

# **Respect in the context of the Iran nuclear deal**

**Research Master thesis**

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## **Introduction**

In May 2018 after American President Donald Trump had canceled the Iran nuclear deal and the Europeans desperately tried to salvage what was left of the deal Ayatollah Khamenei stated seven conditions the European countries would have to meet to keep the deal with Iran. The first two conditions are particularly interesting because they demand firstly that the Europeans rectify their dishonesty in the nuclear negotiations and make assurances they will not repeat said dishonesty. Secondly Khamenei accuses the Europeans of going along with US violations of the nuclear deal in spirit and in text and this they must rectify in the future.<sup>1</sup> This shows that Iran was willing to keep the deal if the European countries would from now on treat Iran with more respect. Further demands were mostly concerned with Iranian oil and economic sanctions, but the focus of the first two were clearly demands for respect and honest treatment.

This attitude and the concern of being respected was already emphasized during the negotiations leading up to the deal. Hence, this thesis asks the following questions: *To what extent did Iran use the nuclear negotiations to gain respect from abroad? How important was respect in comparison with other aspects of the negotiations especially the economic one such as the lifting of sanctions and the right to the peaceful use of nuclear technology?* Furthermore two sub-questions will be also addressed in parallel: *What are the differences between Ahmadinejad and Rouhani's approach to status-seeking? What domestic reasons did they have for their respective approaches?*

The main hypothesis this thesis advances is that Iran used the nuclear negotiations to improve its status and gain respect by Western countries. Iran seems to have pursued this objective through two approaches: One was to defy the West and gain respect from those opposed to Western policy. The other was to work with the West and compromise to get a deal and thereby respect from the West. The demanded respect means more than a pat on the back. It translates into trust in the context of the nuclear treaty and elevates the Iranian position in the West. The thesis seeks to shed light on Iran's strategy to dismiss its pariah status and become a respected country, which is considered vital to attract investors and help underscore its, *de facto*, regional power status in the Middle East with legitimacy in the long run. This thesis will expand on what is meant by 'respect'. It elaborates on how lack of respect and recognition of its international status has been detrimental to Iran and shows how Iranian leaders used the nuclear negotiations in order to deal with the negative stigma the US and other Western states put upon Iran and to gain international respect.

The thesis is structured in five chapters. The first chapter deals with respect in International Relations theory, and will analyze the theoretical origins of the term. Chapter two will give the historical background in regard to the nuclear issue, Iranian history and domestic power struggles. The third chapter considers the issue of respect and the nuclear negotiations between 2003 and 2018 with a strong focus on Ahmadinejad and Rouhani. The fourth chapter analyzes how this thesis relates to the broader study of Iranian foreign policy as well as looking at further implications for international relations studies. The final chapter summarizes the findings.

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1 Tehran Times (2018)

## 1. Literature Review

In the following part, this paper engages critically with the realist literature on Iranian foreign policy: there is undoubtedly an Iranian struggle for regional hegemony or at least dominance, yet there are also aspects to Iranian foreign policy not easily explained by the realist theory. For example Thomas Juneau's more recent work<sup>2</sup> fills a gap by offering a neo-classical view, yet he criticizes the Iranian foreign policy and seems to have a too Western point of view. Rather than having an active interest in a nuclear deal, he argues that the US more or less broke Iran and forced it to negotiate, which is a problematic argument at best in my opinion. His work broadens the horizon of scholarly work on Iranian foreign policy and is therefore in line with what this paper tries to achieve. However it suffers from its Western point of view and specious reasoning.

The classical realist interpretation of states fighting for survival in a hostile environment has certainly its merits with regard to Iran, as does the offensive realism theory, which states that countries aim at maximizing their power, and the Iranian build-up of Shia militias of Afghans and Pakistanis certainly point in that direction. There is a host of authors that mostly follow a neoconservative narrative and are an expression of this offensive realism theory, such as Emmanuele Ottolenghi<sup>3</sup>. While they go to great length to show Iranian involvement with Hamas and Hezbollah, they fail to appreciate Iranian attempts at coming to an understanding with the West and completely ignore constructivist opportunities to analyze Iranian foreign policy. Furthermore they are following the stigmatization discourse and reinforcing it. For example Emmanuele Ottolenghi asserts that Iran gave aid and training to Al-Quaida operatives through Hezbollah.<sup>4</sup> This kind of literature usually downplays the importance of the democratically elected leaders and sees a dominance of the guards and other unelected members of the system in decision-making processes. In this narrative the lifting of the sanctions in this regard was just an attempt to improve Iranian economic power and ease the pressure on Iran, to further strengthen the hand of Iran. Giving (officially) up on any nuclear arms programs was a (temporary) price to pay, in times when Iran was more focused on conventional and irregular war waging in Syria, Iraq, Lebanon and Yemen. Yet this ignores a long on-going debate about the country's position vis-à-vis the west and the rest of the world in Iran. The realist dominance of the analysis leaves the constructivist possibilities of re-reading the evidence and putting more emphasis on discourse analysis untouched, especially with regard to president Rouhani, but also president Ahmadinejad.

Maaïke Warnaar<sup>5</sup> wrote an excellent book concerning this aspect. It argues strongly in favor of a constructivist approach to Iranian foreign policy. Despite more and more scholars claim that Iranian foreign policy is motivated by self-interest and rational, she argues that rather ideology and non-material values still play a major role in Iranian foreign policy making. This thesis connects to her work, which in theoretical terms was ground-breaking and elaborated on how international norms and rules influenced Ahmadinejad and how ideology played a major role in his action. Yet she does not elaborate so much on values like honor, respect or stigma which this paper focuses on. Demands like the previously mentioned correction of past "ignorance" complaints about dishonesty are not explained by a realist worldview because backstabbing and betrayal is normal *modus operandi* of states in this view. On the other hand in a constructivist view trust, honesty and respect matter. However, in Maaïke Warnaar's work, the focus is rather on ideology than on more general values like honor and respect.

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2 Juneau (2015)

3 Ottolenghi (2011)

4 Ottolenghi (2011) p.23

5Warnaar (2013)

The constructivist angle this paper will use is so interesting because it brings in a cultural and religious dimension, often lacking in works of International relations. Iran is home of many of the great civilizations of the old world and it is inhabited by proud people, who are living in a theocratic Shia state at the same time. They adhere to a minority group of Muslims, that was and still is persecuted and insulted continuously by their Sunni brethren. This aspect is not appreciated by the other authors but has been worked on extensively by Vali Nasr's<sup>6</sup>. His book remains an important text, although it is by now not up to date. It shows how vulnerable Iran often felt and that it was insecure in regard to its position *vis-à-vis* the West, making an argument that Iran wants to secure itself in regard to the West which this paper will pick up when discussing the benefits of respect.

Similarly Akabarzadeh and Conduit in their work<sup>7</sup> on Rouhani look at the factor of trust when analyzing Rouhani's take on policies towards the US. Their work was a great inspiration and start for this paper because when analyzing respect one has to factor in that respect leads to trust by investors which in turn facilitate economic growth. Their work has a special focus on status recognition and how Iran wants its position in the Middle East legitimized. Furthermore they discuss that Iranian foreign policy is distrustful of the US intentions, fearing "that the United States was willing solicit Iranian help only where, and when it benefited American interest"<sup>8</sup>. The authors also highlight the difference in rhetoric and discursive practice between Ahmadinejad and Rouhani and also note that serious negotiations would have started in 2012 under President Ahmadinejad and he had out to both Presidents Obama and Bush, trying to improve the relationship between both countries.

An author that looks at Iranian reconciliation and the groups in Iran pushing for a normalization of Iranian status in the era after the revolution into the first Ahmadinejad presidency is Ray Takeyh<sup>9</sup>. While he is for the most part a realist in his analysis and at times references are not adequate, his work shows how important status recognition is in Iranian foreign policy and that under the right circumstances, Iran would be willing to compromise to reach a settlement.

Respect and honor are important in Iranian culture and the Iranian constitution in article thirty-nine even prohibits crimes against the honor of any person arrested.<sup>10</sup> The disrespect felt by many through Western Imperialism was one of the reasons for the Iranian revolution. To analyze the ideology that came with the revolution Nikki Keddie's book<sup>11</sup> remains relevant although it is not up to date anymore. It shows the strong anti-imperialism that influenced the revolution and its historical roots, especially how the West mistreated Iran over centuries and abused its power. Keddie's work is the foundation for the historical background chapters.

The analysis of the role of respect won't explain Iranian foreign policy anew – yet it will help to bring in further aspects and might explain it and give answers found wanting in realist explanations so far. It also helps to bring together foreign and domestic policy which so far is best done by the RAND Corporation. In their publications they give a good understanding of the internal Iranian dynamics<sup>12</sup>.

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6 Nasr (2006)

7 Akabarzadeh and Conduit (2016)

8 Akbarzadeh and Conduit (2016) p. 37

9 Takeyh (2009)

10 Özoguz (2007) p.32 Article 39

11 Keddie (2006)

12 RAND (2010)

Although some of the players have ceased to exist and new ones have appeared, their work still greatly helps making sense of Iranian domestic dynamics. The same goes for the work on the Pasdaran<sup>13</sup>, which helps to analyze the domestic role of the IRGC. Both works stay relevant despite their age. They explain in great detail how domestic politics and non-elected actors influence Iranian foreign policy. They also argue that there has been a shift from revolutionary fervor to regional power play, which in turn means that Iran increasingly wants to have its status recognized and might cooperate on regional matters, if it is approached and considered accordingly. They uniquely take on the topic by not analyzing single actors, but networks inside the leadership clique, which serves as a foundation in the background chapters of this paper. Yet their overly realist outlook forms a shortcoming leading to missed opportunities at analyzing ideas and ideology in regard to foreign policy.

In regard to the theory of respect Reinhard Wolf's article<sup>14</sup> is the omnipresent foundation of this paper. His theory is in a proto-state according to his own words, but it stands in a longer tradition of works on honor – a term commonly found in classical realist theory. An equally important work is by Adler-Nissen<sup>15</sup> which has an important influence. When looking at respect in the context of Iran it mostly means overcoming stigma as happened under Rouhani or embracing stigma.

## **2. Method and Data**

The method used for this paper is critical qualitative discourse analysis. This method is preferable for this topic because it engages with discourse hegemony, power abuse, justice and it places emphasis on “grounding a broad contextual perspective in detailed textual analysis”<sup>16</sup> The data will be speeches, interviews and remarks by the main actors as well as media articles. They are good source material for this paper because they show what leaders wanted to communicate with the outside world and their domestic audience.

### **I. Respect in International Relations Theory**

#### **1. Background**

Respect in International Relations encompasses several other terms, which have existed for quite some time in the academic realm. These terms all translate to ideas similar or close to respect. Status recognition obviously is an important part of respect theory. All states aspire to have a place in the world recognized and accepted by other actors. It is also an important factor for power projection because if a country is not perceived as having great power status it can not act and capitalize on it. Iran as a largely independent country with a mostly homogeneous population and a strong military has consistently sought to be recognized as a regional power in the Middle-East that could not be ignored.

In her article about stigma in International relations Rebecca Adler-Nissen describes stigma as an increasingly used tool in international relations.<sup>17</sup> She cites Goffmann (1963) who argued that either states accept their stigma and take pride in it, like Iran did under Khomeini by taking pride in the fact that everybody was supporting Saddam against them, or that they start identifying with the group that

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13 RAND (2009)

14 Wolf (2011)

15 Adler-Nissen (2014)

16 Andrus, Clary-Lemon and Huckin (2012) p. 123

17 Adler-Nissen (2014) p. 143

stigmatizes them and try to overcome the stigma.

She furthermore suggests a third category, which is very important in this context, namely stigma rejection. Meaning that a state accepts the rules but denies having violated them. While the first category is not relevant for this paper the two other ones are important. Being stigmatized or being considered a pariah comes with an array of negative side effects. Namely that a country will suffer from sanctions if the breach of norms is considered grave by other countries. This might take a soft form with a country being unable to buy arms from another country, to outright economic sanctions crippling growth. These often also include measures aimed at hindering foreign trade and complicating traveling abroad for the citizens of the sanctioned country. Additionally the country will not be able to participate and profit from programs of international cooperation.

It also creates a situation of military vulnerability, because military strikes, especially as retaliation, against a country shunned by the international community are much less frowned upon. An example would be the US air strikes against Libya in 1986 after Libya was accused of bombing a discotheque in Berlin and killing two off-duty US soldiers. The attack was criticized but no condemnation of the US happened and no further action was taken.<sup>18</sup> Libya at that time with its support for terrorism and constant war-mongering against its neighbor states was a true pariah. In order to overcome stigma and not to be a pariah anymore, a state has to rectify its misbehavior.<sup>19</sup> By using international institutions that check behavior a state can get credit from a neutral institution, like the UN or the IAEA (The International Atomic Energy Agency). This in turn can be used to gain trust of states creating new opportunities for interaction, which further build respect and trust, leading to a slow but steady sliding back into the fold of the international community. This is ultimately the end goal of adherence to international norms, to become a respected member of the international community. Yet to do so, overcoming pariah status requires not only adherence to international norms, but a realization of the pariah status one has acquired.

Honor is a concept that can be found in the earliest texts of realism, such as in Machiavelli's "Il Principe". The meaning of it is very similar to that of respect, but with a far more personal connotation and a longer and broader history of academic engagement. When looking at earlier texts like aforementioned work by Machiavelli, we see him writing that a leader should appear virtuous and honorable at all times. He defines honor in the 21<sup>st</sup> chapter of "Il Principe" gained by great feats in war. Clausewitz who is also associated with classical realism argued that "no other [feeling] is so powerful and mighty as the thirst of the soul for glory and honor"<sup>20</sup>. Honor features in classical realism as a means to an end or an inevitable driving force of human passion. While most thinkers saw it as "indistinguishable from or secondary to that of rational interest"<sup>21</sup>, classical realism would be insufficient in its theory to be a useful method for analyzing honor. The more contemporary neo-realism school features even less place for non-material goods like honor.

To really work with such concepts constructivism is more suited, which focuses much more on ideas and asserts that the world is constructed through ideas and concepts we have about it. Honor or respect as it will be called henceforth is thereby much better suited to be used against this

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18 Condron (1999) p. 156/157

19 Adler-Nissen (2014) p. 169

20 Clausewitz (2008) p. 78 (translated by the author)

21 Tsygankov (2012) p.15

theoretical framework.

## 2. Constructivism and respect

Constructivism criticizes the assumptions of realism among other things anarchy, arguing that it is doubtful that states will interpret the system the same way realist scholars do. States create the international order through their behavior rather than having a certain behavior forced upon them by the international order. If the system was indeed anarchic it would be not because it was made so by human nature, but by human interaction.

Constructivism also does not ascribe to the contrast between ideology and rationality, rather as Maaïke Warnaar argues, “contrary to approaches that treat ideology as a “straight jacket” or a “playing field,” in which ideology forms a boundary to otherwise rational calculations[...] rationality does not exist outside of its ideological context. There is no separation between ideology, on the one hand, and realist calculations, on the other. This means that when Ray Takeyh holds that Iranian foreign policy is driven by “great power pretensions” rather than “ideology,” a constructivist would instead say that great power claims are inherent to the Iranian regime’s foreign policy ideology”<sup>22</sup>.

