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Strategic or Sectarian?

Factionalist Roots of Iran's Foreign Policy Paradox

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Introduction

Conflict among different sects of Islam has been a feature of the Middle East ever-since the fight over Muhammad's rightful succession in the 7th century AD. While these sectarian divisions seem to have lost prominence in Middle Eastern politics during the 20th century, the region has seen a resurgence of religion-centred tensions in recent years. The Islamic Revolution of 1979 in Iran, the United States-led invasion of Iraq in 2003, the Arab Spring starting from late 2010, and the expansion and defeat of Daesh after 2014, all are regional causes for instability and are associated with this rise of sectarian violence. Furthermore, it is often asserted that sectarian actors stoke existing religious enmities in order to further their political agenda. This is especially true for Iran: Since the revolution in 1979, the Islamic Republic has been presented by its critics as being driven by a Shi'ite sectarian, revolutionary, and expansionist agenda. This view is prominently held among Arab Sunni states, most importantly Saudi Arabia. A good illustration of this perception is the idea of a 'Shi'a crescent' spanning from Iran to Lebanon, implying Iranian aspirations for dominance over Shi'a groups throughout the region. The term was coined by King Abdullah II of Jordan in 2004 and generated a fair amount of scholarly attention (Barzegar 2008, Parchami 2012), with some scholars criticising the term as overblown or putting the notion of such a grand sectarian plan in perspective (Barzegar 2008). Nevertheless, it remains a major talking-point for critics of Iranian influence, especially Arab stakeholders fearing Iranian power-projection (Haji-Yousefi 2009).

Starting from the Arab perspective, is Shi'a expansionism under Iranian leadership something to be feared? Given Iran's close ties to Shi'a proxies, as well as its often-aggressive rhetoric towards Arab Sunni states, especially Wahhabi Saudi Arabia, questioning Iranian intentions and whether or not the country should be considered a "sectarian actor" is worthy of research.

While literature on Iranian motives in foreign policy is abundant, work on sectarianism in this context is scarce. Ostovar (2017) fills precisely this gap and serves well to illustrate broader problems when tackling the puzzle of Iranian foreign policy. In his argument he observes that Iran's behaviour has a "sectarian guise", which intensified after the Arab Spring in 2011. Nevertheless, in his view sectarianism is not a main driver for Iran, concluding that "Sectarianism is a latent and inescapable aspect of Iranian foreign policy, but confessional aspirations are not what drive the bulk of Iran's decisions" (Ostovar 2017, 110).

While technically answering the question, this analysis does not further our understanding of the processes by which foreign policy is made in Iran, or what role sectarianism plays in political practice. Ostovar (2017) acknowledges sectarianism as a feature and gives detailed examples of how it can be observed but fails to discuss how it shapes foreign policy. If it is true that sectarianism is “latent and inescapable”, as Ostovar (2017, 110) asserts, how exactly does it factor into foreign policy? And if sectarianism is not a main driver of it, then what is?

In context of the broader literature, Ostovar (2017) falls back to a dichotomy similar to what other scholars have proposed when analysing motivators for Iranian foreign policy. Barzegar and Disvallar (2017) see a shift in Iran’s behaviour from being driven mainly by ideology after the revolution to a more pragmatic stance in recent years. Posch (2017, 81) similarly assesses recent Iranian behaviour to be more strategic than ideological: “If Iran were to give ideology absolute priority in its strategy and foreign policy, Tehran would have to pursue an aggressive foreign policy which would massively exceed the country’s military and economic capabilities.” The overarching puzzle in the literature about Iranian foreign policy therefore seems to be its ambivalence between ideology and pragmatism. Within this framework, there seems to be a consensus that while ideological motivations were more important immediately after the revolution, this has since given way to a more pragmatic rationale.

However, placing Iran on a spectrum defined by a vague dichotomy – with terms like sectarian, ideological, fundamentalist and revolutionary on one hand, and rational, pragmatic, and realist on the other, seemingly being used interchangeably – arguably leads to more confusion about Iran’s motivations rather than giving a sufficient explanation. Ostovar’s (2017) approach similarly falls short of adequately explaining what leads to Iran’s foreign policy having sectarian features, other than being sectarian by “default”. It is hardly disputed that the Islamic Republic has acted along sectarian lines. On the other hand, it is also hardly disputed that states generally act strategically in their self-interest, in the very least in questions of survival. To conclude that Iran is somewhat sectarian, but only if it suits its strategic interests barely advances our understanding of the role sectarianism plays in foreign policy formation.

How, then, should one conceptualise Iran’s foreign policy behaviour? Is it ideological or rational, fundamentalist or pragmatic, sectarian or non-sectarian? I argue that the difficulty

of making sense of Iran's foreign policy – and consequently finding a satisfactory answer to these questions – is largely due to the misconception of its elite as unitary. In other words: Iran is portrayed as a black box, which implies a need to conceptualize its seemingly ambivalent behaviour in a consistent manner. This view can be useful when generalizing patterns of the regional dynamic but is inadequate when zooming in to analyse Iran's motives or policy objectives. Furthermore, most ambiguities in Iran's foreign policy behaviour remain, whether one declares it a sectarian actor or not. For analysing a country's decision-making process, the crucial area of research is its domestic structure, which processes domestic and systemic incentives to generate the country's foreign policy out-put.

The aim of this thesis is to propose a framework suitable for making sense of this seeming ambiguity in Iran's foreign policy. This means opening the Iranian black box to investigate what the main drivers of Iranian foreign policy are, and how they lead to its sectarian features. The leading research question will be: *How does sectarianism factor into Iranian foreign policy formation?* To do so, it is crucial to analyse the ideological framework Iranian policy makers operate in, here termed *Khomeinism*. In this thesis, I will discuss Khomeinism with a focus on its sectarian aspects and ask how and through what processes these translate into the country's foreign policy.

This approach is based on three initial observations. First, the Iranian political system is shaped by factionalism and personal relationships. Second, Iran's elite factions have different degrees of access to Iranian foreign policy institutions, which have overlapping mandates. Third, all members of the Iranian political elite accept Khomeinism as the foundation of the state but differ in their interpretation and adherence to it.

By employing the analytical framework laid out in chapter two, this thesis finds that the distinction between a Constitutionalist and Idealist interpretation of Khomeinism can explain the seeming ambiguity of Iran's foreign policy behaviour. In doing so, this work generates the following hypothesis: Foreign policy conducted by institutions controlled by the Idealist faction tend to be more sectarian in the Khomeinist sense, while foreign policy institutions controlled by the Constitutionalist faction tend to behave less sectarian. Still, both factions fully agree on the "Guardianship of the Jurisprudent" (*velayat-e faqih*) and Khomeinism as the state's leading ideology, while differing in their interpretations of it.

To arrive at this hypothesis, this thesis is structured as follows: In the first section I review the relevant literature, emphasizing the conceptual problems of existing frameworks

of Iranian foreign policy. Following this I lay out the research methods used for this thesis and define the basic concepts necessary to develop a new framework. In chapter one, I give an overview of Iranian institutions charged with foreign policy. The focal point here is the differentiation between elected and unelected institutions, which differ in their accessibility to different factions. In chapter two, I first discuss Khomeinism with an emphasis on its sectarian dimensions. Then I construct a framework of the Iranian factional political system based on adherence to Khomeinist principles. In chapter three I will test whether the proposed framework is useful in explaining cases which remained ambiguous in the literature. These include the regional sectarian dynamic, Iran's proxy-relationships, and relations to non-Islamic countries.

Literature review

Sectarianism in the Middle East

Sectarianism is a seemingly unavoidable feature of the Middle East, judging by the vast amount of literature published on the topic. Yet, despite the deep historical roots of sectarianism in the region, the increase in attention within International Relations literature is a recent phenomenon. Before the American invasion of Iraq and the Arab Spring, and the intensification of sectarian violence that followed the ensuing power vacuum in the region, sectarianism might have been a factor acknowledged but not further discussed. As a result, explicit frameworks aimed to understand how and why sectarianism plays a big part in current Middle Eastern politics have only lately been developed. To keep within the scope of the current project, I will focus on sectarianism from a Shi'a, and more specifically, an Iranian perspective. On one hand, because it seems that keeping this focal point will enable a more structured analysis of the development of Middle Eastern sectarianism, and on the other, because the initial spark for current trends of intensified sectarianism are thought to be found in the Iranian Revolution of 1979 (Haddad 2011, 1).

Though some authors extend the timeframe and see age old problems of reconciling theologies with states' behaviour (Machlis 2014), others focus their research on recent developments, with the Iranian Revolution, the invasion of Iraq, and the Arab Spring as triggering events exacerbating sectarian violence. They generally recognize that sectarian differences always have existed and lay the ideological foundation for contemporary policies (Machlis 2014), but point to political alignments, forming a Shi'a camp around Iran and a Sunni camp around Saudi Arabia as the wedge deepening political division along sectarian lines (Haddad 2011, Byman 2014, Bardaji 2016, Ostovar 2017).

Haddad (2011) offers a potential framework to analyse sectarianism in its own right, which he then uses to analyse the sectarian crisis in Iraq after 2003. He criticises preceding authors for either downplaying the impact of sectarian ideas on politics, an undifferentiated view of sectarian identity, and the failure to account for the general elasticity of sectarian identity (Haddad 2011, 10). This approach is justified, since sectarianism is, at least, a significant factor in at least elite's legitimisation and ideological mobilisation. He gives four key drivers of sectarian identity: external influence, economic competition, competing myth symbol complexes and contested cultural ownership of the nation (Haddad 2011, 10), which he then applies to contemporary Iraq. The framework seems adequate in explaining intensification of sectarian differences in Iraq domestically, as well as how the dynamic

between individual identity conception and identity politics leads to increased sectarian violence. Importantly, however, the author does not touch upon its role in foreign policy formation.

A more recent work on the roots of intensified sectarianism in the region is the 2017 book *Beyond Sunni and Shi'a*, edited by Frederic Wehrey (2017). It encompasses discussions on causes for sectarianism in geopolitics, its impact of institutions, and the doctrinal sources of sectarian politics in the Middle East (Wehrey et al. 2017), and thus mostly stays on the international and regional levels of analysis. The book's chapter concerned with the role of sectarianism in Iranian foreign policy will be discussed further down.

[Iranian Foreign Policy](#)

The underlying puzzle which has occupied most literature concerned with Iranian foreign policy evolves around the dichotomy between ideological or sectarian motivations on one hand, and rational, strategic ones on the other, generating a sense of confusion about Iran's general strategic goals.

