaeili, 2021) and forty seven other actors who were responsible for the assassination of Qasem Soleimani and Mohsen Fakhrizadeh. The Iranian Army held its biggest drone exercise in its history in January 2021, allowing the Deputy Commander of the Army to claimed that "Iran is a Drone superpower" (Dadras, 2021) . In addition, the IRGC released a new underground missile city in the South of Iran, which is associated with IRGC Navy forces. In this regard, the Head of IRGC stated that "this is only one of the several underground missile bases, and we are ready to nip any possible

threat in bud” (Salami, 2021). Moreover, during a military exercise only a few days before Joe Biden’s inauguration as US President, Iran launched a long-range missile to a warship replica in the Indian Ocean, while the target was “only 100 miles away from the US warships (USS Nimitz) and 20 miles away from a trade ship” (Tomlinson, 2021). This implies that, regardless of the possibility for international cooperation or further negotiations with the world’s powers, the BMP remains the main defense strategy of Iran. Therefore, there is no possibility for the negotiation on Iran’s missile program, which has viewed in Iran as having deterred all possible attacks on the country after the Iran-Iraq war. In this regard, while showing the capability of Iran’s BMP for the destruction of US warships, the IRGC’s officials conveyed the message that “destroying aircraft-carriers and warships using long-range BMP is one of Iran’s defense strategies” (Salami, 2021). While Iran’s strategic culture has always followed deterrence and self-sufficiency as two main principles, the assassination of Soleimani and Fakhrizadeh as the flag-bearers of Iran’s deterrence and self-sufficiency was considered as a great loss for Iran. This consolidates the offensive dimensions of Iran’s BMP and puts an absolute prohibition on any kind of negotiations with the US. This way, Iran “will never participate in a negotiation which limits its security and defense capabilities” (Raeisi, 2021) and “we are not waiting for the US to be back to JCPOA, but we are in a hurry to lift the sanctions” (Khamenei, 2021). The prohibition of negotiation with the US has even been reflected in the narratives used by the officials who are known as moderated actors. In this way, “negotiation with the murderers of Soleimani is meaningless” (Motahari, 2020) and “negotiation with the killers of Soleimani is forbidden” (Mousavi, 2020). The domination of revolutionary narratives in Iran’s strategic culture — which emphasizes the prohibition of negotiation, the development of nuclear program, the expansion of ballistic missiles and the planning for the destruction of Israel— reached its peak in the last days of the Trump administration. In this vein, the Secretary of State Mike Pompeo claimed that all sensitive positions of Iran are occupied by hardliners and “you are more probably to find a unicorn in Iran” (Pompeo, 2020) than a moderated actor.

5.1.2.3. Towards a new way of war? The attacks on Israeli bases (2021-2022)

As discussed in the previous section, the revolutionary narrative on the BMP has been dominating Iran’s strategic culture since 2020 and the majority of the political elites were reassured about the central role of the BMP in Iran’s defense strategy.

In 2021, when Ibrahim Raesi came to power as a revolutionary president in Iran, the foreign and defense policy of the country towards ballistic missile program remained almost intact. Raesi and his new team started negotiations with 4+1 (the JCPOA parties except for the US) in order to lift sanctions and benefit from the JCPOA while maintaining that “the negotiation on ballistic missiles is the red-line of the Islamic Republic and we would not retreat from our position about ballistic missiles” (Bagheri Kani, 2021).

The new round of nuclear negotiations with the 4+1 in 2021 revived the moderation narrative on the ballistic missile program. Referring to the IRGC’s missile launch in 2014, right after the signing of JCPOA, Ali Motahari stated that “we are so happy to see that the Raesi government also wants to negotiate with the West. However, we are sure that this time no one will test a missile, no one will call the agreement an absolute loss, and no one considers the negotiators as cheaters” (Motahari, 2021).