This means in regard to the topic of respect, that rather than just seeing it as a irrational struggle based on ideas of self-aggrandizement, by analyzing the discourse causing this action and rhetoric we actually get a glimpse at the inner logic behind the general political decision making. One of the core ideas of constructivism is the notion that the international system is a social construct and as such reinforced by the actions of the actors adhering and emphasizing certain social norms and ideas. These norms are created in discourse, which if prevailing will result in action. This action will establish a certain norm over time. Two terms are important in regard to this inter-subjectivity – “collective knowledge and understandings,” ‘knowledge that persists beyond the lives of individual social actors, embedded in social routines and practices as they are reproduced.’<sup>23</sup>, and co-constitution, which means that people and norms constitute each other. Or in this case one cannot analyze the international order without analyzing the countries, and likewise analyze the countries without analyzing the international order.

Inter-subjectivity in this case means, that even though more and more people from the revolutionary era in Iran are dying and more and more officers of the armed forces and young diplomats have no experience of American involvement in Iran and the Shah era, they have “inherited” the stories, the experiences and the ideology and are not necessarily different from their forbears. Co-constitution means that any foray into certain time spans of Iranian foreign policy needs to be introduced by a thorough description and analysis of the times around them. Iranian policies did not constitute itself in a vacuum and especially the importance of respect allocated in politics is on the basis of whether or not Iran is perceiving the other countries and international institutions respecting it or not.

As mentioned in the introduction, this approach will help to understand Iranian behavior in certain moments when a realist approach won’t fit. Negotiating through the UN, which, from an Iranian perspective would be seen as a western tool of hegemony, does not fit in with a realist explanation. Even if one follows the realist argument that the international order is some kind of Hobbesian war of

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22 Warnaar (2013) p.33

23 Barkin (2012) p. 26

all against all – or anarchy – this would still be the result of states creating this order and reinforcing it through their action. Respect would still exist in such a world in the form of deterrence – the other side believing in the military capabilities of the actor. Yet we live in a world of international institutions, of international law and international courts. States that pay those the proper respect cannot be explained by a purely realistic perspective.

A theory presented by Reinhard Wolf argues that a foundation for looking at respect is to establish the “normative expectations, social needs and emotional reactions”<sup>24</sup> of the other in the international realm. Following his argument respect is when the nature of interaction confirms the self-ascribed position of an actor, thereby giving him status recognition. Wolf argues that respect creates a willingness to cooperate, while disrespect creates anger and frustration. Since the subject of this paper is a state the idea in application would mean that a leader who can show he regained the position in international relations that people self-ascribe to themselves would create lots of positive feelings for himself.

In order to analyze a country with regard to respect it is necessary to analyze its self-image. How does a country portray itself, what acts of other states does it deem disrespectful or correct. Because respect originates in social relationship which in turn is created by communication looking at authoritative figures of the mentioned country is a good way of getting a grip on a country’s self-image. This discourse reflects other countries behavior as Wolf rightly points out “Because we cannot read other people’s minds, respect has to manifest itself in behavior towards us. When striving for respect, actors seek adequate consideration of their physical presence, social importance, ideas and values, physical needs and interests, achievements, efforts, qualities and virtues, and rights.”<sup>25</sup> This means that when looking at a discourse there are several dimensions. Respecting physical presence is easily done by not violating the borders of the other, especially at sea and in the air but also in regard to covert operations.

Respecting ideas and needs is also easily done by taking them seriously.<sup>26</sup> Achievements, values and rights on the other hand is complicated. Again citing Wolf “adequate consideration’ requires both taking them into account as important ‘facts’ and accepting them as authentic.[...]. The crucial term in this definition is ‘adequate’, since those who seek respect and those who are supposed to grant it may profoundly disagree as to the level of adequacy.”<sup>27</sup> Especially in the case of Iran, where a theocratic regime rules that never officially gave up the claim to represent true Islam, and thereby represent all Muslims, it gets complicated since Islam sees itself as the one universal and true religion.

On the other hand, Iran has also a long history of imperial greatness, which saw it rule the entire Middle East in several different empires over the ages. This past glory might also lead to an entitlement to dominate the region once more. On the other hand, there are varying voices and ideas as in any government. Given the constant infighting, a consensus will be hard to establish. However what can be done is to focus on those voiced rights and values that are underpinned by action. By focusing on the ideals, virtues and rights that Iran is actively pushing with investments – in the forms of money, blood or otherwise – will be the main focus of this paper in regard to respect.

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24 Wolf (2011) p. 106

25 Wolf (2011) p. 112

26 Wolf (2011) pl. 112

27 Wolf (2011) p. 112/113

Concluding and adding to Wolf's statement that "A strong indicator for anger and other types of emotional arousal [over disrespect] would be quick and premature decisions taken with little attention to material risks or consequences"<sup>28</sup> likewise those ideals and values a country is keen on getting respected are backed by long-term political investments and will feature repeatedly in the discourse.

### 3. What does respect mean for Iran?

When looking at why respect matters for Iran one should also ask what are the core values that shape the Iranian behavior? Why is respect relevant and worthy exploring in regard to Iran? The classical if somewhat orientalist explanation is that Iranians are driven by Persian nationalism and Shia Islam. Yet this is not very helpful and better definition of what defines respect in the Iranian case shall be offered. Wolf's<sup>29</sup> definitions are rather broad and should be refined and clarified for this case study. The first of the core values and ideas that should be considered important in regard to Iran, is respect for Islam. As the supposed core of Iranian ideology and identity, yet Islam matters also for another reason. As home of the Islamic revolution Iran sees itself as the leading Islamic nation. The Islamic revolution itself is seen as a core idea of Iran that they would want to have respected.

However, another value that fueled the revolution like no other is even more important which glued together crazed religious fanatics and atheist left-wing idealists - from Trotskyists, anarchists to Islamo-communists - was anti-Imperialism.<sup>30</sup> When thinking about Iran one has to consider this idea, which at its very core deals with respect or the lack thereof.

Anti-Imperialism is also always an outcry against the humiliation of foreign dominance and influence. At its core, it is a deeply constructionist worldview - the Imperialists make the world in a certain fashion and reinforce that order, anti-imperialists challenge this order and try to overcome it.<sup>31</sup>

Anti-imperialism matters on three fronts. The first is the obvious, Iran does not want foreign control or influence. Any expectations or demands that Iran should give in or concede influence are therefore seen as disrespectful. Iranians expect to be treated as a regional power that is not subject to anybody. In consequence, it wants at least to be treated as other countries its size, in all due likelihood better since Iran sees itself as the heir of mighty empires and as the leader of the Islamic world.

This anti-imperialism has historical reasons with the Shah being a close ally of the US, Israel and Europe. Many felt he was selling out the country, a situation the Islamic revolution overcame. This is highlighted by speeches. A recent example by Khomeini was when he said that, "Iran [...] used to bow down to American, Zionist, English and other such agents one day. Dependent, mean, weak and subservient rulers had dragged this nation, this country, this brilliant history and these bubbling and erupting talents towards bowing down to others. However, Islam came and saved the country. The Islamic Republic came and made Iran dear and powerful."<sup>32</sup>

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28 Wolf (2011) p. 113

29 Wolf (2011)

30 Keddie (2006) p.222

31 Ansari (2012) p. 275

32 Khomeini (2017)

One should in this context especially note the people around the Shah which supported a CIA backed coup against Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh who had dared to nationalize the Iranian oil production.<sup>33</sup> Their support for foreign interests created a negative precedent. The other aspect is domestic, since both domestic and foreign policy can not be thought sensibly as separate. The greatest accusation against the Shah and the most treasonous in the eyes of his enemies was that he was considered a lackey of the West. A political figure in Iran that would be seen as detracting from the anti-imperialist line would be seen as respect unworthy by his compatriots. Beyond that he would be criticized for tarnishing the respect countries have for Iran. A single Iranian leader can therefore never give in too much. If several figures all give in a bit the grand total of compromise can be the great, yet a single leader giving in a lot would have a severe problem as, it would open the gates for criticism aimed at his integrity.

Another important aspect of Anti-Imperialism is the concern with Palestine. The official line of the Iranian government is that Israel is an imperialist project that treads on the rights of the Palestinians oppresses them and denies them their right to return to their homeland. Iranian politicians are very much concerned with Israel and the Palestinian people. There is a strong feeling the West is being controlled or at least influenced by Zionists and that there is not enough awareness of the plight of the Palestinians.

The same goes for Iran's ally Hezbollah, which is one of the world's most efficient militias, in Lebanon. Hezbollah is the only militia allowed to retain arms after the end of the civil war in Lebanon due to its continued war of resistance against Israel occupying Lebanese territory.<sup>34</sup> Especially Israel moving with military forces into Lebanon or Palestine or using its air force to hit targets, which is usually ignored or excused by the West, aggravates Iranian leaders.

The idea of status recognition is a concept more firmly established than respect. Yet according to Wolf it features in the idea of respect. Iran sees itself as the most important power in the Middle-East. This claim has a contemporary aspect and a historic one. Iran with its 5000 year history has a strong national sentiment. Nowadays, Iranians still see themselves as the descendants of the great Persians of antiquity and identity the state tries to merge with Islam.<sup>35</sup> The historic aspect is the Iranian awareness that they are the descendants of several great cultures. That their ancestors built empires from Indus to Egypt and Greece. It is claimed that Persia saw the first declaration of human rights. Moreover it was home to great artists and poets and saw much advancement in terms of architecture, agriculture and artisan-ship. In the age of old Persian grandeur this Iranian state controlled the Middle East as the supreme super-power only having to contend with the Romans and the Greeks before the Arabs and their new faith broke the Persian Empire.

That countries which had been great powers in the past want to be treated as such, even when their great power status has been greatly diminished, is normal behavior of states. It can be witnessed in actions like the Brexit, Russian posturing over NATO and the EU pushing their frontier eastward or Chinese indignation over Western lecturing. Yet the Islamic Republic derives its legitimacy not so much from the grandeur of the past but pagan Persian Empire. While this is an important motive for more secular Iranians another aspect is more crucial for the Iranian leadership - the contemporary power of Iran. Iran has the formidable Hezbollah in Lebanon as an ally, with Shias comprising now

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33 Weiner (2009) p. 123

34 Hirst (2010) p. 269

35 Rudolph (2002) p. 153

something along the lines of 40% of the population<sup>36</sup> – and growing – which will steadily increase their control over Lebanon. In Iraq - the US invasion ironically enough – has led to a Shia dominated Iraq, which through increasing strength of pro-Iranian religious parties<sup>37</sup>, has made that country a reliable partner and in many aspects an ally to the great unease of the Gulf monarchies. Iran has long before Russia ramped up its support for Assad, helped the Syrian regime against the mostly Sunni uprising. Assad has now regained the initiative and is on the counter-offensive. This means the old fear of the Shia crescent is slowly becoming reality.<sup>38</sup>

All the while in Yemen Huthi rebels dressed in rags and flip-flops armed with rusty AK-47s and RPG's have taken over and continue to resist the Saudi siege, even daring to shoot missiles at targets in Saudi-Arabia while eluding attempts of the Gulf monarchy to dislodge them.<sup>39</sup> Iran has build up an impressive line of proxy forces and allied forces that number hundreds of thousands and make it the most important regional power of the Middle-East. While this is nowadays recognized more and more, even before the rise of ISIS the situation was not much different. In past years there were no Huthi rebels but Syria was more powerful and ever since the US invasion it was clear to everybody who was able to count that the Shia dominance would result in a Shia dominated and thereby pro-Iranian Iraqi government<sup>40</sup>. Iran was already in a powerful position in 2006. Yet it is a very recent development that Iran is taken serious as a regional power.

An offshoot explanation that comes from having a history of imperial grandness and claiming regional or even global importance nowadays is the Civilization state explanation. Having been an Imperial power that at its height stretched across three continents inevitable leads to a sense of greatness. Iran's civilization is older than the Roman and even the Greek ones. The sense of past greatness will fuel a sentiment in which a people demand to be respected like their forefathers were. Given that Persian influence and language still dominates countries like Tajikistan and Afghanistan, and Iranians still ascribing to a notion of a pure Aryan race (hence the name - Iranian means Aryan) that inhabited the same lands for the last few thousand years, it becomes obvious that there is a strong nationalistic demand for respect.

For these kinds of states – with a long semi-coherent history – the concept of civilization state has been developed (foremost its application has been to China) but this self-conceptualization can also be applied to Iran.<sup>41</sup> Because the self-conceptualization is very much the same. Mojtahed-Zadeh argues that “Iran has functioned for at least 5000 years as a civilization”<sup>42</sup> Especially the long state-hood tradition and the nearly uninterrupted rule over a core territory are used as evidence to support this claim. People that can claim to have invented “the state”<sup>43</sup> are obviously going to demand respect. This historical background which surely is known to the decision makers through the omnipresence of Persian literature and poetry, retells the story of past glory and grandeur.

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36 Hazran (2009) p.3

37 Coker and Gladstone (2018)

38 Parchizadeh (2018) The Shia crescent describes the region from Eastern Saudi-Arbaia over Iran, Iraq, Syria into Lebanon in which Shias are either in power or form the majority – the fear of many Sunnis is that they might control this region in its entry and from there the whole Middle-East

39 Alavi (2018)

40 Nasr (2006) p. 198

41 Xia (2013) p. 43

42 Mojtahed-Zadeh (2007) p. 20

43 Mojtahed-Zadeh (2007) p. 21

Like in all Middle Eastern societies respect plays a huge role in Iran. There is the classical case of respect for seniority, the higher ranking scholars get more respect than the lower ones. Respect for the elders, respect for ones parents, etc. is a core value in Persian families. Iran as a patriarchal and hierarchical society is imbued with the idea of respect. The socialization of the Iranian decision makers will have a clear and imminent impact on how they perceive the world and react to it.

Active foreign policy is always dependent on a solid power base at home. Domestic power struggles often hinder foreign policy initiatives. Yet in the Iranian case every aspect of policy domestically or abroad is in the focus of intense internal power structures. When the new Tehran airport was due to be opened, the Revolutionary Guards who had through one of their companies lost a bid (the contract had been given to a Turkish company), wanted to rectify that situation by occupying the air-strip. After some negotiations the Revolutionary Guards took over and now manage the airport.<sup>44</sup> This should illustrate the severity of the power struggle inside Iran and the level of force participants are willing to commit to get their way. With the high value placed on respect in Iranian culture and society a leader that can gain respect abroad naturally expands his power base at home. Likewise, a leader that fails to get respect abroad, or compromises too much will loose out at home.

#### 4. Practical cases of Iran demanding respect.

While all the mentioned theoretical evidence shows that respect matters, a few instances outside of the nuclear deal should illustrate that respect is important for the Iranian leadership. On 23<sup>rd</sup> of March 2007, a boat of the British Royal Navy was stopped by members of the Iranian revolutionary guards. They took the British sailors captive and took them to Iran proper.<sup>45</sup> However, whether the British had actually violated Iranian territorial waters or not is up to dispute. The area in the Shat-al-Arab, is disputed between Iraq and Iran and the borderlines are not clear. In any case Iran claimed that its border had been violated and it is in every country's right to defend its borders against violations. In the case of armed personal entering a countries space it is even well within its right to use armed force. Given the US long history of violating other people's air and sea space and probing into their areas it can be safely presumed that there had been several incursions into Iranian territorial waters by allied forces.