Iran is portrayed by its critics as fully sectarian, irrational and aiming to intensify sectarian differences. Scholars, on the other hand, can broadly be divided into three groups. First, authors who stay within realist notions, focussing on regional balance of power dynamics, or a combination of those with domestic factors (Calabrese 1994, Juneau 2015, Posch 2017). Second, authors choosing constructivist approaches, integrating shifts of Iranian identity and legitimacy into their analysis (Mahdi 2011, Warnaar 2013). And third, scholars using historical approaches, embedding Iran's political system within its history of foreign intervention and dependence attracted scholarly attention. Ramazani (2013) argues this historical approach grew out of frustration with the West's misinterpretations of Iranian foreign policy. Nonetheless, he stays within the consensus of situating it along the spectrum of ideology and pragmatism, postulating a shift to the latter in recent years. (Ramazani 2013, 184)

Recent literature, similar to many works published immediately after the 1979 revolution, also focuses either on the ideological roots of Iran's revolutionary state (Bakhasch 1985), or on the realist notion that "Muslim statesmen, like all statesmen, are guided more by the cold calculations of national interests than by the passionate commitment to ideological values" (Piscatori 1984). The problem of reconciling ideology and self-interested pragmatism

in Iranian foreign policy seems to be the main puzzle for scholars in the field, with the leading question forming around terms of *How rational (or ideological) is Iran?*

With the increasing relevance of ideational and constructivist approaches within the field of International Relations came analyses focused on state identity (Nia 2010, Karimifard 2010, Akbarzadeh and Barry 2016), as well as more critical approaches. Afrasiabi (1994) gives a critique of the preceding interpretations of how much impact religion has on Iranian foreign policy, rejecting an overemphasized view of Iran's "Islamicness" as well as purely "fundamentalist pragmatic" approaches (Afrasiabi 1994, 11). He puts emphasis on Iran's institutions and its "foreign policy complex" (Afrasiabi 1994, 23). More recently this view was expanded by scholars focusing on foreign policy institutions and factional influence on them (Kazemzadeh 2017), including works on the role of the executive, in doing so attesting more agency to Iran's government (Warnaar 2013, Akbarzadeh and Conduit 2016). Barzegar and Divsallar (2017) similarly assert that ideological reasoning was more significant in Iran's foreign policy shortly after the revolution, but that new challenges, especially under former president Ahmadinejad, led the Rouhani administration to move "toward a more balanced foreign policy, whose main characteristic is the rational assessment of resources and strategic limits, in contrast to previous approaches that only considered ideological resources" (Barzegar and Divsallar 2017, 40). They conform with most of the literature in assessing where on the spectrum between ideology and pragmatism Iran is to be placed. Posch (2017, 80) also plays with this dichotomy and argues that Iran's strategy of pragmatism actively incorporates soft power into their foreign policy, while "ideological purity takes a back seat when it comes to the survival of the state and the regime". This illustrates well the consensus in more recent literature: While Iran does have its revolutionary agenda, the decision-making process is judged to be strategic and self-interested. In other words, Iran may have an ideologically or sectarian motivated agenda. But if self-interest or strategical goals interfere with it, the latter wins out.

One more recent group of scholars put domestic structures such as institutions and informal dynamics of Iran in the centre of their analysis, seeing factional struggles as the main driver for foreign policy (Lim 2015, Negahban 2017, Kazemzadeh 2017). While this perspective is common in literature concerned with Iran's domestic system (Perthes 2008, Thaler et al. 2010), it is often overlooked in the field of International Relations.

Kazemzadeh (2017) acknowledges the realist problem of presupposing a unitary foreign policy outcome and integrates factionalism and idealistic factors in his analysis. While he postulates that neoclassical realist scholars take domestic factors into account to explain deviations from “rational” decision making, he sees the lack of analytical tools to adequately analyse domestic and religious characteristics in the Iranian case as problematic. The concept of factional competition for influence in Iran’s institutions therefore seems useful in analysing sectarian aspects of their foreign policy and warrants further theoretical development.

Sectarianism in Iranian Foreign Policy

While the sectarian aspect of Iranian foreign policy is generally acknowledged, most authors struggle with the puzzle of reconciling Iran’s self-perception of being non-sectarian and pan-Islamic with its seemingly sectarian behaviour. Ostovar (2017) attempts to fill this gap and ascribes the increase of sectarianism in Iran’s foreign policy to a shift in the region’s political make-up. He argues that Iran’s self-perception is pan-Islamic, according to the rhetoric and teachings of Khomeini, that Iran is not hindered by sectarianism in pursuing its self-interest, and that Iranian officials describe sectarianism to be a plot by the West to weaken Islam from within (Ostovar 2017, 110). The way Islam has been framed by Iranian officials, however, excludes members of Sunni sects, foremost Wahhabism and Salafism, as heretics (*takfiri*) (Ostovar 2017, 102).

According to Ostovar (2017, 110), Iranian foreign policy has a “sectarian guise”, which is set off by political shifts in the region, resulting in states doubling down on sectarian policies out of fear of others doing the same. In this sense, while sectarianism is acknowledged to play a role in Iranian foreign policy decision-making, it is seen as a latent feature utilized for political gains, rather than a root cause.

What gives Iranian foreign policy its sectarian “guise”, according to Ostovar? First, the close relations Iran has to Shi’a proxies in the region. Second, the struggle between Iran and its regional allies – which are mainly Shi’a, and Arab Sunni states around Saudi Arabia. And third, sectarian rhetoric and practices, mainly by the leadership of Iran’s Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) (Ostovar 2017, 110). The ambiguity of Iranian foreign policy, and the reasons given by Ostovar to put these sectarian features in perspective include good relations to non-Islamic countries, Iran’s self-perception of being universally Islamic, and Iran’s support for Sunni, mainly Palestinian, groups. He concludes that sectarianism is a feature, but not a main driver of decision-making, and that the recent increase in sectarian rhetoric is due to

reciprocal mistrust following shifts in the regional dynamic after 2003, with the fall of Saddam Hussein in Iraq, and after the instability caused by the Arab Spring after 2011 (Ostovar 2017, 88). In this view, sectarianism is ever-present but gets intensified by regional political circumstance.

A similar sectarianism “by default” can be seen in Saudi Arabian behaviour towards Shi’a minorities, treating them as Iranian proxies within Arab countries. This in turn leads to the sectarian regional dynamic which Ostovar (2017) claims has been exacerbated after the regional shifts discussed above. He concludes that Iran’s self-perception is not initially sectarian, but isolation after the revolution and the war with Iraq has driven the country to focus – and increase its dependence on – relationships with mainly Shi’a groups, which gives Iranian foreign policy its sectarian guise. These relationships have, regardless of support for some Sunni groups, increased their adversaries’ paranoia and consecutively sharpened sectarian identities in the region (Ostovar 2017, 110). Since the Arab Spring, Iran’s regional behaviour, foremost through the IRGC, has further deepened sectarian rifts. Similarly, Arab states’ support for radical Sunni movements and their oppression of Arab Shi’a groups have also stiffened sectarian division (Ostovar 2017, 110).

Ostovar (2017) makes some important contributions, for instance in recognizing reciprocal sectarian escalation, but concludes that sectarianism – and in a broader sense ideology – is not a main driver for Iranian foreign policy. In other words, sectarianism is seen as an ever-present aspect of Iran’s foreign policy, but not as a root cause in its decision-making process. Iranian foreign policy in this view may *seem* motivated by sectarianism, but self-interest and strategic concerns overrule ideological sectarian objectives.

I argue that this analysis is problematic in two ways, which explain the problems existing frameworks have in trying to reconcile ideological motivation and *Realpolitik* in Iranian foreign policy. First, the literature’s focus on Iran’s policy output in the region rather than the root causes underlying the processes and practices within the Iranian political elites. The question of *How sectarian is Iran?* should be reformulated as *How does sectarianism factor into Iranian foreign policy formation?* The problem of the prevalent dichotomous framing is the assumption of a unitary policy outcome and the neglect of underlying mechanisms as root causes. The second problem lies in the definition of sectarianism in the case of Iran. When authors discuss this issue, they usually stay within terms of the Sunni and Shi’a split, trying to integrate Iran into the regional sectarian dynamic (Byman 2014, Ostovar

2017). As I will argue, the sectarian aspects of Iran's politics, as well as its policy outcomes, are inadequately explained in terms of Shi'a sectarianism. Rather, Iran's foreign policy should be analysed with the acknowledgement of the distinct features of Ruhollah Khomeini's interpretation of Shi'a Islam and its application to the Iranian state, which in practice forms the basis for its foreign policy decision-making. Khomeinist sectarianism, as I will argue, is distinct from broader Shi'a sectarianism. The overarching argument is that Khomeinism has sectarian features which factor into foreign policy decision-making and thus should be treated as a root cause of sectarian foreign policy behaviour by Iran.

Methodology

To solve the conceptual problems discussed above, in this thesis I propose a new analytical framework of the Iranian factional political system based on different interpretations of Khomeinism.

In chapter one, I conduct an institutional analysis of Iran's formal foreign policy set-up as a backdrop for the proposed framework. The Iranian constitution in its amended form of 1989¹ as well as secondary literature discussing it will be the main source for this analysis. In chapter two I first discuss the characteristics of Khomeinism, relying on some of Khomeini's own writings, such as his *Divine Will and Political Testament* (Khomeini n.d.), and secondary literature analysing his works (Abrahamian 1993, Arjomand 2016). In the second part of chapter two I develop a new analytical framework of the Iranian informal political system with a focus on the interconnection between ideology and foreign policy preferences. Here, I draw on existing frameworks of the Iranian political factional system such as those proposed by Perthes (2008), Thaler et al. (2010) and Kazemzadeh (2017). The resulting framework is structured around interpretations of Khomeinism and defines two broader factions: Idealists, who see the Islamic Revolution as continuous, and Constitutionalists, who see it as concluded. In chapter three, I conduct case studies to test the explanatory power of the proposed framework. The case studies trace sectarian behaviour in Iranian regional foreign policy as well as its proxy-relationships back to Iran's domestic and consequently to ideological policy-preferences of the different factions. The work used as a starting point for the case selection is the book chapter *Sectarianism in Iranian Foreign Policy* by Afshon Ostovar (2017), since it is a recent and comprehensive work explicitly concerned with causes of sectarianism in Iranian foreign policy.