It is worth noting that, although the moderation narrative is only supported by a few representatives of Iran’s political elites, Sadegh Ziba Kalam issued unprecedented statements about ballistic missiles that were working towards reinforcing the moderation narrative. He criticized the revolutionary discourse and Ayatollah Khamenei by targeting it in its very heart, namely by raising the critical question of “Who has assigned to us the mission of destroying Israel and why should we destroy Israel?” (Ziba Kalam, 2021a). While encouraging the Raesi administration to negotiate with the West, he stated that “the new government has no way but to start the negotiations over ballistic missiles with the US” (Ziba Kalam, 2021b). Justifying the previous statement by emphasizing on Iran’s economic situation including the inflation and currency crash as well as Iran’s international isolation, Ziba Kalam claimed that Iran’s new negotiation team is fully aware of Iran’s current international status, and that the latter has been crucial in Iran’s eventually returning to the negotiation table. Importantly, Ziba Kalam has also maintained that Iran can actually decrease the range of its missiles, which he considered indispensable to the future of Iran, to the extent that “the next deal would be a JCPOA on the range of our ballistic missile” (Ziba Kalam, 2021c).

Statements of Sadegh Ziba Kalam and Ali Motahari were strongly criticized by Hassan Rouhani and Javad Zarif (Ex-President and Foreign Minister), both of latter often conveyed as a part of moderation narratives. In response to Motahari’s statement and in support of Iran’s BMP and its central role in Iran’s strategic culture and defense strategy Zarif stated that “IRGC’s missile launches after the signing of JCPOA was conducted upon the request of the Ministry of Foreign Affairs” (Zarif, 2021). This statement

demonstrates that both Government and Armed Forces in Iran share an understanding about the importance of BMP. A reflection of this idea is also projected in ex-president Hassan Rouhani's reaction to Ziba Kalam's unprecedented statements against Iran's BMP. Supporting IRGC and its activities in the entire Middle East, Hassan Rouhani stated that "Iran has never had the plan to build nuclear weapons, and the negotiation with the West is only about the nuclear program. The missile program and Iran's cooperation with regional proxies would never be added to the nuclear deal" (Rouhani, 2021).

Apart from this debate, and to reaffirm the idea that Iran's ballistic missile program is non-negotiable and Iran does not have any plan to include BMP in the nuclear talks with 4+1, IRGC conducted another provocative military exercise using several types of ballistic missiles in December 2021, at a moment when Iranian diplomats were actively engaged into the nuclear negotiations in Vienna. While conducting this military exercise (Payambar e Azam 17) Iran even went further than writing political slogans such as "Israel must be wiped out", namely by simulating a missile attack on Israeli strategic bases including the Dimona nuclear reactors (Salami, 2021).

Having that said, the ballistic missile program has not changed in terms of its established place within Iran's defense strategy and Iran's strategic culture continues to be intrinsically associated with the revolutionary narratives on the BMP. This position corresponds to a well-established political and strategic orientation that started with the shooting down of a US drone in 2020, was reaffirmed following the attacks on Ain al-Assad and Taji military bases in 2020 and reached its peak with attacks on Israel's intelligence base and Kurdish military bases in Iraqi Kurdistan in March 2022. Nowadays, Iran's political elite, including its both reformists and hard-liner parties, consider ballistic missiles as the main pillar of Iran's defense doctrine, and absolutely non-negotiable.

Table 7: Iran's shifting narratives (2020- 2022)