Referring international law to legitimize a military action is of course smart, because otherwise the narrative would be that of a kidnapping. After 12 days Iran released the sailors. According to Ahmadinejad, "The amnesty was granted on the auspicious occasion of the birth anniversary of Prophet Mohammad (Peace Be Upon Him) and the upcoming Christian Easter feast. Mighty Iran has pardoned the British military personnel as a gift to the British people, although it had the right to try them"<sup>46</sup> Iran afterward claimed it had received a letter of apology by Britain for violating its territory, which the United Kingdom denied.<sup>47</sup> Yet in a press conference then British Prime Minister Tony Blair told reporters "Britain bore no ill will toward the Iranian people, [...] and **respects** their country's 'proud and dignified history.'"<sup>48</sup>

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44 Denslow (2004)

45 Lyall (April 5, 2007)

46 Islamic Republic News Agency (2007)

47 BBC News (2007)

48 Lyall (April 4, 2007)

Another issue that arose over the years is the violation of Iran's air space. The RQ-170 unmanned aerial vehicle is a drone better known under its nickname “the beast of Kandahar”, after its first public sighting near the airport of said town. In December 2011, one model was brought down by Iran. How exactly is not clear but what is certain is that Iran captured the drone mostly intact.

On December the ninth, Iran lodged a formal complaint with the UN over the violation of its air space. The Iranian letter to the UN general secretary read that this was “an act of hostility against the Islamic Republic of Iran in clear contravention of international law, in particular, the basic tenets of the United Nations Charter.”<sup>49</sup> The Obama administration asked that the drone be returned to them. Upon which an Iranian spokesperson answered that “It seems he (Mr Obama) has forgotten that Iran's airspace was violated, spying operations were undertaken, international laws were violated and that Iran's internal affairs were interfered with, [...] Instead of an official apology and admitting to this violation, they are making this request”<sup>50</sup>.

While the violation of air space certainly seemed to have angered the Iranians not to mention the real-political concern of having spy drones fly into the country, which presumably did not happen for the first time. Though, the American request to return the drone, seemed to really have angered the Iranians. Spying on a country, getting caught and hoping to get the spy equipment back is very disrespectful. This case also showed a near complete lack of US consideration for Iranian feelings. How could any Iranian politicians with a sense of dignity return the drone? Yet the very act of asking was a further sign of disrespect, because it presumed Iran would just give in.

Both transgressions would create enormous anger in a Western country if committed by a hostile nation. Yet, it was perceived as absolutely normal for Western forces to violate Iranian sovereignty or spy on them. Furthermore, both cases also show Iran wanting their normal rights as a country respected and taking great offense at disrespectful rhetoric. Both cases should make the case clear that indeed respect matters in the case of Iran.

## 5. Disrespect towards Iran

Another aspect that needs to be examined is whether Iran saw itself as being disrespected. This is an important question because one has to feel respect lacking in order to demand it. There are further accusations arrests, border violations and media stories that infuriated Iranian leaders and show that Iran saw respect lacking. Two examples shall be discussed in the following.

In 1992, Iranian intelligence killed four Kurdish opposition activists in a Greek Restaurant in Berlin called Mykonos. Further guests and the host were wounded. German investigator arrested Kazem Darabi, an Iranian intelligence operative, who also led Hezbollah in Berlin. A further operative was arrested and both were sentenced. Moreover, Germany also issued an arrest warrant for the Iranian intelligence minister Ali Fallahian. In the final judgment it was noted that Ali Khamenei and president Rafsandshani were behind the killings and were informed about it.<sup>51</sup> This caused offense in the Iranian leadership.

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49 Lynch (2011)

50 The Telegraph (2011)

51 Cowell (1997)

Even in 2018 Ali Khamenei referenced the Mykonos case: „We will not forget – this is an event that unforgettable in our history – that at a particular point in time, our president [Hujjatul-Islam wal Muslimeen Hashemi Rafsanjani] who was an advocate of compliance in the face of the West, was summoned by a Western government – by Germany on the Mykonos case – because of some unreasonable and nonsensical claim against Iran: this incident revealed their shamelessness.“<sup>52</sup> The fact that Iran would still bring up such a case after the killers have long been released back into Iran shows that Iran felt deeply disrespected by the German actions and that it sees these actions as insults which are still not forgiven.

Again, during the Iran-Iraq war US naval forces were operating in the Gulf to protect tankers from Iranian attacks. The American cruiser *Vincennes* thought that Iranian F-14 fighter jets were flying an attack on it. The Americans fired an anti-aircraft missile at the plane and shot it down. It soon turned out that the fighter jet the US just had proudly downed was in fact a civilian aircraft and the missile had killed all 290 passengers and crew. The US saw it as an accident, the Iranians as heinous murder. In 1996 the US government payed 131.8\$ million in compensations to Iran, in part for the loss of life but also for the loss of the plane.

Yet, the US never apologized. On the contrary, George H. W. Bush even went on record during the 1988 US presidential election with saying: "I will never apologize for the United States — I don't care what the facts are... I'm not an apologize-for-America kind of guy."<sup>53</sup> While the quote is not directly related to the downing of the plane for the Iranians the connection was clear. However, the US was expecting the Iranians to take their word as a fact i.e. the event was an accident and should just swallow their pride. While Iranians might forgive the action especially since blood money has been payed. They cannot forgive American arrogance. Not admitting having made a mistake and not apologizing for the mass murder of almost 300 people is such an enormous insult to Iranian honor.

## 6. The anti-Iranian stigma discourse

When looking at Iran wanting to become respected and overcome its outcast position one has to look at the other side, which is a stigmatizing discourse that, happened at the same time and aimed at keeping Iran out in the cold. Foremost among them are of course the opposition groups that want to get rid of the Islamic regime. The most notorious are the People's mujaheddin or MEK which to this day commit terrorist acts in Iran but also against Iranian installations abroad. Furthermore, there are the groups associated with the old Shah regime and others smaller groups.

More importantly, Israel has always spoken out against an Iranian nuclear program and is most likely behind the killings of Iranian nuclear scientists that has occurred over the years. Israel has repeatedly attacked Iranian positions in Syria and killed and wounded Iranian army personal. Moreover, Saudi-Arabia is competing with Iran for regional hegemony and has supported rebels in Syria against Iran's ally Assad. Though what is relevant in this context are the central pillars of the stigmatization discourse.

Firstly, the accusation that Iran would support terrorists, which, goes back to the Axis of evil speech in which Iran, Iraq and North Korea were named as hostile nations supporting terrorism. While

<sup>52</sup> Khamenei (2018)

<sup>53</sup> Ahmadi (2015)

Iran does not dispute its support for Hezbollah, deeming the group a legitimate resistance group against Israel. Moreover, the support for Iraqi groups is also not so much hidden. The accusation often assert that Iran is supporting groups like the Taliban<sup>54</sup>, Al-Quaida and other groups that committed terrorist acts in Saudi-Arabia, South-America and the West. Iran is also accused of supporting Hamas at times, which Iran does not deny, although that relationship is temporarily troubled and Hamas is the official democratically elected government of Gaza

This is a grave accusation because it means that Iran is considered outside of the realm of normal states. When the US bombed Libya in retaliation for supporting terrorists there were not many countries speaking out against this act. If it is widely believed that Iran is supporting terrorists then Iran would be seen as legitimate target for retaliation against terrorist acts. It also means that companies will not invest in a country, even if there are no sanctions targeting their product, service or technology, because it will always lead to bad press and could result in accusations of aiding terrorists. In addition, banks will not work with companies from Iran and producers will not sell into Iran. This was evident during the height phase of sanctions.

The other accusation is that Iran wants to destroy Israel, which is sometimes even asserted that it extends it to Jews around the world. While Iran does not recognize Israel and its leaders repeatedly call Israel a tumor and they call for an end to Israel, they do not call for the destruction of the people of Israel.<sup>55</sup> But often the nuances of speeches of Iranian leaders are not translated and, moreover, like in any country, there exists antisemitism in Iran also on the elite. Many speeches that call for an end of Israel are interpreted that Iran actively wants to destroy Israel and its people. This associates Iran with a renewed Holocaust that the Iranians are supposedly planning and this is why they are pursuing nuclear energy – to get a nuclear bomb.<sup>56</sup> This is the most important accusation in the stigmatization discourse. Iran is accused of pursuing a nuclear bomb in order to either use it against Israel or the United States, maybe even handing it out to its “terrorist” allies.

Infamously remembered is the bomb diagram of Israeli Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu who came with a drawing of a cartoon bomb showcasing Iranian progress towards a nuclear bomb to the UN.<sup>57</sup> While the prime minister of a well armed country, with probably the best intelligence service in the world gives a presentation of such a ridiculous nature might bemuse some, however, it is an expression of a much bigger policy of linking Iran's nuclear program with the pursuit of nuclear weapons.

The rules of the non-proliferation treaty say that Iran has the right to the peaceful use of nuclear energy. It is not allowed to use its program to produce nuclear weapons. As long as this discourse was dominant this meant that there wouldn't be a deal, because no Western country would want a nuclear armed Iran and even Russia and China don't want more nuclear arms powers. It also meant for any one believing this narrative, that the only working deal would mean Iran ends any nuclear activity or is compelled to do so by force of arms.

A last but non-the-less important discourse connects to all these issues. It was always swinging in any assertions by Iran's enemies. Namely that the Iranian leadership is irrational and religious

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54 Stratfor (2018)

55 Khamenei (2014)

56 Times of Israel Staff (2016)

57 Sherwoód (2012)

zealots that do not behave in the rational manner that realist theory usually asserts. Rather they would commit suicide by using nuclear weapons against Israel, suffering the nuclear counter-strike and that Iran would give nuclear weapons to terrorists. This and other arguments that have been used against Iran all trace back to one argument – the Iranian leadership is irrational and dangerous and would accept millions of Iranians to die in a retaliation attack just to kill Israelis in a nuclear strike.

The Iranian leadership as religious fanatics, oppressing their own people and not being rational is the gravest accusation, because it would make any negotiations pointless. One can not negotiate a treaty with crazy fanatics, they will either not engage in serious negotiations or break it when they think its suits their agenda.

## II. Historical Background

### 1. The Islamic Republic of Iran as the 'origin of disrespect'

In the 1950s, the United States saw nuclear energy as a good method of increasing energy output and thereby fuel economic growth not only at home but also in allied countries across the globe.<sup>58</sup> They therefore supported allies that strove to reach the nuclear age. Iran under the young Mohamed Reza Shah had become a close ally, after the allied Soviets and British had ousted his father from power.<sup>59</sup> Using not only American but also German expertise he strove for a modern state, buying modern arms and hoping that nuclear energy would propel his country into the modern world.

In 1979, the last Shah of Iran was ousted from power and after a fierce and at times mass-murdering internal power struggle the Islamist's around Grand Ayatollah Khomeini took over the country by declaring it the first Islamic republic and installing a system that combines theocratic and republican elements with Khomeini the most powerful figure in the center. The German engineers that had been building two reactors through a subsidiary of the Siemens AG left the country.<sup>60</sup>

Yet, Khomeini was not content with Iran. Calling unto Muslims world wide to overthrow their rulers. He hoped to ignite the whole Middle East in revolution. Yet that failed to materialize, instead Saddam Hussein's tanks rolled across the border and the bloodiest war in modern Middle Eastern History broke out. The gulf monarchies supported Saddam and after eight grueling years, Iran had to agree to a peace, after the US navy had humiliated Iran in a military operation and Saddam was renewing the offensive.<sup>61</sup> Iran had lost hundreds of thousands of soldiers during the war. In addition, its economy was in ruins and it was politically isolated and had become a pariah in international relations.

After the death of Khomeini in 1989, Iran entered a stage of rebuilding its country. The war had wrecked havoc with the Iranian economy and society. Iran entered a phase of relaxation, adopting to the international *modus operandi*. Yet this was not easy at times. After being driven out of Kuwait, Iraq's Saddam Hussein suppressed a Shia uprising, which pushed hundreds of thousands of refugees across the border, while Afghanistan was also creating millions of them. In the late 90s the Situation became even more critical, with the murder of several Iranian diplomats through the hands of the Taliban. Iran mobilized and it looked like a war was imminent. Yet, Iran was willing to accept UN

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58 Beachy and Sinha (2015)

59 Keddie (2006) p. 105

60 Beachy and Sinha (2015)

61 Karsh (2009) p. 79

mediation.<sup>62</sup>

Iranian actions during that time also saw it increase in Pariah status. Iranian agents kept murdering opposition figures and in 1998 a hit team murdered several Kurdish exiles in Germany. The following trial, created a lot of bad blood between Europe and Iran, and showed to reformists in Iran the importance of adhering to norms when dealing with European countries. There seems to have been some advocating of normalizing relations with the US in Iran, but this did not result in anything meaningful.<sup>63</sup>

What happened in the following was the turn away from a total war economy and a phase of limited economic growth and the slow the built up of a consume oriented middle class, which meant that Iran wanted to overcome its pariah status. It is also in the 1990s that Khamenei, then supreme leader, allegedly issued a fatwa banning nuclear weapons or weapons of mass destruction – the wording or even the existence of the fatwa are disputed<sup>64</sup>, it can be found on Khamenei's website<sup>65</sup> though. There are also claims that Khomeini spoke out against nuclear weapons<sup>66</sup>.

## 2. The leadership of Iran

While all governmental decision making processes are often a bit esoteric and byzantine, the Iranian state is an extreme case of a complex mechanism. This paper is not long enough to explore and explain the minute details of how decisions are made in Iran. Neither will it attribute certain foreign policies to a certain person or group, because this would be highly speculative. The references are to Iran, not to any particular group, because like in most authoritarian organizations, once a decision is made most members stick with it. Therefore, the internal process leading to an action is not important for this paper, if compared with the action itself. Yet a short summary of the main fractions and mechanics in Iranian decision making shall be presented based on the secondary literature.

The classical split described in media articles and more superficial scholarship about the Iranian leadership describes it as a struggle between two factions, reformers and hardliners. The former being the good noble democrats, trying to reform the oppressive regime into a liberal democracy, while the later are ideological fanatics that want to keep Iran shackled to their revolutionary interpretation of Islam<sup>67</sup>. This is wrong, all groups are part of the system, they are not factions but fractions.<sup>68</sup> While Iran is certainly a democracy, it is a controlled democracy, and only candidates that support the system can run for office. Furthermore, a lot of decision making is partly or completely controlled by non-elected groups.

The central figure is the supreme leader – currently Ali Khamenei – who uses his power to balance the power between different groups. In this paper it will be ascribed to the definition of the RAND foundation, which described the four principle groups as Reformists (among them former President Khatami), Pragmatic Conservatives (current president Rouhani), traditional conservatives

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62 Crossette (1998)

63 Takeyh (2009) p. 177

64 Eisenstadt and Khalaji (2011) p.9

65 Khamenei (2010)

66 Porter (2014)

67 Ottolenghi (2011) p. 15

68 Akbarzadeh/Conduit (2016) p. 4

(now deceased member of the assembly of experts Abbas Vaez-Tabasi) and the principalists (among others former president Ahmadinejad).

Furthermore there are independent ayatollahs and most importantly the Pasdaran (or as their full-name goes the Sepah-e-Pasderan-e-Enghelab-e Eslami or in English Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps IRGC). As an independent armed force, separate from the regular Iranian forces – and their mission is to protect the Islamic order of Iran. They are the power-base of Ali Khamenei – and they have vast economic interest – furthering their power-base and interest. They don't form a faction of their own, in classical sense but are split among several factions, while also having unified interests.