The case studies will take the form of a plausibility probe through process tracing and test the following hypothesis: Foreign policy conducted by institutions controlled by the Idealist faction tend to be more sectarian in the Khomeinist sense, while foreign policy institutions controlled by the Constitutionalist faction tend to behave less sectarian. Sources used include rhetoric used by Iranian officials, either gained from secondary literature or

¹ The amendment of 1989 was the only major change made to the Iranian institutions. It was done shortly before Khomeini's death and was meant to solve both problems of institutional authority and give a procedure for succession of the position of Supreme Leader.

official Iranian communications, as well as analyses of Iranian behaviour in secondary literature.

Conceptual Clarifications – Sectarianism and Khomeinism

There is a persistent lack of clear definitions of sectarianism in International Relations literature. Given the term's ambiguity and its applicability to numerous different areas, it is important to be clear on how it is used. For the purpose of this thesis, sectarianism will be defined as the act of delineating a group around membership to – and adherence to the principles of – a religious sect. In the case of sectarianism among Muslims, one runs the risk of implying monolithic blocs of belief within the Islamic community. To avoid this and stay within the scope laid out for this thesis, I will focus on a distinct Iranian perspective of sectarianism.

The argument here is that the application of a Sunni/Shi'a framework does not fully fit with the sectarian aspects inherent in Khomeinist doctrine, leading to an ambivalent view of Iranian sectarianism. Khomeinism here will be defined as the ideological dogma put forth by Ruhollah Musawi Khomeini which was institutionalized through the formation of the Islamic Republic in 1979. Khomeinism will be treated as its own distinct Islamic sect stemming out of Shi'a tradition, is heavily influenced by 20th century political ideas, and creates an us-and-them dichotomy leading to its own distinct sectarian characteristics.

Scope

This thesis is explicitly concerned with Islamic sectarianism and its influence on Iranian foreign policy. The framework proposed may prove useful in conducting further analyses in other areas, such as societal and economic policies. The scope of this thesis, however, is limited to foreign policy behaviour. The time-frame set encompasses all Iranian administrations since Khomeini's death in 1989.

Chapter 1 – The Iranian Foreign Policy System

Institutions as a Canvas for Factionalism

Iran's multi-layered political system often seems mystical to Western analysts. It rests on a distinct set of institutions, containing republican, democratic, autocratic, and theocratic elements (Perthes 2008, 33). This diverse structure already hints at producing ambivalent policy-outcomes – but has to be analysed more closely.

The constitution of 1979 includes redundant and overlapping responsibilities, which led to informal networks having great impact on policy (Thaler et al. 2010, 22). The revision of the constitution in 1989 attempted to solve some of these problems, for instance with the creation of the Expediency Council, which is meant to mediate between the Iranian parliament (*Majles*) and the executive (Thaler et al. 2010, 22). Still, political domains, including areas of foreign policy, often remain unclear on which institution has final authority. Personal relationships and factional groups dominate decision-making and strongly regulate who has access to these positions. One should thus acknowledge the importance of informal politics in Iran and put the focus of research on the informal, meaning factional competition played out within these institutions (Thaler et al. 2010, 22).

Following this, the main point of this thesis is not that Iran's institutions inherently differ in policy preference. Rather, there is a difference in which factional groups – with their distinct policy preferences and ideational backgrounds – are able to assert influence through which foreign policy institutions. On one hand, democratically legitimized institutions, with the president at its forefront, are more open to political change and more dynamic in their accessibility to elite factions. On the other, unelected institutions, foremost the position of Supreme Leader and the IRGC, are dominated by groups more adherent to revolutionary and sectarian ideas and are more closed off to other factions within the Iranian elite.

That the government is more open to factional competition can be seen in the variety of foreign policy strategies under the different administrations since 1989, especially in the transition from Khatami's to Ahmadinejad's government in 2005. The position of Supreme Leader, as well as the leadership of the IRGC have been more stable ideologically, being composed and dominated by an old guard of officials which were in influential positions during the revolution, as well as a younger generation influenced by experiences of the Iran-Iraq war (Thaler et al. 2017, 122).

I argue that policies dubbed by the literature as “pragmatic” tend to be initiated by the government, especially when the position of president is held by officials from what I call the Constitutionalist faction². The examples given for policies deemed as “ideological” or “sectarian” are generally those initiated by unelected institutions, mainly the IRGC. These unelected institutions are dominated by Idealists, who emphasize more sectarian aspects of Khomeinist ideology.

Foreign Policy Institutions – Constitutional Underpinnings

Within the Iranian system there are an array of institutions which influence foreign policy, including the parliament and the Guardian Council. However, four major institutions are explicitly set by the Iranian constitution to conduct foreign policy: the Supreme Leader, the elected executive headed by the president, the IRGC, and the Supreme National Security Council (SNSC). As a whole, the Iranian constitution is modelled after the French Fifth Republic but is superimposed with Khomeini’s ideas of religious authority (Abrahamian 1993, 33-4).

The Supreme Leader

The Supreme Leader of the Islamic Revolution wields by far the most power within the Iranian system. He is selected by the Assembly of Experts, whose members in turn are confirmed by the Supreme Leader after their own popular election. The Assembly currently consists of 88 Islamic jurists who are vetted by the Guardian Council (Perthes 2008, 34). The Supreme Leader is elected for life, although the Assembly of Experts does have the formal right to dismiss him. The office of Supreme Leader itself is based on the concept of *velayat-e faqih*, or the “Guardianship of the Jurisprudent”. The principle is based on the Shi’a idea that Islamic jurists have religious authority and are tasked with guardianship of the weak. It was reformulated to mean absolute clerical authority over the state by Khomeini, drastically expanding the clergy’s authority. The position is meant to act as placeholder for the 12th Imam, who the Shi’a believe will return on Judgement Day. Khomeini described this in his works in exile and it finally was adopted into the Iranian constitution of 1979. Still, it was highly disputed among clerics, since it meant a radical diversion from Shi’a tradition, which held a less political view of the concept and saw legitimacy only in direct rule of the Imam. These concepts will be discussed in depth in chapter two.

² The analytical framework of Iranian factionalism will be explained in depth in chapter two.

Adhering to *velayat-e faqih*, the Iranian constitution gives the *rahbar* (Farsi for “leader” or “rector”) far-reaching authority. He is formal head of state, supreme commander of the army, and can appoint and dismiss crucial positions within the Iranian institutions, including members of the Council of Guardians and the Expediency Council, heads of the judiciary, executives of *bonyads* (state-owned conglomerates in control of large portions of the economy) as well as directors of radio and television networks (Rizvi 2012, 114).

This gives the Supreme Leader almost dictatorial power with legal control or oversight over all branches of government, in theory giving him political powers “far beyond those of any contemporary head of state”³ (Rizvi 2012, 114). In practice, however, the Supreme Leader is restricted by the need to justify his decisions within the bounds of Islamic law, which his legitimacy relies upon, as well as (to a certain degree) public opinion and, most importantly, the management of internal factional struggles (Kazemzadeh 2017, 204). Rizvi (2012, 114) adds:

“While the constitution authorises popular participation at almost every level of the decision-making process given the *faqih* and the clergy’s rights of veto at every level, the people’s participation and the division of powers are meaningless in the absence of any constitutional powers to other institutions to check and balance *velayat-e faqih*.”

The absence of institutional balancing underlines the primacy of informal factional struggles, to which the regime owes its stability on one hand, and the risk of political gridlock on the other (Thaler et al. 2010, 37-8).

When looking at Iranian foreign policy decisions after the revolution, one can see alterations in the relationship between the Supreme Leader, who has been Ali Khamenei since Khomeini’s death in 1989, and the office of the president, which has shifted between factions. The foreign policy outcome – as set out in the constitution – is therefore a product of the dynamic between these offices, with the Supreme Leader pursuing his own policy preferences and setting the frame for the president to operate in.

The President

The Iranian president is elected by direct popular vote, holds a mandate for 4 years and can be re-elected once. Candidates for the presidency are pre-selected by the Guardian

³ Rizvi here refers solely to the letter of the constitution, which gives the *rahbar* ultimate authority in all political as well as spiritual matters.

Council. The President is head of the government and arguably the second most influential individual after the Supreme Leader, who generally must consent to his election in order for the Guardian Council to confirm his appointment. In terms of foreign policy, the president appoints the members of his cabinet, including the foreign minister, who then have to be confirmed by parliament. He acts as representative of Iran on the international stage and manages diplomatic relations (Tellenbach 1985, Thaler et al. 2010, Kazemzadeh 2017). Additionally, he chairs the Supreme National Security Council, discussed below.

The relationship between the president and the Supreme Leader is decisive for the conduct of foreign relations for Iran. The Supreme Leader has far-reaching constitutional powers and in practice has the final say in all major foreign policy decisions (Rivzi 2012, 114). Nonetheless, the president's democratic legitimacy, and public as well as factional support, make it more difficult for the Supreme Leader to push his political agenda (Perthes 2008, 34). Recently, Hassan Rouhani's negotiations with the EU3+3, which culminated in the 2015 Iran Deal, (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, JCPOA), have at least been tolerated by Khamenei, arguably out of domestic pressure resulting from the sanctions-regime imposed on Iran (Negahbad 2017, 36). Here, Rouhani has been useful in easing economic pressure. But in other areas he has become a liability for Khamenei's anti-American stance, prompting the Supreme Leader to restrain Rouhani where he can, without hindering the JCPOA and sanctions removal (Kazemzadeh 2017, 208).

Iran's presidents have a significant impact on the country's relationship to the international community and its foreign policy. Every president had a distinct position within the factional elite, however often with precarious support. For example, the transition from Khatami's more internationally-oriented administration to Ahmadinejad's isolationist government in 2005 shows how Iran's behaviour towards the international community can change drastically under different administrations. As the official representative of Iran on the international stage, the president also has a large impact on Iran's perception abroad. However, one should not overestimate the president's agency in setting the foreign policy agenda. Rather, he should be seen as acting within the frame set by the Supreme Leader, whose support can be precarious, as seen for instance after a falling-out between Khamenei and Ahmadinejad in 2011 (Kazemzadeh 2017, 202).

The Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC)

The IRGC, or *Sepah-e Pasdaran-e Enghelab-e Eslami*, meaning 'Army of Guardians of the Islamic Revolution' is a distinctly ideological military institution with massive influence, both domestically and in foreign relations. Its main purpose is safeguarding the Islamic Revolution and its values. According to article 150 of the Iranian constitution it is also tasked with defending the country against foreign attacks and agents, fighting counter-revolutionary forces, gathering intelligence on threats to the regime, executing judicial decisions and supporting global "liberation movements" (Negahban 2017, 33-4).

Today, the IRGC is around 150,000 members strong, not including approximately 300,000 members of the *Basij*, a popular reserve force formally integrated within the IRGC (Negahban 2017, 34). The Guard shares overlapping responsibilities with the armed forces but exceeds them both in domestic and external political influence. In particular through its usefulness in managing proxy-relations and its economic rise since the late 1990s, the Guard has evolved to be a major actor in foreign policy, economics and internal security (Thaler et al. 2010, 59). This status was solidified during Ahmadinejad's two terms from 2005 to 2013, entrenching the Guard as a central actor in most aspects of Iranian politics, giving the IRGC "all the trappings of a state within a state accountable only to the Supreme Leader and increasingly present or even dominant in many facets of society." (Thaler et al. 2010, 59).

The Guard's external support of revolutionary movements is one of its central endeavours. The Quds-force, an elite branch of the Guard, helped organize Hezbollah in Lebanon, bringing Shi'a fighters together under Khomeinist ideology, and in Iraq "has granted vast military and financial support to Shi'ite, Iraqi state, and Kurdish forces; and moved thousands of IRGC and Basij soldiers into the country to coordinate operations, gather intelligence, and sometimes fight alongside Iraqi forces." (Negahban 2017, 34). Furthermore, the Iraqi Badr Organisation came out of expatriate Iraqis who were trained and organised in Iran under IRGC leadership (Ostovar 2017, 95).

Formally, the Guard answers directly to the Supreme Leader and is independent from other institutions. But given its significance, the IRGC is able to assert influence on him (Negahbad 2017, 33, 38). To the Supreme Leader, the Guard is a useful instrument both internally and externally, not lastly due to converging ideological and political interests (Perthes 2008, 54, Thaler et al. 2010, 61, Negahbad 2017, 36).

The Supreme National Security Council

The Supreme National Security Council (SNSC) was established with the revision of the constitution in 1989 and was meant to help find consensus on Iran's foreign policy. This was part of a broader effort to ease problems stemming from redundancies and overlap in foreign policy and included abolishing the post of prime minister (Thaler et al. 2010, 22).

The president chairs the SNSC and appoints its secretary. Other members include the foreign minister, ministers of intelligence and interior, as well as heads of the *Majles* and judiciary and the highest-ranking officials of the IRGC and regular army. The Supreme Leader additionally sends two personal representatives to the council (Thaler et al. 2010, 32). Decisions made by the SNSC, when confirmed by the Supreme Leader, are official policy of Iran (Kazemzadeh 2017, 202).

The SNSC is meant to be a mediating institution, easing and organising factional struggles and coordinating diverging policy-preferences. It does ease tensions between elite factions but at the same time solidifies the role of the Supreme Leader in setting broad foreign policy goals, given his signing off on SNSC policies makes them the official Iranian position.

In the following chapter I discuss the Khomeinism, the ideological foundation the Iranian elite operates in, and consecutively use it to develop a framework of the Iranian political factional elite.

Chapter 2 – Khomeinist Sectarianism: From Ideology to Foreign Policy

Khomeinism – Iran's Ideological Foundation

Khomeinist ideology is rooted in Shi'a tradition. Ruhollah Mousavi Khomeini was both a Shi'a cleric and jurist and was the central figure of the Iranian revolution and the founding of the Islamic Republic in 1979. He studied and taught in Qom, a Shi'a religious centre in Iran, where he became politically active criticising the Shah regime, especially during the White Revolution⁴. After demonstrations following Khomeini's arrest in 1963, later dubbed the June uprisings, he was exiled to Turkey and later travelled to Najaf in Iraq, one of the most holy sites in Shi'a Islam. It was here that Khomeini formulated most of his significant ideas. After he was expelled from Iraq in 1978, arguably due to the Shah's fear of his return to Iran, he went on to Paris. After Mohammad Reza Shah left the country during the revolutionary revolts in January 1979, Khomeini returned and established himself as the leader of the revolution, institutionalizing his ideas with the formation of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

Shi'a Tradition and The State

The Shi'a tradition goes back to the dispute over the rightful succession of Muhammad in the 7th century AD. While the Sunni majority accepted Abu Bakr as the first rightful Caliph, the Shi'a supported the claim of Muhammad's cousin and son-in-law, Ali. While the Sunnis had a clear consensus that political power lay with the Caliphs, Shi'ites were historically divided on how to deal with state authority (Abrahamian 1993, 18). In the Twelver Shi'a⁵, or *Imamate* tradition, all political authority lies with the direct descendants of Ali, called the Imams. The twelfth of these, also dubbed *Mahdi* (Messiah), is said to have gone into hiding, only to return at the end of days. This means that for the Shi'a, no worldly government can have full legitimacy as long as the Twelfth Imam is hidden. Thus, Shi'a clerics have often differed on how the Shi'a should deal with the state, ranging from absolute denial of political authority to grudging acceptance or embracing of Shi'a rulers (Abrahamian 1993, 18-9). Because of this inconsistency, the Shi'a clergy had become quietist and apolitical, something Khomeini "turned inside-out" with the revolution (Abrahamian 1993, 32).

⁴ The White Revolution was a set of top-down reforms initiated by the Shah, aiming at modernization and secularization. This included pushing back the influence of the clergy, which led to a number of uprisings through the 60s and 70s, culminating in the Islamic Revolution.

⁵ Next to the Twelver Shi'a other sects exist, which differ in how many and which Imam's they accept as descendants of Muhammad.

Khomeinist Revisionism and its Sectarian Dimensions

Khomeinism is not congruent with previous mainstream Shi'a ideas. To be sure, most of the concepts Khomeini used existed previously. What they meant and how they should be applied to the state, however, was fundamentally new. It is worth noting that some of the most radical changes to the previous Shi'a consensus were formulated relatively shortly before the revolution⁶, and that Khomeini changed and refined some of his ideas up until his death⁷.

Abrahamian (1993) argues that Khomeinism in no way should be treated as a fundamentalist ideology. Rather, Khomeini's political thinking was fluid, populist, and often very vague (Abrahamian 1993). This partly explains how his followers, despite all being devout Khomeinists, can disagree on fundamental issues of state and society.

Khomeinism is an offshoot of Shi'a theology, but integrates it with enough political and ideological novelties to be treated as its own sect. Thus, it seems natural that when analysing contemporary Iranian sectarianism, one should look at sectarian aspects distinct to Khomeinism, rather than sectarianism through a Shi'a/Sunni lens. In the following sections, I discuss Khomeinism's fundamental concepts, how they differ from traditional Shi'ism, and how its distinctly new way of constructing a binary worldview of the "true Islam" and its enemies lead to its sectarian features.

Velayat-e faqih

The most significant of Khomeini's tenets, and the one which would shape the make-up of the Islamic Republic like no other, is the concept of *velayat-e faqih*, meaning the "Guardianship of the Jurisprudent". In 1970, Khomeini went public with a series of lectures on *velayat-e faqih*. In it, he declared all monarchies incompatible with Islam, and stated that all Muslims have the duty to oppose not only single monarchs, but the institution of monarchy as a whole (Khomeini 1981, Abrahamian 1993, 24). The absolute political authority of the Twelfth Imam, Khomeini now argued, had passed on to the clergy with his disappearance.

It cannot be overstated how radical this new idea of political legitimacy was. Previously, *velayat-e faqih* was predominantly seen as apolitical (Abrahamian 1993, 19). It included the responsibility of the clergy to support the most vulnerable members of society,

⁶ For instance, terms like *enqelab* (revolution) and *jomhuri* (republic) did not appear in Khomeini's speeches before 1979 (Abrahamian 1993:32).

⁷ For instance, Khomeini first advocated against, and later for women suffrage (Abrahamian 1993:33-4).

such as widows or orphans, which did not touch political authority. Abrahamian (1993, 19) notes:

“It is significant that in all these discussions, which lasted on and off for some eleven centuries, no Shii writer ever explicitly contended that monarchies per se were illegitimate or that the senior clergy had the authority to control the state.”

The principle's institutionalization in the Iranian constitution marks a clear split from Shi'a apolitical tradition. Not only did it create a new consensus on religious and political authority within Iran, it immediately created a cleavage between Iran and Arab Muslim states. On one hand, this ideological rift is political, since Khomeini's anti-monarchist stance posed a challenge to Sunni heads of state. On the other it is religious, since Khomeini's legitimization is rooted in Shi'a theology, with acceptance of the Imamate as a pre-requisite. Thus, the principle of *velayat-e faqih* is inherently sectarian towards non-Shi'a and Shi'a who do not accept the principle alike. This sectarian aspect is less visible within Iran, due to the country's religious homogeneity, but becomes clear in contrast with Arab Shi'a communities.

Shi'a Symbols Reimagined

Another Shi'a concept which was fully politicized by Khomeini is the idea that the Shi'ites are disenfranchised, oppressed, and denied political power by Sunni usurpers (Arjomand 2016, 121-2). The root of the self-image of the Shi'a as innocent, undeserving victims of oppression lies mainly within the symbolism of the battle of Karbala. There, Ali's grandson Husayn was killed and a movement of penitents emerged, declaring guilt for abandoning Husayn. Their historical sense of guilt and self-abasement still resonates today in the Shi'a festival of Ashura. Arjomand (2016, 121) attests this movement to be the root of the Shi'a community as a whole. Karbala is still of central significance for all Shi'a, as it combines ideas of righteous suffering, penitence, martyrdom and the fight of the oppressed against usurpers. Again, these symbols were traditionally of a religious nature and did not translate into a political statement.

Expressions such as *martyr* were initially used exclusively for Shi'a saints, leaning on the ones killed in Karbala, until Khomeini broadened the term to include common people fighting for the revolution (Abrahamian 1993, 27). By the end of Khomeini's life, any revolutionary shot while protesting the Shah, or volunteer who died during the Iran-Iraq war was termed a martyr for the revolution. For this, the martyrs of Karbala were re-imagined as political revolutionaries fighting the oppressive Caliphate: “Martyrdom, thus, was not just a

saintly act but a revolutionary sacrifice to overthrow a despotic political order.” (Abrahamian 1993, 29). The heavy reliance on Shi’a symbols, and their usage to justify Khomeini’s idea of the state, is a latent sectarian feature, since it excludes Sunni’s and other Muslims who don’t share them.