Turning Points	Revolutionary Narrative	Moderation Narrative
Soleimani's assassination in 2020	A slap was given to the US (attack on Ain Al-Asad)	The US will not achieve its nefarious goals
	An attack on the US hegemony	Negotiation with the killers of Soleimani is absurd
	The US will see our revenge and not negotiation	Development of BMP continues strong
	Israel has to be destroyed	Iran will revenge its heroes
US election In 2020	UAE is our legitimate target	We cannot make a wall around the country
	The main revenge is still in process	The US must come back to diplomacy
	No negotiating with the killers of Soleimani	If the aims is negotiating, the door is always open
	Negotiating is forbidden (red-line)	If the US apologizes and repents, Iran is ready for a <i>rapprochement</i>
Fakhrizadeh's assassination (narratives of 2021)	Iran will destroy Israel by 2040	The nuclear program will not stop with terror of Iranian scientists
	We will descend like a lightning on our enemies	We will retaliate in an appropriate time
	Iran will kick the IAEAs inspectors out of the country	Iran will keep cooperating with the IAEA
	Rouhani and Zarif must be taken to the court for the JCPOA	We are against the withdrawal from the NPT and the JCPOA
	Who dares to negotiate over the BMP?	Diplomatically, Iran defeats the US once again
Attacks on Israeli intelligence bases and Kurdish groups (2022)	We will break the neck of Israel in the region	We will not tolerate Israel's presence at our border
	Missile is a suitable response to any subversive act	There must be definitely a response to subversive acts
	If Aliyev wants to cooperate with Israel, nothing prevents us from an attack on Azerbaijan	Azerbaijan should be very careful about its strategic acts
	We will crush all military bases of Kurdish terrorists in Iraq	Negotiation on our BMP is a red-line
	A response to every bullet of the Kurdish terrorists will be a ballistic missile	BMP has kept us safe from the attacks of the Kurdish terrorists

Source: Own elaboration

6. Conclusion: the BMP and Iran's way of war: a strategic culture perspective

Aiming to understand *how strategic culture has been shaping IRI's foreign and defense policy towards the ballistic missile program*, the present dissertation has taken as a point of departure the following puzzle: 29 years of non-use of the BMP between 1988 and 2017, and its incremental use since 2017, which grew with the expansion of Iran's missile arsenal, from the moment of Iran's presenting its Shahab-3 ballistic missile as a cornerstone of its deterrence approach in summer of 2003, to its currently one of the largest missile arsenals worldwide.

Looking into the Shia as an element of Iran's strategic culture (chapter three), the dissertation has identified factors preventing Iran from using the BMP, corresponding to unconventional and unethical ways of war. In accordance with Shia principles, along with other factors justifying the use of the BMP, the findings of my research have demonstrated that Shia principles, namely *zarare aghal*, *qisas*, *ezterar* and *nafye sabil* have been informing Iran's foreign and defense policy towards BMP in light of an overarching principle of *maslahat* (as analyzed in chapter four).

Therefore, Iran's non-use of its ballistic missiles for about three decades in spite of the existence of several occasions on which the BMP could have been deployed, has highlighted the importance of Shia provisions in Iran's military behavior. Underpinning the aforementioned principles, as this thesis has demonstrated, are the overarching Shia provisions relative to the war and use of force. In line with these provisions is the fact that Iran's, after the 1979 revolution, never started a war. Furthermore, and in line with the same idea, as I discussed in chapter four, is the fact that Iran, in its defensive operations, never has employed unconventional weapons. Even when attacked by Iraq under Saddam Hussein with chemical weapons in the second half of the 1980s, Iran never retaliated with chemical weapons. Last but not least, the country has similarly not recognized inaccurate Chinese missiles as a legitimate, conventional weapons, leading to their non-use during the Iran-Iraq war. And despite the remarkable development of the BMP in the subsequent decades, and the regional volatility surrounding Iran, the country has not employed its BMP for 29 years.

This thesis (chapter four) also demonstrated Iran's specific ways of the war, including its reliance on ballistic missiles and military drones as well as cooperation with military and paramilitary groups in

the Middle East is informed by Shia Islam. Shia religion emphasizes defending the Islamic Society and Islamic rule in Iran on the one hand and insists on the ethics of war on the other hand. According to the fatwas of Shia religious leaders (*maraje'e taghlid*), killing noncombatants in war is prohibited under the principle of *zarare aghall* (minimum loss). Therefore, possessing, development, and employment of WMD is haram. Moreover, the accuracy of weapons is considered to be necessary because it preserves the security of civilians. However, in the opinion of some leaders, violence in war should not tarnish the image of Islam, and therefore, shredding the body of enemies is haram. This limits the employment of heavy weapons such as ballistic missiles.