All these groups have networks (internally as well as externally) and every person of power has their own vested interests and networks. Furthermore there are other groups such as the Basiji militia – most famous for the suicidal charges during the Iran-Iraq war, which were the power-base of President Ahmadinejad. They are mostly lower classes, often not very educated but very conservative.<sup>69</sup> Also the conventional Iranian military has shown its head in recent years and taken a stance in regard to certain political issues.<sup>70</sup>

The Iranian constitution has an outspoken system of democratically elected leaders and checks and balances. A lot decision making is behind closed doors and is not easy to analyze. The most powerful office is without doubt that of the supreme leader, which outranks the presidency in power. This system is installed in order to “ensure continuity of clerical supremacy”<sup>71</sup>, contrasting with the presidency which “was designed to enable the state to function as a republic”<sup>72</sup>. “Khamenei is the single most powerful individual [...] though he does not make national decisions on his own, neither can any major decision be taken without his consent”<sup>73</sup>. This is the most important aspect about how the system works. Negative power- the power to stop action, to sabotage initiatives and plans is what defines the different groups.

The most important are the IRGC, with some seeing them as the driving force of a lot of Iranian foreign policy and nuclear program. It even has been suggested – not without reason – that certain countries are the exclusive domain of the IRGC.<sup>74</sup> The president, currently Rouhani and his fraction, has power and democratic legitimacy, yet he is less powerful than Khamenei. However, even the supreme leader is not completely unaccountable. Khamenei can be ousted from power by the assembly of experts. He is dependent on his own power-bases and his fate is tied in with the survival of the entire system. “The supreme leader is thus vulnerable to the same socio-economic and political pressures as the president. These pressures constrain his ability to fully translate his personal values and opinions into policy.”<sup>75</sup>

The only consistency in the Iranian system is the ever shifting situation, with all groups striving for power, but even more important are their attempts to check the power of their competitors. Who has more power is dependent on multiple factors, internal politics might weaken a group or

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69 Warnaar (2013) p. 55

70 Ward (2009) p. 307

71 Keynoush (2012) p. 128

72 Keynoush (2012) p. 128

73 RAND (2010) p. 117

74 Akbarzadeh/Conduit (2016) p. 9

75 Keynoush (2012) p. 131

person.

While a turn towards realism has been observed, one should not underestimate the ideological motives of many actors. The time of suicidal mass charges might be over, but e.g. the IRGC are still committed to the system and its defense.<sup>76</sup> Yet, they also have their economic interests that shape their policies. Their power increased since the US invasion of Iraq, because they were able to shape events there through covered support. They built up lines of trade and supply that circumvented the sanctions.<sup>77</sup> They influence also lives off their members switching over to the civil service, the economy and the foreign office service.<sup>78</sup> Temporary alliances, a lot of dynamics and ever changing power constellations are the defining characteristics of the system.

The other aspect in this regard is ideology. Iranian ideology is protective of fellow Shias leading to repeated collisions with Saudi-Arabia over the safety of pilgrims and other affairs related to the two holy cities. Yet, Iranian foreign policy is also informed by a sense of defending the oppressed by helping the weaker ones against aggressors. Otherwise, explaining the Iranian support for Armenians in the conflict about Nagorno-Karabakh is hard to come by. Iran did not support a fellow Shia majority state (the only other one being Iraq at that time ruled by Saddam), but they rather they supported Armenia because Azerbaijan was seen as the aggressor.<sup>79</sup> Yet predicting in such a case which ideological prerogative would trump which, would have been hard to do.

### 3. Background nuclear energy and nuclear bombs

Every country has the right to peacefully pursue and use nuclear energy for civilian purposes.<sup>80</sup> For the purpose of promoting and supervising the peaceful use the International Atomic Energy Agency had been founded and has worked since 1957. The IAEA also serves the purpose of safeguarding against the misuse of nuclear technology. This includes the use of nuclear material to build nuclear bombs such as highly sophisticated hydrogen bombs or so-called dirty-bombs – conventional bombs that have nuclear material attached to poison a broader area with radiation.

Nuclear weapons are regulated most prominently by the “treaty on the Non-proliferation of nuclear weapons”. The goal of this treaty is to prevent the spread of nuclear weapons. To this date 191 countries have signed. The treaty is built on three pillars, the first being that nuclear armed states do not transfer nuclear weapons into the hands of non-nuclear armed states (non-proliferation). The second pillar is disarmament, which means that all signatory countries aim at negotiating gradually for a disarmament of (in the end) all nuclear weapons. The last pillar is in line with the IAEA and recognizes every countries right for the peaceful use of nuclear energy. Countries can demand help with their nuclear programs if they can show that they are pursuing it for civilian uses only.

There are four countries that never signed and one that left the treaty. North Korea left the treaty and has nuclear weapons, South-Sudan is a rather recent founding and is engulfed in civil war since its founding. India and Pakistan both have nuclear weapons and the last state not to sign is Israel – also the

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76 RAND (2009) p. 36

77 Keynoush (2012) p. 134

78 Keynoush (2012) p. 134

79 Warnaar (2013) p. 33

80 Green (2012) p. 426

Middle East's only nuclear power. When considering alleged nuclear arms programs one has to look not only at the the payload – the bomb – but also the transportation system. A question for western analysts was therefore not only whether Iran was developing nuclear weapons (Iran's air force is antiquated and it does not possess bombers) but also whether it was developing a delivery system to bring the weapons to its intended target. Therefore Iran to become a nuclear power, its needs to not only develop nuclear weapons, but also decrease the size of the bomb and have missiles capable of delivering it to its target. Otherwise the nuke is just a very expensive mine that can be detonated when driven to its intended target. To understand the importance of the nuclear negotiations one has to understand the Iranian missiles program to contextualize the first and be able to evaluate the Western anxiety.

In terms of missiles carrying a nuclear payload Iran has made steps, but it has not advanced to a level where it is deemed capable of delivering a nuclear warhead. According to US intelligence sources Iran's capability to produce such is not likely to happen before the 2020's<sup>81</sup>. Missiles are expensive to develop, produce and maintain. In consequence, from a strategic perspective, such a program only makes sense when a country can massively increase the payload of the missiles by one of three nasty measures, namely nuclear, biological or chemical weapons. Nuclear arms and missiles have to be thought together. By developing missiles Western analysts fear Iran ultimately wants to develop nukes by its (alleged) desire to develop nukes every missile test is put under more close surveillance.

As will be shown in the aftermath of the deal the continued and expanded missile tests indicative of the program after the nuclear deal caused increased tensions once more with the West. Missile test during the time of the sanctions increased anxieties and led to fears that Israel or the US (or both) would see a preventive military strike as the only solution stopping Iran. Especially Israel which has to suffer under Hamas and Hezbollah missile attacks and has invested billions in the Iron-Dome defense system to shoot down incoming missiles is afraid that a nuclear armed Iran will one day attack Israel with its nuclear arms.

#### **4. Nuclear Power and Western Fears**

Since the end of the Cold War, the topic of nuclear armed terrorists or rogue states threatening has become a Western obsession. From novels by Tom Clancy over movies to video games, Western culture has been bombarded with fictions stories about evil men (more often than not in a Muslim/Middle-East context) using nuclear bombs to spread fear and terror, and, the unease created by this dissipated through to politics.

While the former Soviet union and the USA reduced their numbers of nuclear weapons (Ukraine and Kazakhstan giving up all its weapons), Pakistan, with Saudi financial backing, developed its own nuclear weapons in 1998 to level the power-relation with India.<sup>82</sup> Moreover, in the context of Pakistan something happened that frightened Western leaders Abdul Qadeer Khan, a nuclear engineer used his skills and networks to sell nuclear technology on the black market.<sup>83</sup> Fears that so called rogue states and especially terrorist groups were heightened.

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81 Izewicz (2017) p. 4

82 Shay (2018) p. 3

83 Corera (2006) p.107

Another factor is the Israeli nuclear program: allegedly - in cooperation with Apartheid South Africa - Israel did develop nuclear weapons. Although they have never officially confirmed that they are a nuclear power,<sup>84</sup> it is a widely known fact and Israel likes it that way to have a deterrence. Yet, Israel has never been sanctioned for it and Israel is not a signatory on the nuclear non-proliferation treaty, additionally to that it worked with – what was back then an internationally isolated pariah state - to develop them. Israel has therefore to be considered as a very privileged state.

The other aspect is that the US sees the security of Israel as one of its primary goals in the Middle-East.<sup>85</sup> The concerns in regard to the Iranian nuclear program have much to do with the fear of Iran attacking Israel or giving nuclear weapons to Hezbollah. It can be doubted that American or European leaders fear Iran attacking either of them with nuclear weapons.

The difference between a civilian and a military nuclear program also is not as obvious as many may think. A civilian nuclear energy program of a certain size can easily be used to produce nuclear weapons. Germany for example could easily produce nuclear weapons in a few months, the same goes for Japan. But there are also practical civilian reasons why Iran might want to pursue a nuclear program. Iran has a young well educated population and immense growth potential. To fulfill this potential Iran will need more energy. While solar energy looks like a good option for a country with so much sunshine one has to be realistic. The growth in demand of a cheap and reliable source of energy isn't going to be fulfilled by solar energy. Likewise burning oil, coal and gas to create energy (all three are available in abundance) is an option but pollution is a massive life-quality and – increasingly - health problem. Anybody who ever visited Tehran knows of the massive air pollution that chokes the city - mostly product by the cars. If further coal and oil burning plants would be added the problem would be heightened.

### **III. Respect and the nuclear negotiations 2003-2018**

#### **1. The Khatami era**

##### **a) International Situation**

Since peace with Iraq and the death of Khomeini Iran had lost much of its revolutionary fervor. Economic development and slow but steady social liberalization were the dominating themes of the 1990s and in 2000. Iran still had to contend with Saddam's Iraq and it got involved in the war between Azerbaijan and Armenia by surprisingly supporting Armenia. In Afghanistan the Taliban murdered Iranian diplomats and the Iranian army mobilized against this foe<sup>86</sup>. Yet the war never came around. Iran limited itself to supporting the Northern Alliance, especially the Shia and Tajik elements in it, instead of intervening<sup>87</sup>. It also expanded its influence in central Asia and kept its close ties with Palestinian groups - especially Hamas - and more importantly Hezbollah in Lebanon. In Syria the unlikely long-term ally Hafez al-Assad died of old age, yet his death changed nothing. Baathist Syria stayed a faithful ally.

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84 Campbell and Harding (2006) In 2006 Prime Minister of Israel Ehud Olmert said that Iran wanted to have nuclear weapons like America, France, **Israel** and Russia

85 Bush (2010) p. 400

86

87 Rashid (2010) p. 125

The US under George Bush senior and Bill Clinton were mostly concerned with the war on drugs and containing Iraq. While far from becoming pacifist the US, after a mission with unexpected high casualties in Somalia<sup>88</sup>, seemed reluctant to engage in military adventures and George Bush ran a campaign of closing down military bases and spending more at home rather than getting involved in other people's wars abroad. Overall the international situation for Iran was tolerable if not good. The US threat was decreasing and the Soviet Union was gone.

Yet 9/11 changed all that. The dust over New York had just settled when American elite forces parachuted into Afghanistan bringing money, weapons and more important air support with which they used to help the Northern Alliance rollback the Taliban in a matter of weeks. Iran ever fearful of the US, but likewise hostile to the Sunni-Islamist Taliban, helped the US with intelligence, logistics and special forces.

The Taliban fell and the Americans stayed on to secure the country and help the nascent democracy develop. Yet, the American war machinery still had steam in it and in the US the neo-conservatives around their arch-priest Dick Cheney dreamed of a Middle East not filled with dictators, theocracies and hostile to the West and Israel populations but a democratic Middle East with free-markets and a widespread pro-Western sentiment. So, for the next goal it was decided to hit the old ally turned foe Saddam Hussein. While the war started in March 2003 long before the rhetoric had started that aimed at a so called Axis of evil. Iran, Syria, Iraq and North Korea were singled out as evil and enemy nations that support terrorists and where regime change would needed to be facilitated by the US. Thus, the situation for Iran had taken some sharp turns when in the same year the IAEA made an announcement.

#### b) The secret Iranian program

The IAEA reported that Iran had a secret nuclear program in 2003, while the organization is highly supportive of countries pursuing nuclear energy for peaceful ends, it demands that all facilities are declared to it. Before that, in 2002, already a spokesperson for the “National council of Resistance of Iran” (NCRI) had revealed that Iran was building two nuclear enrichment facilities, one in Natanz and one in Arak<sup>89</sup>. Here begins a trend that was to repeat itself, annunciations came by enemies of the Iranian regime, followed by much more cautious statements. In this case, the NCRI is a front for the MEK, a left-wing terrorist group fighting the Iranian regime since 1979.

In 2003, Iran also made an offer. However the authenticity is questioned and it is commonly referred to as the “grand bargain” Iran would cease support to Hezbollah and Hamas and reveal all of its nuclear program in return for security assurances and normal diplomatic relations with the US. Whether this offer through the Swiss envoy in Iran was sincere or a ploy by the envoy to broker a peace between the US and Iran is unknown. But what is known is that Iran had a secret nuclear program (in addition to an open one) and the US and the European powers were increasingly concerned.

Though the grand bargain would fit in with the Iranian foreign policy of the 90s and early 2000s, when Iran tried to become a respected country with its status as a regional power accepted by the West. Giving up support for Hamas and Hezbollah in this context would mean adhering to the norm of not supporting terrorism and challenge stigmatization discourse. Likewise, it would be open about its nuclear program and accept a two state solution. In return, it wanted to become a partner, be involved

<sup>88</sup> NPR Staff (2013)

<sup>89</sup> Beachy and Sinha (2015)

in regional affairs and have security assurances from the US.

The core idea was that if the US treated Iran as a normal country Iran would behave as a normal country, to quote the Iranian foreign minister, “Yes! We are ready to normalize relations with the US and prepared to discuss problems that exist between us, but for that to happen we must be able to trust the US and this requires some initial positive gestures in the part of Washington, particularly a change in tone.”<sup>90</sup> It shows again that one of the main blocking stones in the US-Iranian relationship is the US rhetoric. The comparison with Nazi Germany and the almost millennial belief that Iran's Islamist regime must be destroyed and disrupted by all means is beyond disrespectful for the Iranians.

The hatred the US at times shows for Iran (the same could be said for the Israeli leadership) is irrational, yet it remains a fact and the negative discourse is very strong. The aspect that Iranian politicians primarily want respect is on the other hand telling that it is quite important, especially in the context of the nuclear deal where trust is important. The Iranians are rightfully reasoning that if the US cannot manage to respect Iran, how could the Iranians trust them to honor any treaties or even engage in serious negotiations? The quote also shows the intent of the Iranian government – to normalize relations. To many hardliners this is tantamount to heresy but many middle-class Iranians, those with a Western mindset and those that hope to build up business-links profit from Western investments and technology are keen on that.

The aspect of security guarantees also reveals something that is a consistent concern in Iranian foreign policy - security. As long as Iran remains a pariah it will never have the same feeling of security in regard to the US compared to countries respected by the US, since for attacking a pariah the US president can easier gain support at home.

### c) The Khatami era

After the revelations France, Germany and the UK (the EU-3) tried to resolve the issue by diplomatic talks and Iran agreed to cooperate with the IAEA and to sign an additional protocol. The Iranian president of that time was Mohammad Khatami, a reformer who wanted to stabilize Iran's economy and open up society. In foreign policy, he wanted to move forward towards a dialogue of civilizations rather than a continuation of confrontation. To advance the Iranian economy, he needed Western investments and know-how, which required normalization of the relationship with the West. Resolving the nuclear issue, would be a stepping stone towards that goal. The following negotiations about the nuclear issue led to the first serious negotiations with those European countries. It also helped curb the negative discourse of Iran as a rogue state with Iranians negotiating like other countries.