Pan-Islamism and Class Society

Khomeini underpinned his political ideas with the conviction that there is a “true Islam”, with a central message of liberation and social justice not just for Muslims or Iranians but for the oppressed people of the world, irrespective of religion or nationality, as stated in his “divine will and political testament” (Khomeini, n.d.). This “true” form of Islam is “constantly distorted by an international conspiracy of Zionists, Eastern and Western imperialists, Marxists masquerading as Muslims, Western-contaminated liberals, opportunistic clerics and local tyrants” (Abrahamian 1993, 36). This version of a universalist, but highly political Islam surpasses the traditional division of Shi’a and Sunni and gives Khomeinist sectarianism its own distinct quality.

Khomeini saw a global conspiracy against Islam, filtered through the prism of a divided society. On one side the *Mostazifin*, traditionally meaning simply meek or humble believer, re-envisioned by the end of the 1980s to mean all the disenfranchised masses. On the other, the *Mostakberin*, the oppressors, palace dwellers and rich (Abrahamian 1993, 26). In this societal view, Khomeini was most probably influenced by prominent Shi’a thinkers who integrated Marxist ideas with Islamic symbolism. A good example is Ali Shariati, who introduced the idea that true believers have the duty to struggle to their deaths against class oppression and colonial domination (Abrahamian 1993, 27).

This binary societal view is persistent in most of Khomeini’s later writing. Political enemies are put in the role of the *Mostakberin*, who conspire against Islam out of their defiance of God, while the popular masses are *Mostazifin* (Taremi 2014, 7). This ties the ideas of oppression and class-society directly to a religious framing integrated with existing Shi’a ideas.

Khomeini also embedded the narrative of oppressor and oppressed to Iran’s historical experience. Iran was at the centre of the Great Game, meaning the imperial struggle for dominance between the United Kingdom and Russia; was occupied during both World Wars despite declaring neutrality; was under constant direct and indirect political influence at least since the founding of the British Anglo Persian Oil Company (later British Petroleum) in 1909;

and experienced a regime-change at least supported by the British Special Air Service (SAS) and American Central Intelligence Agency (CIA) in 1953. These experiences led independence, autarky, and struggle against imperialism to become significant themes in Khomeinism. However, these themes are constantly merged with Khomeini's binary vision of society, constructing an "other" which constantly seeks to dominate Iran, and consequently Islam, from the outside.

Through the framing of political events in terms of a conspiracy against a "true" form of Islam, the Khomeinist idea of pan-Islamism creates a new dichotomy between Iran and the West, Arab monarchies, Israel, and even Shi'a who do not accept the political tenets of Khomeinism. This sectarianism with pan-Islamic claims does not fit the dichotomy between Shi'a and Sunni. Rather, it creates a new, highly politicised version of Shi'ism, equated with the idea of a "true Islam".

Additionally, Khomeini's idea of political pan-Islamism makes the advocacy of Muslim unity consistent with sectarian regional behaviour: if Islam is framed as universal, but tied to a distinct political world-view, sectarian policies can be proclaimed as being non-sectarian. However, this framing views Khomeinism as the only legitimate form of Islam, and membership to it is tied both to political and spiritual ideas.

Revolutionary Export

Finally, it is important to single out the most clear-cut ideological imperative for foreign policy: revolutionary export, meaning the idea that the revolution should be spread abroad. Revolutionary export is rooted in a number of concepts discussed above. It relies on the idea of a "true Islam", which is universal and has an imperative to fight oppression and tyrannical rule. Furthermore, it presupposes the idea of a class-struggle between the oppressors and the oppressed and that all "true" Muslims have the duty to fight this struggle.

The idea that Iran should be actively engaged in other countries is present in its constitution, which states that the "defence of the rights of all Muslims" (Art. 152), and "realising the well-being of all people on earth" (Art. 165) are the country's ultimate goals in foreign policy (Tellenbach 1985, 233). In addition, the idea of a unified Muslim world-state under the *velayat-e faqih* is present (Tellenbach 1985, 232). Khomeini linked this idea to religious reasoning by inverting another traditional Shi'a narrative. In the pre-revolutionary Shi'a it is believed that the Twelfth Imam will return when injustice and oppression are at their height, implying that only he would resolve the worldly problems of the Shi'a. Khomeini,

however, claimed that the *Mahdi* would return when the Muslims returned to the “true faith” and spread justice to other countries’ (Abrahamian 1993, 32), which implies a proactive revolutionary stance.

Revolutionary export is the political expression of the principles of the fight for independence, the binary societal view of oppressor versus the oppressed, the idea of a universal but distorted Islam, and the goal of a Muslim world-state to enable the return of the Twelfth Imam. The idea of exporting the revolution is therefore simply the result of Khomeinist ideology being translated into foreign policy. It combines a wide array of issues and appeals to both political and spiritual ideals. Furthermore, it allows for two sectarian interpretations: pan-Islamic and Shi’a specific sectarianism, discussed further below.

The Iranian Factional System – Towards a new Framework

Iran’s political elite is divided into a system of factions which heavily rely on personal relationships. According to Thaler et al. (2010, 40) “the system is a composite of key personalities, their informal networks and relationships with other individuals and power centres (all of which converge over common interests in the form of political factions), and the institutions with which they are associated.” These factions previously have been defined according to their convictions concerning Islam, their view of the outside world and what Iran’s position in the world should be in general⁸.

Given its ambiguity, and combination of political and religious ideas inherent in Khomeinism, I argue that while all Iranian officials are devout Khomeinists, they differ in what aspects of Khomeinism they prioritize, and how they interpret them in conducting foreign policy. In their approach to, and interpretation of Khomeinism, I define two major factions: Constitutionalists, who see the revolution as concluded, and Idealists, who see it as continuous.

Constitutionalists

The broader Constitutionalist faction can be delineated by the conviction that Iran is a modern nation-state. Constitutionalists point to Khomeini’s later postponing of revolutionary goals in favour of “consolidating the institutions of the Islamic Republic” (Ariell 2011, 118),

⁸ Kazemzadeh (2017, 203) gives a rather diverse grouping around central figures and sees three major groups: Expedients, Reformists, and Hardliners, which he further sees divided into sub-factions organised in “fluid alliances”. Thaler et al. (2010, 68) classify four main camps, namely Traditional Conservatives, Pragmatic Conservatives, Reformists, and Principlists.

and believe the revolution is concluded, but has determined the foreign policy goals of the Iranian state. Thus, the most important Khomeinist principles for the Constitutionalist faction are its institutionalized aspects, such as *velayat-e faqih*, and the principles of expediency and independence.

The faction overlaps with what other scholars have termed Expedients, Pragmatic Conservatives (Thaler et al. 2010, 70) or simply Realists (Perthes 2008, 45), as well as what generally is dubbed the Reformist faction (Perthes 2008, 56). The most significant differences between these sub-factions are social and economic, while their ideas of the state and Iranian foreign policy strategy are sufficiently similar to group them together here.

Constitutionalists have controlled the government from Khomeini's death until 1997, with Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani as president, from 1997 to 2005 under Mohammad Khatami, and currently under Hassan Rouhani since 2013.

Legalism and Expediency

Kazemzadeh (2017) argues that the immediate failure of exporting the revolution before Khomeini's death, as well as the cost of the war against Iraq compelled the government to focus on stabilizing Iran, pursue less aggressive foreign policy and seek moderate reconciliation with the West (Kazemzadeh 2017, 205). This includes a general sense that Iran and the US have some overlapping interests which would make some restricted cooperation attractive, for instance during the US intervention in Afghanistan (Perthes 2008, 56). I agree with this assessment but assert that this does not necessarily mean a divergence from Khomeinist ideology, but rather a focus on expediency and consolidation, which is important especially in Khomeini's later teachings. This is best exemplified in the role of the Expediency Council. The Council was introduced with the amendment of the constitution in 1989 and was intended to mediate disagreements between institutions, mainly the Guardian Council and the Parliament (Thaler et al. 2010, 30). As Nachman puts it:

“[Khomeini] acquiesced [to the formation of the Council], noting that there is need for a ‘precautionary measure in the case that there is disagreement based on common and religious law’ because the ‘expediency of the system and the people is among the important affairs. . . opposing the triumph of the American Islam of arrogant tyrants with millions of dollars of backing as well as external and internal agents’. Once again, we see a subordination of religious law to common law for the sake of the common

good, but Khomeini also emphasizes that expediency is true to Islam, placing the concept in a global political arena.” (Nachman 2018, 10).

This principle of expediency plays an integral part in how Khomeinism was interpreted after his death and forms an ideological pillar for the Constitutionalists. Expediency therefore does not mean the sacrifice of ideological motives in favour of self-interested pragmatism – but is rooted in a valid interpretation of Khomeinist teachings.

Iran in the World

During the Rafsanjani presidency Constitutionalists have sought closer relations with Russia and China and a détente with the West, arguably out of concern over the impact of economic sanctions and international isolation (Thaler et al. 2010, 70, Kazemzadeh 2017, 203). The Khatami and Rouhani administrations further pushed for rapprochement with the West, visible in increased efforts for intercultural dialogue, multilateral cooperation (Perthes 2008, 57), and domestic liberalization (Kazemzadeh 2017, 204). Nevertheless, both leaders kept to the principles of Khomeinist legalism and non-alignment (Rakel 2009, 174). The readiness for talks with the West, especially the US, shows that the faction sees rapprochement as a tool for safeguarding the regime and improving its international stance (Rakel 2009, 150,175), leading to the faction’s preference of easing tensions and bringing Iran out of isolation.

Out of the conviction of Iran being a sovereign modern nation state, Constitutionalists draw a claim to rights such as a civil nuclear program and integration into the international economic system. Constitutionalists in this context emphasize Iran’s compliance with agreements, while accusing others, especially the US, of not reciprocating. As Hassan Rouhani said in a speech at the UN General Assembly: “What Iran says is clear: no war, no sanctions, no threats, no bullying; just acting according to the law and the fulfilment of obligations” (Karam 2018).

Constitutionalists and Sectarianism

Sectarianism plays a less significant role in Constitutionalists ideology. They rather rely on Khomeini’s ideas of independence and the legal fixture of *velayat-e faqih*. Foreign policy is seen as a means for securing the structure of the state, challenging the Khomeinist idea of victory being inherent in fighting for a righteous cause, no matter the outcome (Taremi 2014, 18), and showing the idea that the revolution is concluded.