In the last section of chapter four, I discussed the instances of Iran's ballistic missile deployments against its adversaries (excluding the regular missile tests). In line with this, I demonstrated how individual ballistic missile operations have been justified by different principles of Shia Jurisprudence. This perspective helps to understand different instances of Iran's missile employment during the four last decades. Although most of Iran's missile employments during the history of Iran's BMP were retaliatory uses, they are different because retaliation was performed as *qisas* associated by different inferential principles, including *nafye sabil*, contrary to the previously dominant principles corresponding to *zarare aghal* and *ezterar* (in Iran's BMP policy between 1979 and 2019). A perspective sensitive to Shia Islam principles allows us to better understand Iran's strategic options in its January 2020 missile attacks on the US military bases and also 2022 attacks on Israel intelligence base in Erbil, which stand in stark contrast to the previous BMP employments.

In this vein, the present thesis has hopefully demonstrated how individual principles of Shia Islam (including *qisas*, *zarare aghall*, *ezterar* and *nafye sabil*, in addition to the fundamental and overarching *maslahat* principle), which act as an element of Iran's strategic culture, frame and rationalize the employment of Iran's ballistic missiles, have been articulated in a particular discursive habitat.

Iran's employment of ballistic missiles in light of strategic culture and Shia provisions was also analyzed in chapter five of my thesis. In this chapter, I identified two co-existing narratives - the 'revolutionary' and the 'moderation' ones - on Iran's ballistic missiles. Prior to 2017, there were only a few narratives and statements about ballistic missiles, supporting or criticizing Iran's ballistic missile tests. However, in post-2017, and in line with eliminating the restrictions on ballistic missile employment by Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, BMP once again came to the center of attention of the Iranian

elites. I demonstrate how the shift towards the 'revolutionary' narrative became consolidated after the downing of the US drone (in 2019), and reached its peak after the assassination of General Qasem Soleimani (in 2020), and continued its domination over Iran's SC during 2021 and 2022. In chapter five, I demonstrated the competition of revolutionary and moderation narratives on the BMP within the Shia and traced the process of change in Iran's strategic culture.

To conclude, in the present thesis (and mainly in chapters four and five), I argued that Shia Islam is the most influential cultural factor informing Iran's military behavior. Notably, I draw on strategic culture and go against a research stream arguing Shia Islam determines Iran's way of war entirely and I point out that the 'Quranic Way of War' could lead us to the same old-fashioned idea of 'crazy mullahs' which can be quite similar to the military orientations of Islamic fundamentalist groups such as ISIS, Al-Qaeda, and Taliban. I offer a new argument in which the Quran and the religious ideology of political elites are combined with other elements including historical experiences (undoubtedly, the main driving forces behind Iran's massive investment in ballistic missiles are the experience of the Iran-Iraq war and the sense of threat and insecurity), geographical position, and other identical factors and shape Iran's strategic culture. In this vein, Quran or Islam is not a causal variable for Iran's military behavior and use of force. However, it is safe to argue that Shia Islam is the most influential element of Iran's strategic culture which informs the country's way of war and its style of using force.

I also argued that Shia defines the change in Iran's strategic culture. In a way, drawing on Shia principles and based on the time and conditions of Islamic society as well as certain strategic turning point Shia will allow for the change in military behavior. However, contrary to the fourth generation of strategic culture scholars who claim that the change in strategic culture only takes place due to competition among subcultures, I demonstrate that apart from Shia there are no strategic subcultures in Iran. While both 'moderation' and 'revolutionary' narratives are adherents of Shia subculture, their competition about the role and place of BMP in Iran's foreign and defense policy takes place "within" Shia and "under" the Shia umbrella.

6.1. Debate and implications

There are three different kinds of implications resulting from the Conclusions presented above. They are firstly general implications of the present findings for Iran's foreign and defense policy in more

general terms and Shia Islam and its role in Iran's changing policy towards Iran's ways of war; secondly, for the process of change a strategic culture of Iran, both at the level of assumptions and the operational level; and thirdly, for Iran's foreign and defense policy.