During Pope Johannes Paul II's funeral, Iranian president Mohammad Khatami sat next to the Israeli president and talked with him. The two are from the same province in Iran and chatted a bit in Persian. While this would be perfectly normal for any other country it led to severe criticism in Iran, with critics being able to use the incident to attack the nuclear negotiations as a whole.

The importance of Iranian domestic politics for the nuclear negotiations showed itself several times during the coming years. There were several attempts made by moderate politicians to normalize relations and they were obstructed by domestic pressure. It is mentioned, since this was a good attempt at challenging the stigmatization discourse by Khatami.

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90 Kristof (2007)

#### d) The First Deal

France, Germany and Great Britain started an initiative to negotiate a deal. In the Tehran declaration, Iran agreed to work with the IAEA and implement the additional protocol to build Western trust. In exchange the three powers recognized Iran's right to a nuclear program. The idea was that Iran would give assurances and in return would get access to modern technology. In light how dangerous nuclear technology is, sharing modern technology to decrease the risk of accidents can be seen as a smart move. However Iran was found in breach of the agreement repeatedly by the IAEA. By 2005 the deal was all but dead.

Iran failed to inform about imports of Uranium, while Iran blamed US obstructions to the acquirement of technology - which had been the other side of the deal. The IAEA did not find evidence of a nuclear arms program but it also noted that because of lack of access, they could not make a definite judgment. In 2004 Iran had accepted the Paris agreement and accordingly suspended enrichment processes. Nonetheless a few months later, the US president said that a military option was still on the table.<sup>91</sup>

While the EU-3 proposed a long-term deal in regard to the nuclear issue. Iran made several offers to the Europeans of comprehensive deals which would include a limit of Iranian nuclear activity in return for cooperation in trade, regional security and combating terrorism. Yet all those offers were rejected by the EU. What Iran wanted was not just a negotiated solution to the nuclear issue, it wanted to use the nuclear issue as a bargaining chip to establish itself as a normal state and to overcome its bad prestige and stigma.

By trading, cooperating and working together Iran would have indirectly increased the pressure on its European partners to give positive input into the discourse about Iran, because they of course can not be seen too close to a rogue state. Thus, they would have had to help to change that image to enable cooperation and thereby status recognition for Iran. It would have also helped Iran change its image in the eyes of the Europeans. If both sides would profit from the trade and Iran would show itself as a reliable partner it could become a normal and respected country, would have been recognized as a regional power and could have developed its economy. Hence, respect would have been the foundation for a profoundly good deal for Iran.

What made the first deal not work was that Iran did not want to give up its right to enrich uranium. While the Europeans were unwilling to give in in matters of trade and security cooperation, the US was increasing pressure on its allies, Iran but also on the IAEA the whole time.<sup>92</sup> The stigmatization discourse showed its head again and was still dominating even in Europe. After some initial cooperation, the US in Afghanistan had apparently decided to see an enemy in Iran and increased the hostile rhetoric.

In his axis of evil speech President Bush had named Iran, North Korea and Iraq as enemies of the US and then had went on to destroy Iraq. For Iran to be put into the same category as Saddam's Iraq was hurtful and disrespectful but it also created a negative discourse that would hurt severely Iran's standing and undermine its position via regional rivals like Saudi-Arabia and Israel.

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91 Reuters (2007)

92 BBC (2005)

## 2. President Ahmadinejad

### a) Background and Ideology

In order to understand what drove Ahmadinejad, the president after Khatami, and how he dealt with the issue of respect, one has to understand his background and ideological power base.

When the previously unknown mayor of Tehran joined the race for the Iranian presidential office, not much was known about the man. He had taught at university and worked as a mayor of Tehran for a few years. He emphasized his modest background and lifestyle. He went on winning the elections in the second round with more than seventeen million votes. Yet the international situation was bad. The nuclear issue had been inherited from his predecessor and besides Hezbollah, which faced increasing domestic pressure, especially after the murder of Rafiq al-Hariri<sup>93</sup>, and its long-term ally Syria, Iran did not have many allies in the Middle East.

Ahmadinejad's internal power-base were the Basiji<sup>94</sup>, the popular militia that fills the ranks of the army with fanatical volunteers in case of war and that is responsible for a lot of every-day tasks in the Islamic republic in peace time, most importantly keeping the moral order up in public. Their loyalty in turn to Ahmadinejad went so far that in the context of the 2009 elections, “fearing potential vote tampering, Revolutionary Guard commanders have publicly called on the Basij militia to strictly follow the orders of the supreme leader alone during elections.”<sup>95</sup>

One part of the military forces reminding another of its duty to the constitutional order shows the fragility of the Iranian system. It also shows the depth of entrenchment the president had within the militia that even insiders feared he would use his prestige to mobilize them for his own cause. His Basiji background is also an important factor to consider for his stance. The Basiji try to preserve the revolutionary spirit and zeal and oppose Western influences. They have a siege mentality where Iran is still surrounded by a hostile world, like it was in the war with Iraq. They and the IRGC have also accommodated themselves with the situation and there are extensive smuggling networks under their control that smuggled weapons, oil, consumer goods and technology into and out of Iran. Hence some of the IRGC have an active interest in keeping the situation volatile. For them the stigma discourse is a badge of honor, because it shows the West fears Iran since it resists its and Israeli interests in the Middle East.

In his first speech at the UN, Ahmadinejad emphasized the renewed role of religion he saw in the world. This point he referenced especially in regard to faith and justice and, his definition of justice is quite revealing, because he said that “Justice is about equal rights, the correct distribution of resources in the territories of different states, the equality of all before the law and respect for international agreements. Justice recognizes the right of every one to tranquility, peace and a dignified life. Justice rejects intimidation and double standards.”<sup>96</sup> Having his own country in mind this speech gives a twofold definition of what justice entails, with social justice among states being one point, while dignity, respect for international law and an equal treatment for all contain the main elements of Reinhard Wolf's respect theorem<sup>97</sup>.

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93 Norton (2009) p. 127

94 Alfoneh (2010)

95 Keynoush (2012) p. 134

96 Ahmadinejad 17.09.2005

97 Reinhard Wolf (2011) p.127

While all Iranian leaders invoke God in their speeches and interviews – usually at the beginning - Ahmadinejad is an especially devout Muslim – or wants to be portrayed that way and invokes God more than other Iranian leaders. He said that light surrounded him during his speech at the UN in 2005 „and for 27-28 minutes all the leaders did not blink“<sup>98</sup>. He also told audiences on multiple occasions that he hoped the 12th imam would soon return. Given that the most pressing issue of that time was the Iranian nuclear program, the impression that the president of Iran hopes for the arrival of the end times is not building up trust among western countries that he is not pursuing nuclear weapons to actually bring about the end times.

Like George Bush, Ahmadinejad’s religiously inspired rhetoric caused concern and ridicule in Europe which is increasingly secular and looks at religion with ever greater unease. In contrast president Ahmadinejad is a true believer in the ideals and concepts of the Islamic revolution. These ideas heavily influenced his foreign policy. This also meant he fueled the stigmatization discourse more than he repelled it, by looking like the very caricature this discourse draws of Iranians as deeply religiously irrational and pursuing nuclear bombs to destroy Israel.

#### b) Negotiations under Ahmadinejad

With the previous negotiations leading nowhere Iran had started to enrich uranium once more. The IAEA referred to the United Nations Security Council because of Iran's noncompliance with the Non-Proliferation-Treaty. In October 2006, President Bush imposed sanctions under the so-called Iran Freedom Act. The treaty was dead and in an interview with CNN Ahmadinejad emphasized that Iran had the right to pursue the full nuclear cycle.<sup>99</sup> Indirectly referring to Israel he furthermore said „We're against "nuclear apartheid," which means some have the right to possess it, use the fuel, and then sell it to another country for 10 times its value. We're against that. We say clean energy is the right of all countries.“

What can be seen here is the Iranian leader wanting a fair treatment and an equal treatment of his country. He also wanted to challenge the fact that Israel was allowed nuclear weapons but Iran was not even allowed its legal right to peaceful nuclear energy. Ahmadinejad reiterated the legal point by saying: „What rights do they have when they want to talk about such issues to us, they need to proceed according to international laws. They cannot say that we don't like the intentions -- what we think are the intentions -- of your country, therefore, we want to prevent you. All of our activities have been transparent to the agency, and we've announced many times that because of our religious views, our cultural views, we're against the creation and or use of nuclear weaponry.“

The question of transparency remained a troubled one, yet Iran rightly pointed to the fact that it was being denied rights other countries have. To quote again: „we think that the dictation of rules in the international arena by some powers is unacceptable to us. And this is what we refuse to surrender to.“<sup>100</sup> Ahmadinejad didn't want a compromise on Iranian rights, which is in line with his ideological background. He wanted to challenge the root-cause of the problem instead, which is the West fearing for Israeli nuclear dominance in the Middle-East, from his point of view. With the IAEA referring the Iranian case to the UN. Iran restarting the enrichment process and the two sides not being willing to

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98 Esfandiari (2005)

99 CNN (September 17, 2005)

100CNN (September 17, 2005)

compromise on enrichment and transparency the first treaty was truly dead.

### c) Dealing with Stigma and the negative discourse

During the Ahmadinejad era the anti-Iranian rhetoric reached its high mark. Ahmadinejad was seen as irrational and dangerous and so was his country. He was also seen as breaching international norms by questioning the Holocaust. Even the Europeans more inclined towards negotiations became skeptical about a diplomatic solution. He embraced the stigmatization discourse mentioned above and fueled it even at times.

When looking at the Ahmadinejad phase of the nuclear negotiations one has to consider the rhetoric, the company he kept and his at times odd behavior which did not help the negotiations because it gave him a very negative image in the West. Especially in Europe his actions made it harder for leaders to be seen negotiating with him, since he was so stigmatized.

He lacked the finesse of a worldly leader and those of his speeches which were translated in the West as denying the Holocaust or calling for Israel to be wiped out<sup>101</sup> helped those arguing that Iran was an antisemitic threat to the Israeli people. It also meant that Ahmadinejad was not respected as a leader, because he was considered irrational. During that time there was also a close connection drawn between any actions by Iran and its president by Western media which meant that any act by Ahmadinejad relapsed, often badly, on his country. An example of this behavior should illustrate the point.

On the 30th of September 2005, the Danish newspaper Jyllands-Posten published several cartoons depicting and ridiculing the prophet Mohamed. Some time later a few Danish imams created a dossier called the Akkari-Laban dossier, which besides the caricatures and some information also included a lot of propaganda and even some pictures taken out of context. In consequence Iran saw itself offended and Islam disrespected. Ahmadinejad ordered an end of economic contacts with countries, which had published the cartoons, recalling the Iranian ambassador from Denmark and banning Danish journalists from Iran. Ali Khamenei blamed a Zionist conspiracy, to distract from Palestinian elections, which Hamas had won, yet these elections had been held quite some time after the publication.

The Iranians aimed for an archaic eye-for-an-eye retaliation. The Iranian newspaper Hamshahri organized a so-called "International Holocaust Cartoon Competition" to showcase the Western hypocrisy of the Western conception of freedom of speech. Hamshahri is published by the Tehran government and the limits on freedom of the press mean that such an event can certainly be linked to the government. While the idea was condemned by the West it didn't cause the uproar some might have expected. However, it permanently damaged Iranian reputation and that of the president, because it validated the negative discourse about Iran.

### d) Alliance of the anti-imperialists

A memorable thing about the Ahmadinejad era was his appeal to fellow critics or enemies of the US creating alliances and forming new relations across the globe. It was guided by the premise that the world was split into two camps the West and Iran or good versus evil.<sup>102</sup>

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101Samii (2005)

102Warnaar p.82

Iran according to its foreign minister wanted to take part in the „serious process of political activism“<sup>103</sup> that was aimed at challenging, undermining and overcoming the Western hegemony.

To do so, Iran wanted to form alliances with other countries that oppose the West and Iran wanted to be seen as a “benevolent power”, which is contributing to international justice, and as an example to others in its resistance against the malevolent „arrogant powers“. Iran returned to the rhetoric of the revolutionary phase, looking for other countries also opposing the West. First and foremost among these were Venezuela, Cuba, Syria and North Korea. All these countries suffered under US sanctions and together they tried to form an international opposition. Venezuela was using its income from the high oil prices, partly caused by the US war in Iraq, to support other left-wing governments in South and Central America.

All this was a form of international counter-society<sup>104</sup> or counter-community that existed parallel to the established and Western dominated one. To get respect one needs to exist in some form of relation with other countries, but not necessarily all of them. An exclusive community of countries might very well have their own set of values that create respect by actions, which create disrespect in others. By allying himself with other countries hostile to US policies or that tried to diminish US influence, especially through the IMF and the World Bank, a sort of counter-culture formed. Iran with its long history of challenging the world fitted right in with the likes of Chavez and Castro. This was also a strategy of embracing stigma. The negative discourse around Iran supported by the Iranian opposition abroad; Israel, American Neoconservatives and the Saudis which tried to make out Iran under Ahmadinejad as a country devoid of reason. The US department called his remarks “a continuing stream of hateful invective that has come from this president.”<sup>105</sup>

While Iran embraced its stigma, doing so created respect from other countries engulfed in struggles with the US and was in line with his general policy focused on improving relations with the “outcast” of the international community. A new agreement was signed with Cuba in early 2006 and relations with Venezuela improved markedly. By being confrontational, challenging the West on every field and challenging Western narratives on the Holocaust and the Israel-Palestine conflict, Ahmadinejad strengthened his relationship with these countries and put them on a solid foundation. In 2007 during a meeting Chavez announced that ““The two countries will united defeat the imperialism of North America,” and that they are forming an “axis of unity”. But his strategy also helped him domestically – hoping to recreate the siege mentality that had enabled to wage war with Iraq for eight years the hardliners were pleased with his uncompromising stance. As was mentioned, the IRGC have extensive smuggling networks but they are also active in a lot of normal economic activities in Iran, which makes them hesitant having their home-market open to outside competition.

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103Warnaar p. 113

104The term counter society comes from Annie Kriegel and refers to the creation of a new elite in opposition by communist parties in the West which aimed at replacing the old elite in a communist takeover. They had their own values and norms. In this context the attempts by Iran and Venezuela are meant to create an international alliance with their own norms and ideals which could counter the West. Since the international community is a social order with norms and rules this term shall be borrowed for this thesis, since it is most fitting to describe the topic. It has to be noted though this counter-culture creates a community that is less clearly defined than even the non-aligned or 3<sup>rd</sup> world country community was. It is also not a bipolar cold war setting because most countries part of the counter-community are still very much part of the international community. It is an attempt to change the international order, by slowly overcoming it through the creation of something new.

105State Department (2006)

### e) Supporting terrorists

This also enabled him to operate more freely on the international stage. Actions that would be seen as unacceptable for well established countries, like supporting terrorists, selling arms to countries undergoing sanctions or helping those countries with their nuclear programs, will be seen as brave acts by those that are the pariahs of the international order, because these actions might in the long run help bring down the international order. Thus, embracing the stigma helped create respect with those opposed to the existing order.

A lot of states support militant groups in other countries or have done so in the past, Germany supported Croatia and facilitated its later recognition as a state and the US supported the Mujaheddin against the Soviets. Yet, as the Iran-Contra-Affair showed, countries are wise not to be seen openly rubbing shoulders with these groups. Militant groups are notoriously prone to commit war crimes and even when they stick to the rules supporting them is against international law, let alone often breaks laws in the supporting countries themselves.