The Rafsanjani-presidency already showed a toning down of the most sectarian tenets of Khomeini, not lastly because of Rafsanjani’s stable position as president. With the office of

prime minister abolished and Ali Khamenei's ascendance to Supreme Leader with Rafsanjani's help in 1989, the president was barely restricted by Idealists (Ansari 2007, 12). Tempering sectarianism, however, does not mean Constitutionalist act less ideologically or more pragmatically, but rather shows the Constitutionalist conviction that safeguarding revolutionary achievements through expediency is the central goal in foreign policy. Anti-Americanism and anti-Zionism seem to have less of an impact on their rhetoric, and mistrust towards the West is downplayed in favour of normalizing relations (Rakel 2009, 148). The acceptance of clerical rule, the Khomeinist legal system, and the concept of expediency, however, remain central to Constitutionalist. As the foreign minister of Iran, Muhammad Javad Zarif wrote in an article from 2014:

"The post-revolutionary foreign policy of Iran has been based on a number of cherished ideals and objectives embedded in the country's constitution. [...] Beyond its borders, Iran seeks to enhance its regional and global stature; to promote its ideals, including Islamic democracy; to expand its bilateral and multilateral relations, particularly with neighbouring Muslim-majority countries and nonaligned states; to reduce tensions and manage disagreements with other states; to foster peace and security at both the regional and the international levels through positive engagement; and to promote international understanding through dialogue and cultural interaction" (Zarif 2014, 49).

Zarif emphasizes the institutionalization of revolutionary values into the constitution. This implies the view of the revolution being concluded, rather than ongoing. This does not mean the Constitutionalist stance is less ideological or less conforming to Khomeinist ideas than Idealist interpretations. While emphasizing peaceful cooperation and Iran's conviction to seek good relations with its Muslim neighbours, the promotion of "Islamic democracy" abroad still plays a crucial part in Constitutionalist's understanding of foreign policy. The methods used by Constitutionalist administrations may be more adjusted to a modern view of International Relations, arguably because emphasis on the Khomeinist view of expediency gives more leeway for short term pragmatic policies. The strategic objectives of spreading Khomeinist ideals on a global scale, however, are still very much present.

To conclude: For Constitutionalist, the most impactful Khomeinist values are those which were translated into the constitution and its legalist aspects, as well as the struggle for

independence from outside influence. This showcases the conviction that the revolution is concluded but has set the Iranian foreign policy agenda.

Idealists

While Constitutionalists have historically dominated the presidency, the more influential group in unelected institutions can be found in the Idealists. In their view, the revolution is continuous, meaning its export, Iran's power projection and status in the region, as well as confrontation with the West, influence their policy preferences. The Idealist faction is drastically more connected to the sectarian elements in Khomeinist doctrine, in either its pan-Islamic or Shi'a centric form. Anti-Zionism, Anti-Americanism, and religious symbolism play a bigger role in Idealists' rhetoric and motivation than Constitutionalists'.

Institutionally, the position of Supreme Leader since 1989 has been held by Ali Khamenei and thus the most dominant state institution is under stable control of an Idealist personality. The IRGC also is dominated by Idealists, mainly due to its inherently ideological nature as set in the constitution. The government under Ahmadinejad from 2005 to 2013 marks the only time in post-Khomeini Iran when both the government and the main state institutions were held by Idealists.

The Idealist ideology, while further differentiated in less clear-cut sub-factions, heavily relies on a Khomeinist view of the outside world. Idealists oppose the International system as unjust, as being ruled by a handful of powerful states oppressing the others, claim to want a radical global redistribution of wealth, and advocate the abolition of Israel (Kazemzadeh 2017, 205). The principle tenets of oppressors against the oppressed, social justice, and a conspiracy against the true Islam are prevalent.

Since the position of Supreme Leader has been held by Ali Khamenei since 1989, which makes him the most influential single personality in Iran, it is useful to single out his broader ideological stance to illustrate Idealist ideology.

Ali Khamenei – Idealist Steward of the State

As an early disciple of Ruhollah Khomeini (Ganji 2013, 24), Ali Khamenei was chosen president during the Iran-Iraq war, and after a falling-out between Khomeini and would-be successor Hossein Ali Montazeri was chosen Supreme Leader in 1989 (Schwerin 2015). In order to be eligible, Khamenei was bestowed the title of Ayatollah, which he did not possess prior (Thaler et al. 2010, 45). Ideologically, Khamenei is fully adherent to the principles of the

revolution as set by Khomeini. In a speech on the 27th anniversary of Khomeini's passing in 2016 he said the following:

“The sum of all these goals [for Iran] is the authority of God's religion. The authority of God's religion calls for social justice in the real sense of the word: it calls for uprooting poverty, ignorance, and oppression; it calls for preparing a collection of Islamic values, [...] it calls for offering national dignity, national and Iranian identity, and international power [...]. It was Imam [Khomeini] (r.a.) who moved us towards this path. [...] However, attaining all these goals is possible under one condition: the condition that the train should keep moving on this special track: the track of the Revolution. [...] After Imam's (r.a.) demise, whenever we acted in a revolutionary manner, we managed to move forward; and whenever we ignored the revolutionary behaviour and jihadi movement, we fell behind; and we were frustrated.--This was the reality.” (Khamenei 2016)

In the last part of this excerpt the perpetual view of revolution becomes clear. Divergence of revolutionary policy is blamed for the worsening of Iran's position, and revolutionary ideas legitimized through invocation of a “true Islam” of social justice as envisioned by Khomeini.

Anti-Americanism

A central aspect of Khamenei's foreign policy agenda is the relationship towards the US. Since the revolution, his stance has been strictly anti-American, blocking any substantial rapprochement while presidents Rafsanjani and Khatami – who did vie for normalisation – held the presidency (Kazemzadeh 2013, 453). Khamenei's ideological views were solidified in the years of opposition against the Shah, who, like Khomeini, he saw as a Western puppet (Ganji 2013, 25). Khamenei is convinced that the US will always push for a regime change, and therefore rapprochement goes against Iran's goals (Ganji 2013, 25.) Furthermore, he stated in speeches that Iran is stronger and would win in a war against the US and Israel, since Islam would prevail (Kazemzadeh 2013, 453), showing the Khomeinist conviction that God grants victory to the ones who put their trust in him (Taremi 2014, 16-7).

Two Flavours of Sectarianism

In regard to sectarianism one can see two different strains among Idealists: pan-Islamic sectarianism, which excludes Muslims who don't share Khomeini's revisionist ideas of a “true Islam”, and Shi'a sectarianism, which does not downplay Khomeinism's Shi'a roots and excludes other sects a-priori.

Pan-Islamism

In a collection of speeches published on his website, Khamenei, who regularly emphasizes pan-Islamic unity, states:

“We do not believe in the kind of Shia which is supported by London. We do not consider those Sunnis who are supported by the US and Israel as Muslims. We do not consider them Muslims in any way. Islam is that which is opposed to kufr, to oppression and to arrogance. These are our common points.” (Khamenei 2018)

The Khomeinist definition of Islam along political lines becomes clear here. The division between Sunni and Shi’a is replaced by those who fight “oppression and arrogance” and those who do not. This delineates Islamic sects along political lines, and excludes differing political interpretations as un-Islamic, making this framing inherently sectarian. Khamenei further said:

“Today, two willpowers are opposing one another in the region: one is the willpower of unity and another is the willpower of discord. The willpower of unity belongs to believers. The cry of unity and unanimity among Muslims is being released by sincere voices. These voices are inviting Muslims to pay attention to their common goals. If this happens and if this unity is achieved, the condition that Muslims are in today will change and they will achieve dignity.” (Khamenei 2018).

In Khamenei’s rhetoric, there is no mention of actual antagonism among Islamic sects. Rather, he holds the Khomeinist view of holding a pure interpretation of a “true Islam”, which either is accepted or not. Unity among Muslims in this view is seen as Islamic, division – stoked by outside forces – is declared oppositional to Islam.

Khomeinist Sectarianism with a Shi’a Flavour

While pan-Islamism, as held by Khamenei, is the official Iranian line, an example of Khomeinist Shi’a sectarianism can be found in the Idealist administration in power from 2005 to 2013. Ahmadinejad made an inherently Shi’a messianic narrative one of his central messages, claiming direct religious legitimacy for his government, which was divisive within Iran and increased sectarian tensions abroad (van den Bos 2017, 39). This messianic idea is shared by IRGC personalities, such as Ali Saeedi, who is personal representative of the Supreme Leader in the IRGC (Kazemzadeh 2017, 20). *Mahdism* became defining of Ahmadinejad’s time in office, going so far that he claimed to be answerable to the twelfth Imam himself, rather than the Supreme Leader, and that “Our revolution’s main mission is to pave the way for the reappearance of the Mahdi” (van den Bos 2017, 40,42).

His messianic stance led Ahmadinejad to conflict with the clerical establishment and the adherents to the idea of pan-Islamism (van den Bos 2017, 39). A number of IRGC officials, however, especially in the context of ties to Shi'a proxies, also show explicitly Shi'a sectarian inclinations. Qassem Suleimani, head of the elite IRGC Quds-force, for instance, celebrated Shi'a dominance in Iraq as a success, emphasizing Iranian Islamic leadership as distinctly Shi'a (Ostovar 2017, 104).

Iranian Shi'a sectarian interpretations and pan-Islamism are both rooted in Khomeinism. The pan-Islamist view is based on acceptance of a "true Islam" in the Khomeinist sense, while Shi'a centric views are explicitly proclaimed as Shi'ite but are still rooted in Khomeinism. Vagueness and integration of contrasting ideas are features of Khomeinism, which here express themselves in two variations of Khomeinist sectarianism.

The following chapter consists of three case studies testing the hypothesis laid out in introductory section above.

Chapter 3 – Case Studies

The following case studies serve to test the hypothesis that Idealist controlled institutions behave in a more sectarian manner, which can in turn explain increased sectarianism through Idealist's control over foreign policy institutions.