Accordingly, one of the implications of the centrality of Shia for Iran's strategic culture resides in the definition of an enemy and a friend of Iran, as well as in the very particular definition of legitimate defense and deterrence. The respective central concepts that are cornerstones of Iran's strategic thinking would be different if we excluded the "rule of Shia jurisprudence" from this equation. Without Shia, Iran could well remain the US's main ally in Western Asia; and there would have been no room for hostility with the US in Israel. This understanding of the central role of Shia is all the more important today, when Iran is enriching its Uranium at the level of 63 percent and has the potential capability to enrich above 90 percent, which is the required level for making nuclear warheads. Without Shia's constraining role, Iran could have built its nuclear deterrence like Pakistan. That is why I claim that the role of the Shia religion in Iran's military behavior is very important and should not be underestimated.

Second, Shia religion has several guidelines for war and the use of force. While the most important principle in Shia religion is to avoid killing civilians and noncombatants in the war, Iran's military sector has been pushed toward developing very accurate weapons with a certain level of destruction. Although the employment of ballistic missiles is permissible in Shia, the employment of heavy weapons, even the conventional ones, (such as missiles) does not correspond to Shia's 'ideal' way of war. The ideal way of war in Shia corresponds to the emphasis on ground battles, as well as on the reliance on light and semi-heavy weapons, with manpower playing the most important role, which allows to control the number of casualties, therefore, allowing the deaths of civilians to remain in a safe margin. This fundamental idea is the main reason underpinning Iran's massive investments in proxy wars and the support of military and paramilitary groups in the region.

A perspective sensitive to Shia Islam principles allows us to better understand Iran's foreign and security policy towards BMP and demonstrate Iran's changing policy towards BMP employment. In this connection, however, it is useful to recur the distinction between the operational level and the level of assumptions and beliefs in any given country's strategic culture. The present analysis could allow one to argue that while the level of assumptions and beliefs lever remains intact in Iran's strategic culture, the precedent set by the January 2020, and March 2022, and November 2022 missile employments

concerns the operational-strategic level. It might be too early to argue that Iran's strategic culture is changing in its core, since it would take a more prolonged predominance of the revolutionary narratives in Iran. Such prolonged predominance of the revolutionary narratives could, however, pave the way to the change of Iran's (more offensive) strategic culture, in the long-term.

Third, one particular conclusion of the present research, related to the instances of missile employment and the more recent rise of *nafye sabil* in Iran's discursive habitat in which strategic actions (including the parameters of retaliation) are decided, raises the aforementioned question on the definition of Iran's strategic partners versus adversaries in Iran. In particular, there is an issue of the composition of Iran's critically important 'global arrogance' list led by the US and Israel. More recently, this list seems to have been growing by including Muslim countries, namely, Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates. Paradoxically enough, this longer list extends to the line of Iran's action in which the aspiration to prevent the domination of global arrogance over weaker countries informs Iran's support of Maduro's regime in Venezuela or even support of Armenia against Azerbaijan. Furthermore, the growing importance of *nafye sabil* needs to be analyzed for its implications for the concept of deterrence, both for the strategic options articulated in Iran, including its support to Hezbollah, Gaza, *Hashd Al-sha'bi* in Iraq.

6.2. Avenues for future research

Finally, the present thesis opens three avenues for future research. The first one is closely related to the theoretical contribution of my research. The present analysis also raises a question that goes beyond the case study of Iran, namely on the place of religion in individual strategic cultures. This issue could constitute a possible avenue for future research for strategic culture scholars, especially those interested in non-Western countries in which the influence of Shia Islam is strong, namely Yemen, Iraq, and Lebanon. In this regard, the link between Shia Islam, strategic culture and military behavior, can be explored in other case studies that can shed light on regular ballistic missile employments on the part of Yemen against Saudi Arabia's Aramco or at the international airports (as in 14 September 2019), or Iraq's attack against US forces and their articulation in the discursive habitat of Shia Islamic principles of *ezterar* and *nafye sabil*. In these studies, too it is important to pay closer attention to the importance of individual inferential principles of Shia Islam, which as it is argued here, allow for a more fine-grained understanding of the sources of Iran's strategic culture.