If most countries and especially the hegemon - the United States of America are against a group, one that threatens their interests and those of its allies in particular, it is not wise to be seen as supportive. Given that the US named support for Al-Qaeda as one of the reasons for toppling Saddam Hussein's regime, this is no mere question of being verbally chastised by the US but literally a question of survival. Policies aimed at Hezbollah can be counted in this category. Even though Hezbollah started taking part in the political process of Lebanon, it is still considered a terrorist organization by the USA and EU.

While there is no doubt that there is extensive support for Hezbollah by Iran, the openness of that support is rather telling of the relationship Iran has with the West. Hezbollah was founded in the early 80s originally operating under the banner of the "Islamic Resistance"<sup>106</sup>. It had been founded with the help of the IRGC and had since then become a formidable force fighting in the Lebanese civil war on behalf of the Shias of Lebanon and the Palestinians refugees. After the Taif agreement the civil war ended and all militias were to be dissolved. Yet Hezbollah was allowed to remain. Its continued purpose was to fight in South Lebanon which was occupied by Israel that had created a South-Lebanese proxy state which was protected by the South-Lebanese-Army and the Israeli Defense Forces, the IDF.<sup>107</sup> In addition the end of the civil war also meant a phase of massive Syrian domination in Lebanese affairs. Tens of thousand of Syrian soldiers and intelligence operatives were stationed in Lebanon (at the cost of the Lebanese state) and a complete takeover of Lebanese politics by the Syrians had taken place.<sup>108</sup> This also meant that Iran as an ally of Syria could freely support its war-time ally Hezbollah and moreover, it also started taking part in the democratic political process of Lebanon sending delegates to parliament.

Yet its real emergence as a power came when Israel unilaterally withdrew from South-Lebanon because Hezbollah was able to take over the part of the country and turn it into their own fiefdom and from this they regularly raided northern Israel and fired rockets into it. In 2006 after one of those raids two Israeli soldiers were abducted into Lebanon. Hezbollah demanded the release of several prisoners in exchange for the abducted. Israel retaliated and in a massive air and ground-campaign attacked Lebanon. Thousands died and Hezbollah lost quite an amount of fighters and infrastructure. Yet it

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106Traboulsi (2007) p.222

107Saad-Ghorayeb (2002) p.53

108Saad-Ghorayeb (2002) p.157

survived and that was what mattered for them.

Nasrallah gained popularity across sectarian lines and became a popular figure in the Arab political scenery. With protests in support of the group happening in several Arab countries.<sup>109</sup> While Iran founded Hezbollah and has always had a strong influence on it (the very flag of Hezbollah is almost an exact copy of the IRGC flag for example), it has always been a bit cautious about embracing Hezbollah too openly. It is after all deemed a terrorist organization by many and is allegedly involved in criminal activities around the world to fund itself.<sup>110</sup> Yet, when Hezbollah became popular Iran wanted part of the popularity cake, so embracing the organization and its leader became a much more common thing to do.

In 2010, Ahmadinejad visited Lebanon and Hezbollah and thousands of members of the party of God (the translation of the name Hezbollah) went to the streets to welcome the Iranian president in his first visit. He also visited Southern Lebanon, which had taken the brunt of Israeli attacks.<sup>111</sup> Hezbollah members of parliament embraced the president and emphasized the ideological proximity of the group with Iran.<sup>112</sup> This shows that Iran actively wanted to be associated with the militant group. Khatami the predecessor of Ahmadinejad had also traveled to Lebanon<sup>113</sup>, yet he had also pressed for a more political Hezbollah. Ahmadinejad embraced the militant group. He didn't want Iran to be seen as a stabilizing factor that turns a war-time militia into a political party as Khatami had done. Ahmadinejad wanted Iran to profit from the respect Hezbollah had gained as the first Arab army to defeat Israel. Furthermore by doing so, he fully embraced the stigma of a country supporting terrorism.

#### f) Street credit versus the international community

What associating with other “anti-imperialists” and militias or terrorists (depending on one's point of view) comes down, is a focus not so much on the politicians in the world and especially the Middle East but the people on the street. By following policies that are in line with wide-spread anti-US sentiment, Iran gained respect from the public. By becoming the anti-imperialist David facing down the US Goliath, Iran got respect from left and right wing opposition parties opposed to US foreign policy in the West, but more importantly in the Middle East. People in Egypt, Yemen, Jordan, and other countries, whose head of states went along with US policy, saw Iran as the true representative of Islamic and Middle Eastern interest. This created soft-power but it also challenged the West on a more fundamental level. By gaining popular support, they showcased once more that the West's talk about human rights and democracy is just rhetoric.

The closest allies of the West (besides Israel) are Saudi-Arabia and Egypt which are both as far removed from democracy as possible. This can be seen as an expression of the Iranian revolutionary belief, that in the long run (Islamic) revolutions will sweep away these unjust regimes and they will be replaced by governments on friendly terms with Iran. Moreover, it also challenges Western stigma, because if Iran is so popular and the West is so unpopular then the Western talk of democracy and people's will is hollow.

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109Norton (2014) p. 147

110Gleis/Berti (2012) p.71

111Worth (2010)

112MacLeod (2010)

113Wakin (2003)

On the other hand it is a solid attempt to create a different publicity, parallel to the official elites ruling these countries. By showing defiance, by mocking and attacking the US and the West Iran gained respect. That there was an attempt to create a new community against the US is evident in the relation with Venezuela. The verbal attacks that came along with actions, though aimed at endearing the anti-American elements around the world towards Iran. Especially the anti-Israel rhetoric, that has been part of Iranian policies since the Islamic revolution, sits well with the Arab public, which even in countries like Egypt and Jordan has only grudgingly accepted the existence of Israel.

While questioning the Holocaust as President Ahmadinejad did during a speech at Columbia<sup>114</sup>, might not appeal to a normal Western crowd it will be seen as challenging the West in its heartland in the Islamic world, where the historic reality of the Holocaust is largely unknown or sidelines in face of the narrative of the Palestinian suffering. That this Arab street view of Iran existed at the time is evident in the polls conducted, which showed that Nasrallah, leader of Hezbollah and ally of Iran, was the most beloved leader of the Arab world.<sup>115</sup> The Arab street also didn't perceive a possibly nuclear armed Iran as a threat.<sup>116</sup> By garnering this respect, President Ahmadinejad could make Iran popular with the people that Iran hoped would rise up one day similar to Iran's own Islamic revolution.

One again has to consider the perspective of Ahmadinejad. By making the Iranian anti-American stance popular he was creating future alliances in his mind. The people of the Middle East would eventually rise up against their rulers and then they would remember Iran for its stance. While this idealistic stance of course mattered, it also helped Iran in practical terms. The popularity of Iran or at times at least lack of hostility meant that leaders in the Middle East had to tread carefully because they can not count on the public backing them up in any moves against Iran. Moves that made Iran unpopular with the West made it popular with the Arab street. The US would have to fear that the mood in the Middle East would reach a critical boiling point.

The war against Iraq had seen anti-American sentiment rise to unknown heights and eventually this would reach critical mass. This severely limited American options if they did not want to face Middle East completely engulfed in flames and risk losing all their allies except Israel. It also impeded any feeble American attempts of winning hearts and souls. Iran was rather doing the winning.

It also made America's biggest problem of that time even more troublesome: Iraq has a Shiite majority that was increasingly looking to Iran for guidance. The more the Shias of Iraq started to like Iran the more the Americans had problems bringing peace to Iraq without Iranian consent. The unpopularity of the US in the Middle East and the increasing popularity of Iran also meant that the European countries, which have millions of immigrants and their descendants from the Muslim world living in their countries, were increasingly estranged from the US policies.

This shows that there was a realist underpinning of these policies which made the Americans dependent on Iran and only recognizing Iranian interest and status would enable the Americans to persuade the Iranians into a more constructive policy towards the US.

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114Global Research (2007)

115Haaretz Service (2008)

116Telhami (2010)

g)The letters to the US presidents

While Ahmadinejad's hostile rhetoric were the most prominent feature of his presidency, another aspect was that he wrote letters to US presidents. By congratulating even Obama for his winning of the presidency, he became the first Iranian president since the Islamic revolution to do so. The first letter to President Bush from 2006 asks Bush how he can bring together his Christian faith and the at times hypocritical US foreign policy, the US war on terror and the invasion of Iraq. He went on talking about Guantanamo bay prison, injustices in the war against Iraq. Here we see again the motive of justice and religion so common to Ahmadinejad. As in previous and later attempts he tried to make the West face and end the hypocrisy in its foreign policy between arguing for human rights and breaking them on a daily basis. He then goes on and talks about Israel saying about the Holocaust "Again let us assume that these events are true. Does that logically translate into the establishment of the state of Israel in the Middle East or support for such a state?"<sup>117</sup> Again he engages what he sees as trying to solve the root problem - namely to solve the Israel-Palestine issue, because then the concerns of the West over Iran's nuclear program would go away. But instead, he is reinforcing the perception that Iran poses a threat to Israel.

It is in Adler-Nissen's terminology an attempt of trying to overcome Stigma, and instead embracing it in the process. By trying to resolve the issues that causes the stigma to Iran, he reinforces it. He then makes a very interesting point by saying "I live amongst [sic] the people and am in constant contact with them --many people from around the Middle East manage to contact me as well"<sup>118</sup>. While this of course reinforces the argument made before that Ahmadinejad saw street credit as more important, here we see him as some one who wants to be perceived as the voice of the little man in the Middle-East and is trying to use this as argument with the US.

Using wide-spread agreement with Iranian concerns with US foreign policy as a form of soft-power pressure point, he then mentions the 1953 coup, support for Saddam and the shooting down of the Iranian airline plane among other things as grievances of the Iranian people against the US. He does bring this argument again after listing a long list of failed American policy, especially Iraq and the giant amount of US money spent on Iraq by arguing that if the US would have acted differently "And I am most sorry to say, would there have been an ever increasing global hatred of the American governments?"<sup>119</sup>.

In a similar matter, Ahmadinejad wrote a letter to the then-still president-elect Barack Obama in 2008. He congratulated him on winning the presidency and argued that now was the time for a fundamental change in US foreign policy that "the nations of the world expect an end to policies based on warmongering, invasion, bullying, trickery, the humiliation of other countries by the imposition of biased and unfair requirements, and a diplomatic approach that has bred hatred for America's leaders and undermined respect for its people. They want to see actions based on justice, respect for the rights of human beings and nations"<sup>120</sup>.

Again president Ahmadinejad makes the case for a fundamental change in US foreign policy. Yet he does not attack Israel, he argues that the US should be fairer to other countries and that the previous foreign policy only has created hatred and animosity, arguing instead for the rights of "the

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117Ahmadinejad (2006)

118Ahmadinejad (2006)

119Ahmadinejad (2006)

120Ahmadinejad (2008)

oppressed nations of Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan"<sup>121</sup>. It is still a text that very much carries the characteristic of Ahmadinejad's frequent references to God and the prophets, talks about justice and he still wants a fundamental change in US foreign policy. However, he is much less falling for the trappings of the stigmatization discourse, which indicates a heightened awareness of the impact of his words. Relations cooled down after this again and Ahmadinejad questioned whether the US was not truly the force behind 9/11, which of course caused a sharp response from Obama. But slowly contacts were made and negotiations started in 2012.

The letters show that beyond the hostile rhetoric Ahmadinejad wanted to engage with the West and genuinely hoped for a change in US foreign policy by holding the US to account over its rhetoric of human rights and democracy. Thus, while it presents a different approach, it does not represent a change in stance.

### 3. President Hassan Rouhani

#### a) Background

Hassan Rouhani, president after Ahmadinejad has been part of the elite of the Islamic Republic from the start. Born in 1948 he served in multiple appointments, being a member of the Assembly of Experts since 1999, and being speaker of parliament on several occasions. He negotiated with the Western powers in regard to Iran's nuclear program. Furthermore like almost all members of the elite he is a cleric with enough prestige to do ijthad - to make statements on law based on Islamic legal tradition and reason. In 2013, he applied to run for presidency, out of 680 candidates eight were allowed - the well connected Rouhani among them.

#### b) Rouhani's program

Running for president Rouhani managed a program that had to appeal to the Iranians and was in line with the principles of the Islamic revolutionary rules and of course, Rouhani's own convictions. Rouhani ran a campaign focusing on strengthening the civil society and bringing in more discussion. He he also wanted to strengthen the economy, especially by strengthening the private sector to create jobs, which, considering the high unemployment in Iran, are always very much in need.

Rouhani defended his actions as negotiator arguing that he improved the overall strategic and economic situation of Iran. He argued from a economic point of view that "when a centrifuge is supposed to keep spinning while the entire country remains stagnant, meaning that we launch the single Natanz nuclear facility, but hundreds of our factories face problems, stop operating or work at a 20-percent capacity due to a lack of parts, raw materials and sanctions... that we do not approve of."<sup>122</sup> The argument here is not that the nuclear program is wrong but that it damages the economy. This argument is one not unlike to those voiced in Europe at the beginning of the 20<sup>th</sup> century when social democrats argued against new battleships and wanted to expand the welfare state instead.

Rouhani appealed especially to the middle class that might be more interested in economic growth rather than expanding Iranian hard power through the threat of nuclear arms. This approach in his election campaign is the key to understanding his later negotiation strategy and how it was supposed to appeal domestically.

<sup>121</sup>Ahmadinejad (2008)

<sup>122</sup>Bello (2013)

Yet, he also said that, "Iran has an exclusively peaceful nuclear program, which under international law is lawful and indisputable. A politically motivated campaign of misinformation has persistently attempted to cast doubts on the exclusively peaceful nature of this program. This campaign is being fueled and directed first and foremost by Israel, in order to divert international attention not only from its own clandestine and dangerous nuclear weapons program, but also from its destabilizing and inhuman policies and practices in Palestine and the Middle East. Regrettably, the Security Council has discredited itself by allowing the United States to impose this counter-productive Israeli agenda. If elected, I will reverse this trend by restoring international confidence . . . Nuclear weapons have no role in Iran's national security doctrine, and therefore Iran has nothing to conceal. But in order to move towards the resolution of Iran's nuclear dossier, we need to build both domestic consensus and global convergence and understanding through dialogue."<sup>123</sup>

Again, we encounter the negative discourse, but this time there is a recognition on the Iranian side that a change of discourse is necessary. Rouhani in this speech said he wanted to restore Iranian reputation and normalize relations in order to resolve the nuclear issue in a face saving manner that respects Iranian right to nuclear energy. This is a very realist and constructivist approach at the same time. Realist in the way that it takes the world as it is. It is unfair to Iran that Israel has nuclear weapons but everybody talks about the Iranian "peaceful" nuclear program. However, bemoaning that fact and bringing up this unfairness as Ahmadinejad did leads to nothing. Rather it has to be accepted as a fact for the moment that has to be dealt with – that is the realist aspect.

Rouhani wants on the other hand to change perception of Iran in the world and fights this negative discourse of stigmatization. This is the constructivist aspect. Rouhani recognizes that the world is made up of ideas of discourses and he wants to engage with these and change them to better Iran's position in this world.

Domestically, Rouhani attempted a two pronged approach appealing to those who are disinterested or against the nuclear program with a clear message that the Iranian people and their economic well being would take precedent over the nuclear program. Yet, he also emphasized that Iran has a right to a nuclear program and he would safeguard Iran's rights in this aspect and thereby safeguard Iran's honor in the perception of those in favor of a nuclear program. Furthermore, he stressed that the international laws pushed for by the US many decades ago also applied to Iran and it was a country like all the others and it would not give up its rights. Going on the ideological offensive he attacked Israel as being behind a smear campaign against Iran, while Israel was using the Iran nuclear issue to distract from its "crimes" in Palestine. Yet the most crucial argument is that Israel has a nuclear program and more crucially a nuclear arms program, being in possession of nuclear arms and ICBMs. However, Israel would not be targeted with sanctions for this crass violation of international rules.