Case one deals with the Middle Eastern regional dynamic, which is often asserted to evolve around a Sunni and a Shi'a camp, and shows how Idealist's ideological preferences, translated through factions and institutions, serve better to explain increases in sectarian behaviour by Iran, rather than regional events by themselves. Case two examines Iranian proxy-relationships and serves to show that Iran's choice and maintenance of these is fully compatible with Khomeinist Idealist ideology, which therefore must be treated as a root cause for Iranian sectarian behaviour. Due to limitations of scope, cases focusing on non-sectarian Iranian behaviour will be limited to a short discussion of Iran's good relations with non-Islamic countries, and how these can be explained through Constitutionalist control over Iran's inter-state relations.

Case 1 – Iran within the Regional Dynamic

In assessments of Middle Eastern sectarianism on the regional level, three events are held to account for recent increases in sectarian violence: the Islamic Revolution of 1979, the destabilisation of Iraq after the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003, and the Arab Spring starting from late 2010 or early 2011. The overarching argument put forward in the literature is that the increase of sectarianism is due to instability and low governmental control (Haddad 2011, Byman 2014, Ostovar 2017). As I argue here, increased sectarian behaviour conducted by Iran is better explained with Idealist dominance over institutions, which leads to sectarian behaviour along Khomeinist lines. Regional instability lends itself to Idealists' strategy of reliance on proxies – but is not the reason for it. Here, I discuss three major regional events said to have led to increased sectarianism and put them in context of Iran's domestic institutional and political factional system.

The Iranian Revolution

The Revolution as driving factor for sectarianism is clear cut, exacerbating sectarian sentiments on both sides. The Iranian strategy of revolutionary export and claim to Islamic leadership, which are central to Khomeinism, meant diminished relations with the Gulf monarchies, while the fear of a 'Shi'a Crescent' fanned the flames in the Sunni Camp. The revolution is clearly a domestic Iranian event, and solidified Khomeinist doctrine as the

ideological basis for the country's foreign policy. This indeed has exacerbated sectarian tensions in the region but did so precisely by institutionalizing Khomeinism in Iran.

The Invasion of Iraq

The American Invasion of Iraq in 2003 is argued to have destabilized Iraq and laid bare sectarian violence (Haddad 2011). This assessment is surely accurate, but from the Iranian perspective must be set in the domestic context. For the Khatami government, which was in office until 2005, another issue overshadowed the Iraqi invasion: the nuclear dispute which had started with disclosure of Iranian Uranium enrichment in 2002. Concerning both issues, Khatami's approach was built on the belief that dialogue and less confrontation with the West would secure revolutionary achievements, meaning the make-up of the Iranian state, and finally the right to civil use of nuclear technology (Hadžikadunic 2014, 7). This exemplifies the Constitutionalist idea of Iran as a nation-state, which came out of the revolution, but now has to be safe-guarded and integrated in the international community. The IRGC, which is dominated by Idealists and considered the steward of the nuclear program (Razaei and Moshirabad 2018, 138), alongside Khamenei, undermined the government's strategy and enabled Ahmadinejad's election in 2005 (Hadžikadunic 2014, 8, Kazemzadeh 2017, 209).

This shows how the Iranian state can act parallel to the government. However, this is nothing new. For example, when in 2001 Khatami's administration cooperated with the US in their operations in Afghanistan, the IRGC gave "refuge to al-Qaeda members fleeing Afghanistan, let Hezbollah coordinate operations from Tehran, and delivered explosives to the Palestinian Authority, prompting Iran's inclusion in the "Axis of Evil" and the Americans' development of detailed plans for war" (Negahbad 2017, 38). The Guard's sabotage of US-Iranian relations clearly shows the different approaches between factions: Constitutionlists see isolation as a threat to the regime, while Idealists see intensification of proxy-relations as a useful deterrent, since in their view rapprochement will not change the US' policy of regime-change. This dynamic surely is influenced by regional destabilization but serves better to explain Iran's seemingly inconsistent behaviour.

With the ousting of Saddam Hussein, Iraq became open for foreign influence, which Idealist-controlled state institutions readily utilized, with proxies such as the Iraqi Badr-Brigade playing an important role for Iranian power projection. This use of proxies should not merely be attributed to strategic reasoning after destabilization in Iraq. The Brigade had been trained by the IRGC in Iran, and Saddam Hussein's government was treated as an antagonistic

un-Islamic regime since the revolution (Abrahamian 1993, 36). While the American invasion gave an opportunity for power-projection, the root cause for sectarian interference by Iran is a domestic one.

In 2005, Ahmadinejad won the presidential election with Khamenei's full support. This brought Idealist policy to the governmental level, leading to their dominance in policies concerning the region as well as diplomacy. This, alongside the increased significance of the IRGC (Negahban 2017, 35), streamlined Iran's policies along sectarian lines. Warnaar (2013) undertook a case study of the 2010 Tehran Declaration⁹ and its discursive context and concluded that "the regime's nuclear discourse was rooted in its broader foreign policy discourse, had a high level of internal consistency, and got plausibility from its placement within historical as well as contemporary international developments" (Warnaar 2013, 138). All of this is consistent with Idealist policy preferences, specifically through confrontation with – and mistrust of – the West. The broad support from Khamenei for Ahmadinejad and his policies shows the marginalization of the Constitutionalist faction, while the broader Idealist faction dominated foreign policy institutions from 2005 to 2013.

The case of Iraq shows how sectarian policies originate from within the Iranian system. State institutions, foremost the Supreme Leader and IRGC, control Iran's proxy-forces. These share Idealist ideology, which makes them the faction's most important tool to pursue their agenda. The government, when controlled by Constitutionlists, can attempt diplomatic rapprochement, but is constantly undermined by the state. In the case of Ahmadinejad, one sees a convergence of both state and government in terms of sectarian ideology, which then bolstered the IRGC and increased Iran's dependence on sectarian proxies. Ostovar (2017) rightly asserts that the ousting of Saddam exacerbated sectarian violence in the region, but it did so precisely by opening an opportunity for Idealists to follow their ideological agenda.

[The Arab Spring](#)

In 2009, Ahmadinejad faced significant domestic backlash in the Green Movement, which was initiated after Ahmadinejad's disputed re-election. Following this the administration exhibited more openness to negotiation, evident in a planned deal to exchange high-enriched Uranium (HEU) for low-enriched Uranium (LEU), which later got revised into the 2010 Tehran Declaration (Warnaar 2013, 139). This, as well as a dispute over government

⁹ The Tehran Declaration was a joint agreement between Iran, Brazil, and Turkey, in which Iran agreed to deposit 1,200kg LEU. The Declaration did not stop further sanctions in 2010 (Warnaar 2013, 139-40).

offices in 2011 (Kazemzadeh 2017, 202), led Khamenei to reassert control, and “Ahmadinejad’s role in foreign policy was then eclipsed by foreign minister Ali Akbar Salehi (a pragmatic hard-liner) and the secretary of the SNSC, Saeed Jalili (an ultra-hard-liner close to the supreme leader).” (Kazemzadeh 2017, 202).

Ahmadinejad’s pivot arguably stemmed from domestic pressure, since the government is legitimized through elections. His moderation and therefore divergence from Idealist policy preferences led Khamenei to reassert control, meaning Idealist state institutions again pushed back to secure their agenda. Ahmadinejad’s marginalisation coincided with the beginning Arab Spring, which gave the state an opportunity to further intensify relations to sectarian proxies.

Conclusion

Similar to 2003, domestic dominance of the Idealists coincided with regional destabilization. This formed an opportunity for Idealists to push their regional policy preferences. In other words, it is valid to see destabilization as a factor which exacerbates sectarian violence. But domestic factional disputes, in this case the reasserted dominance of Khomeinist Idealists, should in the least be acknowledged as a root cause for Iran’s behaviour.

Case 2 – Iran’s Proxy-Relationships

Iran’s set of close relationships with Shi’a proxies is one of the major examples given to argue for Iran being a sectarian actor. Ambiguities such as Iran’s support for the Palestinian Fatah counter the Lebanese Shi’a Amal led to the assertion that strategic interest trumps ideological motives from the Iranian perspective (Ostovar 2017, 97). The broader argument is that Iran acts strategically but is dependent on Shi’a proxies due to regional dynamics, which gives Iranian regional behaviour its ‘sectarian guise’ (Ostovar 2017, 110). I claim that Iran’s choice of proxies is not simply strategic, but fully in line with Khomeinist doctrine discussed in chapter two. Proxies which don’t share Khomeinist ideology are still to be helped against oppression as viewed from a Khomeinist perspective. Thus, the proxy’s own ideology becomes important only in maintenance of the relationship.

While the Iranian choice of proxies can seem paradoxical from a Shi’a perspective, it is consistent with Khomeinist ideology. Its ambivalence stems from the vagueness which is characteristic for Khomeinism, and allows for different interpretations, which in turn lead to different forms of sectarianism, depending on the factional and institutional make-up of the Iranian foreign policy complex.

Ostovar (2018) examines Iran's record of establishing proxy-relations and sees the acceptance of *velayat-e faqih* as one of three factors for a relationship being successful. Furthermore, he defines three categories of failed client-relationship. Various non-client proxies, Sunni groups with ideological overlap but differences in their regional agenda, and Shi'a clients which accepted but later rejected *velayat-e faqih* (Ostovar 2018, 1241). To investigate Iranian behaviour and motivations, the choice, rather than the success of proxy-relationships, is important. Here, I differentiate between Shi'a and non-Shi'a proxies of Iran and argue that reliance on Shi'a symbolism is beneficial to maintain Iran's relations to Shi'a proxies, but secondary in Iran's selection of proxies. Iran's selection of proxies is rather based on a pan-Islamic view of Khomeinism, while the form of the relationship can rely either on a Shi'a or pan-Islamic interpretation, depending on the proxy.

Shi'a proxies

Iran has its closest proxy-relationships with Shi'a groups which also accept *velayat-e faqih*. Hezbollah and the Iraqi Badr-Organization are prominent examples of this (Ostovar 2018, 1240). Here, the ideological and religious consistency is obvious, and lends itself to the argument that Iran consciously stokes sectarianism through these proxies.

Shi'a sectarianism is clearly significant in these relationships, as the prevalence of Shi'a symbolism in the Syrian and Iraqi civil conflicts shows (Byman 2014, 83). Names of fighting groups referencing Shi'a saints such as Husayn or Ali's wife Fatima are intentional tools to emphasize the Shi'a characteristic of these relationships (Ostovar 2017, 105-6). This focus on Shi'a symbolism suggests that the IRGC deliberately behaves Shi'a sectarian. Another example of this is the proclamation of a "Shi'a Liberation Army" under IRGC leadership. Retired IRGC officer Falaki even hinted at the Guard's goal being the construction of a "Shia movement composed of militant groups and activists from across the greater Middle East and South Asia" (Ostovar 2017, 109).