In addition, the present research paves the way to study the place of strategic culture and Shia provisions in Iran's other military programs. To this end, the second avenue for future research can address how strategic culture can inform Iran's military behavior as a whole concept or even Iran's foreign and defense policy towards nuclear program or more recent evolving programs such as military drones and hypersonic munitions. Notably, strategic culture and the place of Shia Islam can also be applied to Iran's collaboration with proxies and military groups in the region and can even explain the strategic culture of non-state actors such as Hezbollah and Houthis.

The third avenue can go further to analyze the impact of Iran's growing military capability on the Middle East's strategic and security environment and elaborate on how Iran's foreign and defense policy has impacted the formation of an arms race in the Middle East. Iran's growing ballistic missile program, as well as its support of individual states such as Syria and Lebanon as well as the military and paramilitary groups in the region, has resulted in the shifting security and strategic environment of the Middle East and has been pushing the regional states towards rapid arms buildups.

The particularity of the arms race in the Middle East resides in the especially volatile and complex security environment, resulting in a high sense of insecurity and the correspondingly complex threat perception on the part of the regional states. These problematic developments come, indeed, as an addition to individual states' longstanding aspirations for regional dominance and interests to control the regional energy resources. The energy revenue has allowed several regional countries to acquire advanced military equipment and weapon systems (including ballistic missiles, air defense systems, advanced fighters aircraft and tanks and armored vehicles), which are often supplied by extra-regional actors, namely the US, Russia, France, China and the UK that become part of the strategic equation of the Middle East .

While most of the developed countries have been investing in their military programs and contributing to the qualitative arms race, the dynamics of the latter in the Middle East has been mostly defined in terms of a quantitative arms race. In this vein, the employment of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and investment in high-tech military capabilities has been a secondary concern to all Middle Eastern states except Israel. At the same time, the number of tanks, logistic aircraft, combat fighters, ballistic missiles, warships, drones, and other traditional armaments has been sharply rising in all states of the region.

7. References

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8. Appendixes

Appendix 1: Affiliation and position of investigated narrators

Narrator	Affiliation
Abbasi	Former IRGC general and University professor
Alamal-Hoda	Imam of Friday Prayers in Mashhad
Amir-Abdollahian	Foreign Minister
Amouei	Member of Parliament
Ashena	President's advisor
Khamenei	Supreme Leader
Bagheri	Chief of the staff for armed forces
Bagheri-Kani	The head of nuclear negotiation team
Esmaeeli	Speaker of Judiciary power
Dadras	Deputy commander of Army
Dehghan	Military advisor of Supreme Leader
Ebadi	Supreme leader's representative in Mashhad
Ghaani	Head of Quds IRGC (after Soleimani)
GHalibaf	Parliament's President
Hajizadeh	Commander of IRGC's Aerospace forces
Jafari	Former Head of IRGC
Kamalvandi	Speaker of atomic energy organization

Kavakebian	Member of Parliament
Lahouti	Member of Parliament
Maleki	Member of Parliament
Motahari	Parliament's Vice President
Mousavi	Speaker of the ministry of foreign affairs
Mousavi	Deputy commander of IRGC air-space forces
Naghdi	IRGC Speaker
Nobakht	Former Speaker of Iran's Government
Pezeshkian	Parliament's Vice President
Raeesi	Chief Justice of Iran
Raefi-pour	University professor and public figure
Rahimpour	University professor and public figure
Rezaee	Former Head of IRGC, Military consulate of Supreme Leader
Rouhani	President
Salami	Head of IRGC
Salehi	Head of atomic energy organization
Seddighi	Imam of Friday Prayers of Tehran
Tajzadeh	Former advisor of president
Velayaty	Consulate of Supreme Leader in foreign Affairs
Zarif	Foreign Minister