The insult towards Iran, against which Rouhani here is arguing, is therefore twofold: firstly, Israel is massively privileged. It has a massive army that has so far defeated all conventional foes that threatened its existence. In addition, it is allowed nuclear weapons over which there is no international oversight, and which enable it to literally evaporate all its neighboring states. Secondly Iran is denied a common right of states, namely the pursuit of nuclear energy for peaceful ends. This is a domestic

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123Pedram (2013)

argument that appeals to those that toe the official line in regard to Israel. Hence, Rouhani is not abandoning the anti-Israel stance and the nuclear deal is no shady backdoor way of making peace with Israel. Promising to be more open about Iran's nuclear program with the West he wants to normalize relations, lift the sanctions and rebuild Western trust into Iran.

In essence this means Iran will try to lose its stigmatized pariah status. He then went on and further explained, in regard to the relationship with the US, that in order to heal this "chronic wound, whose healing is difficult but possible, provided that good faith and mutual respect prevail". This again shows the main argument that for Iran - being a respected country and treated with good faith is very important. In Rouhani's view Iran and the West need not be enemies but in order to achieve this state Iran needs what is due respect. Moreover, normalization of relations with the USA is crucial to develop the Iranian economic potential.

Yet, even the realist, president Rouhani knew that this wouldn't come easily. He continued by saying "I have a phased plan to deescalate hostility to a manageable state of tension and then engage in promotion of interactions and dialogue between the two peoples to achieve detente, and finally reach to the point of mutual respect that both peoples deserve."

This is interesting because Rouhani indirectly recognizes something here that is usually overlooked. Iranian leaders often also lack respect in regard to the West. Rouhani didn't just demand respect in relation to the West, he was willing to go down a path where over time both sides learned to live with each other and then start to respect each other. Furthermore, he was willing to give in exchange for respect by the West and Iran would become more respectful towards the West. The "death to America" shouts the talking of a "decadent, rotten, corrupt, etc. West" all stand testimony to the fact that in this relationship both sides could do with a better rhetoric. But it also underlines again a recognition that Iran's biggest problem is the negative discourse around it and that the aggressive rhetoric and demonstrations do not help Iran to overcome that issue.

### c) Western Media coverage

When considering how Rouhani was able to regain respect from the West one has to consider how he was portrayed in Western media. The western media discourse around him created PR credit which he could use to challenge the negative discourse that surrounded Iran. This shows that not only was Rouhani trying a different approach, he was given a fair chance in Western media to change the discourse and this in turn created pressure on Western leaders to negotiate honestly with him. A few examples will be used to show how the western media created a positive image, which Rouhani then could use to rework Iran's image in the West and thereby make it a respected country once more.

The German periodical "Der Spiegel" called him the "new hope"<sup>124</sup>, CNN saw in him the man to revive the reform movement<sup>125</sup>. "Le monde" called him the "diplomatic mullah"<sup>126</sup>.

While many cautioned that Rouhani was still a man of the system, there was a widespread hope that Rouhani would facilitate change. Rouhani is traditionally counted as a conservative or a moderate but he created serious hope for a nuclear deal and a new foreign policy in Iran. Usually, Iran was portrayed as being irrational and especially in secular Europe the theocratic regime caused unease.

Maybe it was the hope that there would finally return some reason to the Middle East or a genuine fear of a nuclear war in the Middle East. However, it does not matter so much what reasons

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124 Salloum (2013)

125 Sayah (2013)

126 Ayad, Golshiri and Michel (2013)

caused the positive change. There was a 180 degree turn and it contrasted sharply with the previous representation of Iran as an irrational and dangerous country.

That Rouhani gained the prestige as a "rational" leader was therefore a substantial change. That this change worked despite the Islamic Republic not changing can be seen in an incident that cannot but look obscure to outside observers.

Will Pherell, an Afro-American musician struck gold with his song "Happy" which was a global success. The artist invited people from around the world to make videos from themselves singing and dancing to his song. While there are presumably thousands of such videos on the Internet the one made by some young Iranians caused somewhat more attention. Because for breaking the Islamic rules (singing, dancing, women posing without hijabs), these young people were arrested.<sup>127</sup> Western commentators saw this of course as further evidence of the oppressive and backward Iranian system.

While illegal parties are very common in Iran and drugs and alcohol are readily available on the black market, the problem in this case was that it constituted a public incident with the video being readily available on YouTube. The young people had to publicly apologize and were sentenced to whipping. Yet, Rouhani's tweeted something that greatly helped ease the pressure on Iran and salvaged some of its reputation abroad. By tweeting "#Happiness is our people's right. We shouldn't be too hard on behaviors caused by joy."<sup>128</sup>, he gained back some control over the narrative.

Thus, he could use his positive image in the West to keep Iran somewhat respected in the context of a situation that was widely considered absurd. Here was clear evidence that the Iranian president had regained the initiative in the battle for the discourse. He could show that Iran was more than old mullahs punishing young people longing for freedom and fun.

#### d) Rouhani's interviews with the West

Rouhani gave several interviews after becoming president in the years 2013/2014 which he used to propagate his agenda, as well as make the case for a nuclear deal. They are interesting because they show how Rouhani on the one hand tried to regain control over the discourse but also showed tactics he would employ during the negotiations. When asked whether Iran could be more flexible in its stance in the negotiations President Rouhani answered: "Flexibility meaning exactly what? For any country, there are red lines, there are borders trespassing which are unacceptable. We are not a government that can make the final decisions because they must be the decisions and the expression of the will and wishes of the people – as the government's chosen through the ballot box by the people, we can represent their decisions. But something that is ultimately unacceptable by our population, we cannot accept."<sup>129</sup> This statement highlights that Rouhani could use democracy as a weapon. Respect for democratic votes is a core idea of Western states. When challenged to be more forthcoming Rouhani can point to democracy and say that it can not be demanded of him what would be rightly perceived as scandalous if demanded of a Western democratic state.

This approach shows a cunning skill in negotiating but also the importance of regaining respect. Because his election was greeted with high Western hopes Rouhani was put in a position from which he could use respect to further the Iranian position. Because Iran (besides respect) strives for nuclear energy and technology. When asked how a situation that is beneficial for both sides would look like the

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127BBC (2014)

128Rouhani via Twitter (2013)

129Amanpour (2014)

answer by President Rouhani was: “The meaning of win-win is that the negotiating countries should respect and recognize and accept the legitimate, peaceful nuclear rights of Iran. And on our side, to bring about the necessary confidence among the opposing parties that our program is peaceful.” and that Iran “want[s] the Americans to express that they do recognize, respect and accept all of Iran's legal rights in its peaceful pursuit of nuclear technology”<sup>130</sup>. The attempt here by the Iranian president is to make the discourse less about the issue of nuclear weapons but instead about the rights of the Iranian people to peacefully pursue nuclear energy.

Rouhani emphasized that Iran was not pursuing nuclear weapons and cites that Iran has signed the Non-proliferation-treaty, is being supervised by the IAEA and that Iran has deemed nuclear weapons “haram” - forbidden by Islamic law. Thereby he challenged the discourse element that argued that Iran was pursuing nuclear weapons, with another argument from said discourse. If Iranians are deeply religious and irrational they will not pursue nuclear weapons since they are forbidden by religious law. If they are contrary to the dominant argument rational rather than irrational, then one can make a deal with them if the offer is good enough.

In an interview with the Washington Post, Rouhani again tried to regain control over the discourse by highlighting that Iran hadn't broken any deals and was on the contrary very transparent about its nuclear program. He said that “between 2003 and 2005 and [sic] we actually gave the IAEA authority to supervise a number of our military sites that they were concerned about, as well. If the IAEA or the West sought to clarify or shed light on our activity we would be transparent. And why is it that when we go through transparent steps it is only Iran? I would say that in fact one principle issue on our mind is: Is the sensitivity of the nuclear issue just an excuse, or is it really a real question?”<sup>131</sup> This highlights again that Rouhani wants his country to be treated fairly. Iran is willing to be transparent but wants that then in turn to be recognized as the act of goodwill it is. And again, the president of Iran reiterated the point that trust needed to be built up for any deal to work.

Why is trust so important? Rouhani is the candidate of the middle class i.e. of all those that want to advance economically, that want to move beyond a revolutionary state which doesn't offer much to its citizens in terms of economic benefits. But for that he needs foreign investors, who will not invest in a country distrusted by the West. If Iran's position as a country with legitimate rights and interests is not taken into account by the Western powers there will not be an economic dividend of the nuclear deal. Because companies will be very reluctant to invest and this is exactly what happened.

#### e) The deal

After his election in 2013 negotiations took on a new pace. Rouhani said he wanted a new agreement reached in a few months time not a few years.<sup>132</sup> this attitude again makes sense since the first few months of a presidency are usually the ones where a leader leaves the biggest mark. In November 2013 in Geneva, after a few days of negotiations, the Joint Plan of Action, otherwise known as the Geneva interim agreement, was concluded by Iran and the P5+1 (the five permanent UN security members – China, France, Russia, USA, United Kingdom - and Germany) plus the EU.

It was a *quid pro quo* which saw a decrease in sanctions in return for a freeze in parts of Iranian nuclear program. It was a trust building exercise and also it was the first official agreement Iran and the

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130Curry (2013)

131Ignatius (2013)

132Ignatius (2013)

US concluded since the Islamic revolution. Thereby it was the first step towards making Iran a regular country once more. Iran granted access to the IAEA to more facilities, desisted from opening new facilities, left most of its centrifuges non-operational and didn't enrich more Uranium. In return the Iranian automobile industry was relieved of sanctions and Iran was able to buy spare parts for its planes. Here we see the focus on the economy that was characteristic of the Rouhani approach.

The Iranian foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif saw Iran's right to nuclear enrichment safeguarded through the agreement, while the US interpreted it a bit different and each side could proclaim themselves successful winners of the negotiations. For Iran this meant it was saving its face and the government could proclaim to internal critics that it had safeguarded the Iranian rights.

On January 20<sup>th</sup> the agreement was formally activated. It then took in total one and a half years in the P5+1 plus the EU format to reach a final deal. A first deadline which had been set for 24<sup>th</sup> November 2014, needed to be extended to 1<sup>st</sup> July 2015. During those negotiations Iran agreed to convert its 20% Uranium into fuel and in return more than 2,8 billion \$ in frozen assets were freed. But finally the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (*barnāme'ye jāme'e eqdāme moshtarak* in Persian) was agreed upon by all sides.

Respect was a major point of debate in this negotiations with the Iranian foreign minister lamenting how the sanctions were an insult to his country's dignity, which, in turn, led to the American foreign minister saying that “[Iran] is not the only nation with pride”<sup>133</sup>. While this heated exchange of words makes for a nice anecdote it shows how Iran was using the right to respect as a means of diplomacy, although with limits given the American reaction.

Respect, it has to be said, was always a gateway to other things. When Iranian politicians talked about respect they of course wanted respect but they wanted it in order to facilitate trade, get Iranian status recognized and get assurances for any deals made and to weaken and overcome the stigma discourse.

After the agreement the Iranian foreign minister was proud to say that he achieved the objective of “maintaining Iran’s dignity and might, establishing the nuclear program, enrichment and retaining the heavy-water reactor.”<sup>134</sup>. It had become a focal point for Iran that its right to nuclear power had to be maintained and that was achieved. Iran could like any other country proclaim that right, and even though it had to compromise the right was maintained. It also showed that the Americans recognized respect and pride as important factors and saw that Iran wanted that from them.

The final agreement which was reached in April 2015 would encompass that Iran would accept restrictions on its nuclear program in some aspects for a few years and increased inspections by the IAEA in return for a lifting of the sanctions. An important factor here is that the agreement is based on the Nuclear-non-proliferation Treaty rules.<sup>135</sup> Which means that Iran can feel being treated like a normal state, according to the international rules and norms, while the West gets the assurances to overcome anxieties about Iran secretly building a nuclear bomb.

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133DeYoung and Morello (2015)

134Teheran Times (2015)

135Acton, Dalton, Hibbs and Perkovich (2015)

That the treaty was agreed upon in the context of the existing treaties also appealed to Iranian sentiment of normalizing relations with the world. Moreover, the negotiations showed a heightened American understanding of Iran when the US foreign minister asked the Iranian foreign minister whether he had the power by both the president and the supreme leader to make an agreement.<sup>136</sup> This showed an American awareness for the fact that the democratically elected president of Iran does not make the final decisions.

While the nuclear sanctions are lifted Iran also gets access to over a 100 billion \$ of assets frozen as after eight years EU sanctions are lifted (among other against the IRGC). Sanctions in regard to missiles would remain for eight years. Furthermore all extraordinary sanctions would end after a maximum of 15 years, meaning after that time Iran would be considered trustworthy enough and become a normal state. It would also mean that Iran would reach this post-stigma status when the last of the Islamic revolutionaries have retired or died, opening up a *tabula rasa* for a new generation of politicians<sup>137</sup>.

The agreement also established a mechanism, whereby if any participant sees the other as violating the agreement they can refer to a joint commission. If Iran breaks the agreement all the sanctions are automatically reimposed without any of the veto powers being able to stop them.

#### f) Reactions to the deal

In Iran the reaction to the deal getting agreed in April was celebrations. In Tehran people were dancing on the streets, music being played and the streets became clogged with people celebrating. Rouhani certainly had the gratitude and the respect of the majority of Iranians for his conducting of the nuclear deal.

The Israeli leadership of course was not happy over the agreement but in general the Western reaction had a marked new tone. Europe was relieved that this long simmering crisis had been resolved. The threat of war had ended and the very real prospect of a nuclear arms race in the Middle-East that had captivated European fears and caused anxieties. Russia in its reaction reaffirmed Iran's right to nuclear energy.<sup>138</sup> Most European leaders expressed their happiness about the fact that now a nuclear armed Iran had been prevented. But, also another topic came into the fray, Guy Verhofstadt said that "This positive energy must not be wasted. It's crucial we now engage with Iran and the Arab states in eliminating ISIS and bringing stability"<sup>139</sup>. Even in the initial reactions the Europeans already hoped to make Iran a partner in the region, especially in the fight against ISIS, which at that time still was in possession of much of Iraq and Syria and had a considerable land force at its disposal.

Iran was getting respect, remarks by French foreign minister Laurent Fabius illustrate the point especially clearly, when he said "if Iran, an important country, a great civilization, a major actor in the region, clearly makes the choice of cooperation, we will pay tribute to this evolution but we will judge on results. Its contribution would be useful to solve numerous crisis"<sup>140</sup>. As if following the respect playbook he pays homage to Iran's long history, its regional power and acknowledges it as a necessary partner giving it the long sought status recognition.

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<sup>136</sup>DeYoung and Morello (2015)

<sup>137</sup>Sick (2015)

<sup>138</sup>Al-Jazeera (2015)

<sup>139</sup>De La Baume and Palmeri (2015)

<sup>140</sup>De La Baume and Palmeri (2015)

Obama in his speech, kept the door open for further negotiations on other issues on the basis of “mutual interests and mutual respect”<sup>141</sup>. While Obama faced down heavy criticism by Republicans and the Israeli lobby alike he emphasized that sanctions against Iran that have different reasons than the nuclear program would stay in place and that as long Iran posed a threat to Israel relations wouldn't normalize. Thus the bellicose rhetoric was gone and now the talk was about economic chances and controls. Iran had gained massive increase in reputation and against the stigmatizing discourse.