Such an emphasis on Shi'a symbolism is compatible with Khomeinism, albeit fully equating the meaning of Khomeini's "true Islam" with Shi'a Islam. Of course, previous Shi'a tradition forms an important linkage between Iran and its closest proxies. But keeping in mind these proxies' adherence to Khomeinist leadership and authority, what seems purely Shi'a sectarian is filtered through a Khomeinist lens. In context of the proposed framework, I claim that the IRGC, potentially influenced by non-Iranian Khomeinist proxies, is dominated by Idealists who identify more with its Shi'a roots than pan-Islamic claims. For maintaining

relations to Shi'a groups, this offers clear benefits. Pan-Islamic Idealists, on the other hand, cannot escape Khomeinist Shi'a symbolism, which they use excessively themselves, but attempt to put it in perspective in broader pan-Islamic terms, as not to jeopardize relations to non-Shia proxies. Supreme Leader Khamenei, in this context, seldom uses the term "Shi'a", but rather frames Iran's proxies on the backdrop of fighting oppression.

In the current Iranian foreign policy set-up, I argue that we see the following: the position of Supreme Leader is held by an Idealist personality, who defines the scope in which the IRGC operates. Khamenei puts emphasis on the ideas of pan-Islamism, which allows for the selection of proxies according to the Khomeinist principle of fighting oppression. IRGC offices, on the other hand, are controlled by Idealists who prioritize the Shi'a specific guise of Khomeinism, which is reinforced by interaction with Shi'a proxies. These approaches are not mutually exclusive, and both are rooted in Khomeinism.

Non-Shia Proxies

Iranian support for Sunni and even Christian Palestinian (Ostovar 2017, 97) resistance-groups seems ambiguous when analysed through the lens of Shi'a/Sunni sectarianism. Ostovar (2017, 97) claims that the Palestinian cause trumps Shi'a inclinations out of strategic incentives.

I argue that it is a false presupposition to assert that Iran generally aims to support Shi'a proxies. Rather, supporting non-Shi'a actors is just as consistent with Khomeinist ideology. The criteria in choosing proxies, as stated before, are influenced by the Supreme Leader and framed in the Khomeinist view of oppressor and oppressed and the idea of a universal Islam, providing Iran the ideological imperative to fight *Mostakberin* in other countries (Taremi 2014, 7). In the context of Palestine, Israel is seen as a puppet of the US, and therefore part of the global conspiracy against Islam. Support for any resistance against it is laudable from a Khomeinist perspective, since political resistance is equated with a spiritual struggle against oppression. Whether the proxy is Shia or Sunni is secondary, as long as they share the idea of fighting against enemies of "true Islam" in the Khomeinist sense.

The Palestinian cause is emphasized by Iranian officials, since it shows Iran's commitment to a universal Islamic cause. This is set in contrast to Arab states who have accepted Israel's existence and ties back to Khomeini's goal of 'liberating' Jerusalem (Taremi 2014, 14-5). As Khamenei said in a speech in February 2019:

“[...]the challenge today concerns the presence of mighty Iran at the borders of the Zionist regime, and the expulsion of America's illegitimate presence from the Middle East, and the support of the Islamic Republic [of Iran] for the struggle of the Palestinian jihad fighters in the heart of the occupied territories [i.e. Israel], and the defence of the flying flag of Hizbullah and of the [Islamic] resistance across this region.” (Khamenei 2019)

When establishing client-relations, the ideology of the proxy becomes important for maintenance of these relationships (Ostovar 2018, 1240). For the selection of proxies this is secondary. As Ostovar puts it, Iran even supports groups which “have never even loosely shared the Iranian brand of religious ideology or wider strategic agenda” (Ostovar 2018, 1241). To maintain the relationship, however, the proxy’s perspective matters, resulting in Iran’s ties to Shi’a proxies being more reliable.

Conclusion

Overall, Iran has supported and initiated relationships with a vast number of Muslim non-state groups from the Balkans to Afghanistan. These groups differ ideologically, religiously, and politically. Some proxies have become direct clients of Iran, such as Hezbollah and the Iraqi Badr-Organization, while others have been less consistent, for instance Hamas in Palestine. Shi’a sectarianism intensifies the proxy-relationship but is not a requirement for Iranian support. Again, Iran does not discriminate according to Shi’a-sectarian criteria but supports proxies they see on the same side of fighting oppressors, as defined by Khomeinism.

Khamenei, who is highly influential in the decision of proxy-selection, emphasizes an ecumenist approach. IRGC officials as well as Shi’a proxy-leaders, who conduct and maintain these relationships, take a more Shi’a centric stance. Thus, Khomeinist sectarianism dividing the world in followers of a “true Islam” and its opponents, as held by the Supreme Leader, explains better Iran’s vast choice of proxies and the continuous effort to expand their clients, while Shi’a sectarianism is more impactful in maintaining close relationships to Shi’a clients. Both types of sectarianism, however, are interpretations of Khomeinism, but simply emphasize different aspects of it.

Case 3 – Relations with non-Islamic Countries

Good relations with non-Islamic countries, shown for instance in support for Christian Armenia over Shi’a Azerbaijan, better relations to India than to Pakistan and important links to atheistic regimes like China, North Korea and Venezuela are given as an argument for the

view of a pragmatic, self-interested Iran (Ostovar 2017, 93). This is viewed as paradoxical considering Iran's close relations to Shi'a proxies and heavy Anti-Zionist rhetoric (Ostovar 2017, 93). This paradox is resolved when looking at the institutional make-up behind these policy behaviours: Inter-state relations and diplomacy are managed by the government, while proxy-relations are mainly handled by the IRGC.

Ostovar writes that "sectarianism runs counter to Tehran's official positions, but close relationships to Shi'a allies have become the basis for Iranian influence in the region." (Ostovar 2017, 88). The underlying assessment here is that Iran gives an official line inconsistent with its actions. When assessing this problem through the lens of Iran's institutions, it seems that "Tehran's official position" is the one put forth by the government in the context of international diplomacy, but is under stewardship by Khamenei and the IRGC, who control Iran's proxy-relationships. The government's power concerning foreign relations here seems to be overestimated, since it struggles to portray Iran as a reliable partner on the inter-state level but cannot protect its diplomatic approach against IRGC interferences.

The relationship to secular regimes such as China can be explained by Iran's international isolation and the need to look for non-Western partners. Especially due to the sanction's regime since the beginning of the nuclear dispute, these relations have gained importance for Iran. Constitutionalist – in accordance with Khomeini's stance on independence and expediency – seek allies who oppose American hegemony, which explains why relations to such countries are not problematic ideologically. For Idealists, the fight against oppression, albeit embedded in religious terms, is the main ideological imperative here, and does not restrict Iran's choice of allies, similar to support of non-Shi'a proxies.

Generally, relations to non-Islamic countries are a necessity for Iran to ease its political isolation and bolster the regime against Western influence. These relationships are generally accepted by all elite factions but are initiated by the government in a diplomatic context and are consistent with the Constitutionalist faction's policy preferences. From the Idealist perspective, these relations are unproblematic if they overlap with the idea of independence and the fight against oppressors, mainly seen in the US.

Conclusion

The puzzle of Iranian foreign policy evolves around reconciling Iran's ideological foundation and rhetoric with its foreign policy output. Iran on one hand supports mainly Shi'a proxies, but on the other claims to act in the spirit of pan-Islamic unity. Iran on one hand is in a hegemonic struggle with Wahhabi Saudi Arabia over dominance in the region and Islamic leadership, but on the other has no problem having good relations with non-Islamic countries (Ostovar 2017, 93). In terms of Islamic sectarianism, Iran has deep ideological ties with Shi'a groups – Hezbollah and the Iraqi Badr Organisation come to mind – but at the same time emphasizes support for non-Shi'a groups, most prominently in their support for the Palestinian cause (Ostovar 2017, 95). The literature struggles to reconcile these diverging behaviours. Neither realist notions of self-interest nor constructivist ideas of a Shi'a transnational constituency seem to be able to adequately solve this. In this thesis I have argued that two problems, which are inherent in current analyses of Iran's behaviour in the Middle East, must be corrected for. First, the focus on policy outcome rather than the root causes inherent in the Iranian state. And second, the equation of sectarianism inherent in Khomeinism, which integrates revolutionary, political, and theological ideas with a monolithic idea of Shi'a sectarianism.

In chapter two, I have proposed a framework of Iran's factional political elite delineating groups according to which aspects of Khomeinism they treat as most central. I have defined Constitutionlists, who emphasize its legalist aspects as institutionalized in the Iranian constitution, and Idealists, who prioritize Khomeinist narratives of oppressor vs. oppressed and perpetual revolution. Idealists tend to be more sectarian, which expresses itself in two ways, both of which stem from Khomeini's teachings: pan-Islamic sectarianism, which downplays Shi'a symbolism, but depends on the acceptance of a "true Islam" distorted by outside enemies, and Shi'a centred sectarianism, which emphasizes the revolution's Shi'a roots, symbols, and values.

To conclude whether Iran is sectarian or not falls short of acknowledging the complexity of foreign policy formation in the Islamic Republic. Nevertheless, the country's sectarian behaviour is not simply a 'guise' (Ostovar 2017, 110) but is rooted in Khomeinist ideology. Specific interpretations of Khomeinist doctrine translate into Iran's foreign policy through its factional system and institutions, leading to seemingly ambivalent outcomes if Iran is treated as a unitary actor. Sectarianism inherent in Khomeinist doctrine is filtered in the

same way, leading to increased sectarian behaviour by foreign policy institutions which are controlled by those factions which emphasize sectarian aspects of Khomeinist dogma. This set of rather fluid interpretations is possible due to the adaptable nature of Khomeinism. *Velayat-e faqih* implies a constant reinterpretation of Islam by the clergy, and Khomeini himself set an example in developing his ideas well after the Islamic Republic was established.

This analysis has implications for policy-makers and scholars alike, mainly in the realization that Iran is neither fundamentalist and irrational, nor fully rational and detached from ideology. Rather, it should be acknowledged that in order to resolve the seeming paradox of Iran's behaviour, one must be fully aware of the factional make-up as well as the ideological foundation of the Islamic Republic, the Khomeinist doctrine.

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