Ziba-kalam

University professor and public figure

Source: Own elaboration

Appendix 2: Some of the important missiles of Iran

Name	Range (KM)	Type	Weight (KG) (Whole-Warhead)	Length (M)	Fuel
Sejjil	2000	Ballistic - Surface to Surface	23540-650	17.90	Solid
Khorramshahr	2000	Ballistic - Surface to Surface	26000-1800	13	Liquid
Emad	1700	Ballistic - Surface to Surface	17500-750	15.5	Liquid
Ashura	2500	Ballistic - Surface to Surface	NA-750	23	Solid
Qiam	800	Ballistic - Surface to Surface	6250-645	NA	Liquid
Fateh 110	300	Ballistic - Surface to Surface	3670-500	8.9	Solid
Ghadr-F	2000	Ballistic - Surface to Surface	17458-640	15.86	Liquid
Fateh 313	500	Ballistic - Surface to Surface	4500-NA	8.86	Solid
Sumaar	700	Cruise	1210-410	6	Solid
Hormuz	300	Anti-Warship	NA-600	NA	Solid
Ya Ali	700	Air to Surface	670-120	NA	Solid
Persian Gulf	300	Ballistic-Surface to sea	3730-450	8.9	Solid
Hoveizeh	1350	Cruise	NA-NA	6	Solid
Kowsar	20	Cruise	100-30	2.6	Solid
Qader	1500	Cruise	NA-200	7.4	Liquid

Zolfaghar	700	Ballistic - Surface to Surface	4620-450	10.3	Solid
Nasr	35k	Anti-Warship	350-150	3.5	Liquid
Noor	120	Cruise	715-175	6.38	Solid
Ra'ad	350	Anti-Tank	23-12	0.98	Solid
Bavar 373	320	Surface to air	NA-NA	NA	NA
Mersad (Shahin)	45-80	Surface to air	NA-NA	NA	NA
Mersad (Shalamche)	40	Surface to air	637	5.03	NA
Shahab 1	300	Scud - Surface to Surface	5900-950	11.25	Solid
Shahab 2	500	Scud B - Surface to Surface	5900-950	11.25	Solid
Shahab 3	2000	Ballistic - Surface to Surface	15000-670	15	Liquid
Fajr	43	Surface to Surface	407-85	5.2	Liquid
Dezful	1000	Ballistic - Surface to Surface	NA-450	12	Solid
Zelzal 3	210	Ballistic - Surface to Surface	3250-900	3.5	Solid
Arash 4	40	Ballistic - Surface to Surface	NA-NA	2.89	Liquid
Sayyad 1-2	60	Surface to Surface	2320-200	10.84	Hybrid
Zafar	25	Anti-Warship	120-30	2.68	Solid
Zoubin	20	Air to Surface	560-340	3	Solid
Haj Qasem	1800	Ballistic - Surface to Surface	7000-500	11	Solid

Abu Mahdi	1000	Cruise	NA-NA	NA	Solid
Val-fajr	NA	underwater torpedo	NA-250	NA	Liquid
Hoot	360	underwater torpedo	2700-210	8.2	Liquid
Test-71	20	underwater torpedo	1800-205	NA	Liquid

Source: Own elaboration

Annex 3: Statements of Iran's high officials

(2012) Ayatollah Khamenei (Supreme Leader). Annual speech for New Year. 20 March

(2013) Ayatollah Khamenei (Supreme Leader). Annual speech for New Year. 20 March

(2014) Ayatollah Khamenei (Supreme Leader). Annual speech for New Year. 20 March

(2015) Ayatollah Khamenei (Supreme Leader). Annual speech for New Year. 20 March

(2016) Ayatollah Khamenei (Supreme Leader). Annual speech for New Year. 20 March

(2017) Ayatollah Khamenei (Supreme Leader). Annual speech for New Year. 20 March

(2018) Ayatollah Khamenei (Supreme Leader). Annual speech for New Year. 20 March

(2019) Ayatollah Khamenei (Supreme Leader). Annual speech for New Year. 20 March

(2020) Ayatollah Khamenei (Supreme Leader). Annual speech for New Year. 20 March

(2021) Ayatollah Khamenei (Supreme Leader). Annual speech for New Year. 20 March

(2022) Ayatollah Khamenei (Supreme Leader). Annual speech for New Year. 20 March

(2012) Ayatollah Khamenei (Supreme Leader). Annual speech for International Quds Day (Last Friday of Ramadan)

(2013) Ayatollah Khamenei (Supreme Leader). Annual speech for International Quds Day (Last Friday of Ramadan)

(2014) Ayatollah Khamenei (Supreme Leader). Annual speech for International Quds Day (Last Friday of Ramadan)

(2015) Ayatollah Khamenei (Supreme Leader). Annual speech for International Quds Day (Last Friday of Ramadan)

(2016) Ayatollah Khamenei (Supreme Leader). Annual speech for International Quds Day (Last Friday of Ramadan)

(2017) Ayatollah Khamenei (Supreme Leader). Annual speech for International Quds Day (Last

Friday of Ramadan)

(2018) Ayatollah Khamenei (Supreme Leader). Annual speech for International Quds Day (Last Friday of Ramadan)

(2019) Ayatollah Khamenei (Supreme Leader). Annual speech for International Quds Day (Last Friday of Ramadan)

(2020) Ayatollah Khamenei (Supreme Leader). Annual speech for International Quds Day (Last Friday of Ramadan)

(2021) Ayatollah Khamenei (Supreme Leader). Annual speech for International Quds Day (Last Friday of Ramadan)

(2022) Ayatollah Khamenei (Supreme Leader). Annual speech for International Quds Day (Last Friday of Ramadan)

(2012) Ahmadinejad (president). Speech in Iran-Iraq war anniversary. 21 September

(2013) Ahmadinejad (president). Speech in Iran-Iraq war anniversary. 21 September

(2014) Ahmadinejad (president). Speech in Iran-Iraq war anniversary. 21 September

(2015) Hasan Rouhani (president). Speech in Iran-Iraq war anniversary. 21 September

(2016) Hasan Rouhani (president). Speech in Iran-Iraq war anniversary. 21 September

(2017) Hasan Rouhani (president). Speech in Iran-Iraq war anniversary. 21 September

(2018) Hasan Rouhani (president). Speech in Iran-Iraq war anniversary. 21 September

(2019) Hasan Rouhani (president). Speech in Iran-Iraq war anniversary. 21 September

(2020) Hasan Rouhani (president). Speech in Iran-Iraq war anniversary. 21 September

(2021) Hasan Rouhani (president). Speech in Iran-Iraq war anniversary. 21 September

(2022) Hasan Rouhani (president). Speech in Iran-Iraq war anniversary. 21 September

(2012) Ahmadinejad (president). Speech in general assembly of the United Nation

(2013) Ahmadinejad (president). Speech in general assembly of the United Nation

(2014) Ahmadinejad (president). Speech in general assembly of the United Nation

(2015) Hasan Rouhani (president). Speech in general assembly of the United Nation

(2016) Hasan Rouhani (president). Speech in general assembly of the United Nation

(2017) Hasan Rouhani (president). Speech in general assembly of the United Nation

(2018) Hasan Rouhani (president). Speech in general assembly of the United Nation

(2019) Hasan Rouhani (president). Speech in general assembly of the United Nation

(2020) Hasan Rouhani (president). Speech in general assembly of the United Nation

(2021) Hasan Rouhani (president). Speech in general assembly of the United Nation

(2022) Hasan Rouhani (president). Speech in general assembly of the United Nation

Appendix 4: Official websites of the religious leaders

#	Religious Leader	Ling to official website
1	Ayatollah Wahid Khorasani	http://wahidkhorasani.com/English
2	Ayatollah Abdollah Javadi Amoli	https://www.al-islam.org/person/ayatullah-javadi-amuli
3	Ayatollah Jafar Sobhani	https://www.al-islam.org/person/ayatullah-jafar-subhani
4	Ayatollah Naser Makarem Shirazi	https://makarem.ir/index.aspx?lid=1
5	Ayatollah Hossein Noori Hamedani	https://noorihamedani.ir/en
6	Ayatollah Fazel Lankarani	http://www.lankarani.com/eng/
7	Ayatollah Alavi Gorgani	http://agorgani.ir/