It was in the following months and years that the true impact of the nuclear accord was to be felt. President Hassan Rouhani was invited by leaders from Europe to visit and conclude trade and investment agreements. Iran went on what the press deemed a shopping spree. Buying planes from Airbus and after a visit to France, Peugeot-Citroen announced a return to the Iranian market to partner up with the Iranian Iran Khodro car-producer. On his visit to Italy something remarkably happened. When visiting the Capitoline Museum the Italian government had all the naked statues hidden by cardboard. This was done in order to appease the visitor from the Islamic republic. This caused criticism from Western media but it showed that the Italian government was genuinely concerned with respecting the Iranian leader. Smilingly in January 2016 Rouhani could declare that “everyone has realized now that Iran is a reliable country”<sup>142</sup>. The media discourse changed dramatically.

The focus thereafter shifted away from the now non-existing nuclear issue to Iranian involvement in the fight against ISIS. While Western states were still dismayed by Iran backing Assad the Iranian backed Shia militias in Iraq were seen as a welcome force to stem the black tide of ISIS. Iran had become an important factor in the war against ISIS in the mind of many Europeans maybe even a partner. Western journalists made reports traveling with Iranian backed forces and there was respect spreading – respect for the martial prowess of Iran's proxies but also for Iran itself which had often created these forces or made them into what they were through their elite Al-Quds brigades.

By fighting ISIS, Rouhani taps into a well of legitimacy that is available to states since 9/11. Dictators around the globe were able to make themselves indispensable allies to the US in the aftermath of the beginning of the war on terror. States like Uzbekistan became allies, profited from US military aid and from leasing out military bases or fly-over rights. The deal put Iran into a position where it could create further legitimacy and become even at times a partner which made it necessary for the West to respect Iran and take its status and interests into account.

#### g) Trump era 2016-up to this day

In the US Trump had promised during the run-up to his presidency to end the Iran nuclear deal, calling it the worst deal ever. His at times belligerent rhetoric caused considerable concern in Europe, where many pinned hopes on the deal stabilizing the Middle East and ending the threat of war. Trump demands to renegotiate the deal<sup>143</sup>. With Trump the stigmatization discourse was back accusing Iran of pursuing nuclear weapons and posing an existential threat to Israel.

Iran and its President obviously can't just go back to the drawing board and renegotiate just because the US President wants it without losing face. So, the Iranian interactions in regard to the deal in the time of President Trump is quite interesting in regard to respect and how Iran is using respect in

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141 Time Staff (2015)

142BBC (2016)

143Miller (2018)

order to get what it wants - keeping the current deal.

Since Trump became president it was awaited with anxiety whether he would rip the agreement apart or keep it. The young French president Macron took up the torch and announced that the treaty can be renegotiated in a meeting with the US president, which resulted in extensive media coverage.<sup>144</sup> The problem was that neither Russia, China, Germany or Iran wanted to do that. Rouhani's reaction as it was reported on this meeting was that he said "They say that with the certain leader of a European country we want to make a decision about a seven-sided agreement,[...] For what? With what right?"<sup>145</sup> While this emphasizes the multilateral nature of the agreement, it also shows an important Iranian sentiment, anti-imperialism. Iran likes the current deal and of course doesn't want a worse deal for itself. But what Iran definitively doesn't want is France and the US making a deal on how a new agreement has to look like, just because they want to without consulting Iran.

This brings back memories of Russia and the United Kingdom splitting up Persia (along with the rest of Eurasia) into zones of influence with no regard to local people or their interests and even using Persia as a battlefield in world war one.<sup>146</sup> While this shows grave incompetence on the side of the West, it also shows that an Iranian leader can not just ignore the Iranian public and its strong nationalist sentiment. It also shows something else since Rouhani in his reaction asked with what right these two leaders decide that the deal needs renegotiating. Iran wants to be respected and sees the nuclear deal as an important step into the right direction - becoming a respected country. Giving in now would lead to an internal questioning of that strategy, with internal critics gaining momentum.

The internal politics of Iran constitute outlook of Iran and Iran and other countries constitute the International order, so these aspects are connected. Yet, it also shows how Iran uses respect as a defense because it can claim to adhere to the program and thereby show itself as a respectable country while making the US look like the aggressor that breaks treaties and France makes itself look ridiculous by being subservient to the US when it demands a renegotiation.

Rouhani will in all due likelihood understand that the IRGC's testing of missile and continued investment in that technology create concerns. As previously mentioned Trump's concern in regard to that technology are not completely unfounded yet the missile program was not part of the deal (and Rouhani's influence on the IRGC is very limited, if there is any at all).

Since 2017, the US has been imposing sanctions in order to curb the missile program targeting people and companies associated with it<sup>147</sup>. President Trump threatening the deal put new pressure on Iran. Companies shunned away from investing fearing to loose their money if sanctions were imposed on a later stage. Iran needed a tactic to react to the US president's rhetoric. The one employed by Iran shall be shown here. President Rouhani appealed to the US foremost to stick to the deal, arguing "if America carries out any violations today, the whole world will condemn America. They will not condemn Iran"<sup>148</sup>.

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144Davis and Rogers (2018)

145BBC (2018)

146McMeekin (2016) p.290

147BBC (2017)

148Al-Jazeera (2017)

The argument being that by breaking a deal the US would isolate itself, rather than Iran and that the US would be considered as a rogue state. Calling Trump a “rogue newcomer to the world of politics”, further calling out the US by saying that “by violating its international commitments, the new US administration only destroys its own credibility and undermines international confidence in negotiating with it or accepting its word or promise”<sup>149</sup>, shows how Iran was now trying to use the factor of trust and standing in its own defense. Calling upon the US to stick to the deal or face losing a lot respect abroad. This is smart when dealing with country leaders aware of the importance of international reputation and interested in keeping it.

Rouhani made the deal a centerpiece of his presidency and he faced massive internal opposition against it. Making a deal with the West was always considered a risk. Internal critics, especially hardliners who might even prefer the siege situation, to have an excuse for high military spending and to excuse lack of economic growth and opportunity by blaming the conflict with the West for the economic hardships. Khamenei, who was always suspicious of the deal said in 2018, after the deal had been ended by Trump, that “I said many times from the first day: don’t trust America,”. And he added, “I don’t trust these three countries,” Britain, France and Germany”<sup>150</sup>.

Iranian internal critics that always saw the West as untrustworthy, with America having malevolent intentions towards the Muslim world and Europe either being in cohorts with the USA or too weak to stand up to it, saw themselves proven right.

#### **IV. Link between case study and broader Iran foreign policy**

##### **1. Status and respect in Iranian foreign policy**

The Iranian leadership is extremely distrustful of the West. The coup against Mossadegh and the support for Saddam Hussein are still very vivid memories and will remain so because they are passed on by the old generation. But what the negotiations showed the willingness of Iran to engage, to compromise and to work in the context of international organizations to deal with the West. Yet, it demands real concessions, Iran did not want to sell out on its rights. On the contrary Iran wants its status respected and normalized. Furthermore, Iran was not willing to give up its right to nuclear power but have its use of it controlled.

When looking at issues of Syria or the Iranian missile program this means that Iran will be willing to accommodate other interests as well if its interests are maintained. However, in order to do so it must feel like the other side is sincere. This level of trust and this sincerity is best shown through respect. Accepting that Iran has a place in this world and that it has legitimate interests. The Ahmadinejad era showed that attacking Iran and stigmatizing it over its actions leads nowhere. In consequence, Iranian hardliners were getting stronger and embracing their bad reputation as a badge of honor – testimony to their unbroken revolutionary spirits and actions. Three rounds of sanctions were imposed and Iran did not budge, but the moment the West was willing to engage in serious negotiations, Iran was willing to talk. As soon as respect and recognition of Iranian rights and status became dominant themes in the Western discourse Iran was willing to engage in discussion.

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149Morello, Gearan (2017)

150Reuters (2018)

What this case study shows is that Iranian foreign policy is always an extension of domestic policy and that different leaders use different attempts to strengthen and please their domestic power base and further their own ideological goals. It also shows that under a leader competent and interested in these matters Iran proved itself quite capable of changing the narrative, with Rouhani bringing new hope to the West of a more peaceful, cooperative Middle East and overcoming the stigmatization. In this context it is also noteworthy that Rouhani showed that Iranian leaders can very well use Western media and rifts in Western foreign policy for their own advantage. In his interviews he was able to promote himself as someone willing to make compromises increasing in turn pressure on the West. Iran is also currently trying to salvage the deal and get as much out of it with the European powers who want to keep the deal. Iranian ability to change the narrative is therefore a topic that needs to be considered increasingly.

Yet, there was a constant theme in Iranian foreign policy under both, the presidents Ahmadinejad and Rouhani Iran: wanted to be perceived as a regional power. The final treaty was not agreed between regional countries and the US, but by the world powers. This global relevance that was granted to Iran is seen as their rightful place by the Iranians. Likewise will the Palestine-Israel conflict, the Kurdish question and the Syrian civil war not be resolvable in the way of Western interest, if Iran is not recognized and its interests sufficiently pleased.

This analysis also shows that Iran has become far more accepting of the international order. Even during the much more ideologically heated Ahmadinejad era Iran was willing to engage the West. International laws and norms have shown themselves to be very useful tools for Iranian power politics. Even the democracy in Iraq styled after West rather than the Islamic Republic of Iran turned into an ally of Iran by sheer force of demographics and one-man-one-vote. The right to nuclear energy on the other hand was a useful weapon in the negotiations.

That Iran is also trying to get more attention towards its fight against ISIS shows that Iran wants to be perceived as a regional power. It wants its status as a regional power recognized and thereby legitimized. That is also something that became evident in the negotiations. Iran wants to be recognized as a regional power by the West and thereby have its position legitimized.

To summarize respect and status recognition link up to all other topics of Iranian foreign policy. It touches upon the topic of Iran striving for the status of regional power with two very different approaches by two very different presidents and how Iranian foreign policy is linked with domestic policy and power struggles, especially when a president is perceived as too soft. It also shows that there is a faction in Iran that has a genuine interest in normalizing relations with the West but not on purely Western terms. Furthermore, it illustrates that Iran is capable of changing narratives and that there is no discursive hegemony of the West anymore.

## **2. Wider implications respect in international relations**

When looking at respect in the context of the Iran nuclear deal, it appears at first marginally. The aspect seems no really relevant and is shoved to the sidelines compared with the lifting of the sanctions and the hope connected to that of economic growth. However, investments that stimulate that very growth are built on trust. A country that is an international pariah will never see as much investment as a respected member of the international community. A country that is not respected lacks a legitimacy protection, other countries have. Every lifted sanction means more respect. It is not so

important what the deal said, it was important what it implied and what everybody understood that from now on companies and countries could once more make deals with Iran.

The other aspect is recognition of status and interests. Respecting other countries' status and interests does not always come easy to countries competing for both. The realists see this as proof that respect does not matter. For countries to come to terms they need to recognize each others interests and learn to balance them out and respect in this analysis does not matter. Yet, the opposite is true in fact. For a country to trust another countries to respect its interests and to honor any deals, they must firstly feel like the other party is sincere. If the other side does not show respect this sincerity can be questioned.

Going away from a realist perspective to a constructivist perspective, a country wants to be respected, because other countries will be less likely to act against it. If a country becomes respected and can permanently change its image other countries will change its behavior. Furthermore, respect still forms the foundation for other political and economic interests but it is much less of a trust building measure than an attempt at building solid relations.

What this thesis showed is that, respect is the foundation of negotiations between partners not trusting each other. It is also the most important gain for stigmatized countries, because only by becoming respected can they hope to get access to Western investments. This means, when looking why negotiations between Western and non-western pariah started in the first place or not, something that is often hard to establish. It might help to look at how did Western leaders accommodate the others side need for respect? Looking for example at Libya under Qaddafi, when after decades as a pariah openly supporting terrorists he became a partner of the West being able to more easily sell his oil and gas to Europe and becoming Europe's gatekeeper against unwanted migration. In the following, he got to visit European heads of states and their capitals on lengthy visits.

When looking at successful Western negotiations such case studies can be quite revealing in regard to the extent that respect matters in international relations. While realists will insist that economic and political factors matter more the trust building that needs to happen in-between states so that the formerly stigmatized country can realistically believe that the other side is honest about their intentions. On the other hand there is a realistic reason for country's wanting to become respected and that is aforementioned economic reasons.

What the Ahmadinejad era also showed was that leaders will challenge other powers in order to strengthen their position via their power-base and that disrespect towards a country can greatly help that country's leadership solidify its position. By embracing stigma as Adler-Nissen writes, countries can become beacons of resistance. The Iranian case, like the Cuba case, she mentions in her article, show how this constant barrage does not help break the country. Iran became popular especially for supporting Hezbollah and defying the West and Israel. So, when looking how regimes that face sanctions and threats manage to stay in power, one should also consider that insults and attacks help the regime because it feeds directly into their rhetoric and can create a siege mentality.

Summarizing the nuclear deal shows how respect can be used to facilitate negotiations and how it builds trust. It also enables countries to develop a working relationship where previously non-existed. It also shows that when working on governments with an anti-Western outlook one should not underestimate these state's desire to still have their status recognized and to come to terms with the

West and create a working relationship.

### 3. Current state of play

In May 2018, President Trump ended the deal imposing new sanctions because neither Iran nor other parties involved in the treaty were willing to renegotiate according to his wishes. Threatening sanctions, the US seems hell-bent on forcing its will on Iran, while Israel used Fox-news to promote his view that Iran was still a major threat. However, the renewed US attempt to negotiate a better deal failed because the US was unwilling to accept Iran as a country that they can not command - that would have required respecting Iranian anti-Imperialism - rather than a country they would have to make an offer to.

While no substantial new information has been released, the most common criticism voiced against the deal is that the Iranian missile program is not covered. It also did nothing to ease Israeli unease about the IRGC building a foothold in Syria from which to strike against Israel directly. But rather than talk with Iran directly and offer something to achieve a solution the US opted for trying to force Iran on its knees through sanctions. This policy, which China, Russia and the EU will not support at this point, does not seem like a feasible solution to stop any potential Iranian nuclear program.

While the US isn't able to end the deal in legal terms. The US can sanction any company making deals with Iran. The US and affiliated markets are too big and important for companies to be risked over Iran. Companies like Peugeot don't even try to challenge US sanctions but simply give up on any business opportunities in Iran.<sup>151</sup> The EU which is already locked in a trade-dispute with President Trump will also unlikely challenge the US. Overall the US is ending the deal by force and massively damaging its reputation in the process, but it works. The Iranian defense strategy didn't work because Trump doesn't care about the loss of respect. It would be speculative to wonder why, but the fact remains that he ended the deal.

In June 2018, Iran then announced to open a new facility building centrifuges, but citing that "What we are doing does not violate the [2015 nuclear] agreement," he said, specifying this was just the start of the production process and "does not mean that we will start assembling the centrifuges"<sup>152</sup>. While both the IAEA and the EU stated that it did not violate the deal and negotiations between Iran and Europe continue, it seems increasingly like the situation is reverting back to pre-deal era. The importance put on the deal shows that Iran tries to salvage its reputation and the respect it got from Europe over into the post-deal era, even though European companies were already hesitant before the new sanctions to operate in Iran. The economic boom some hoped the deal would cause never materialized<sup>153</sup>. In addition, this economic argument has since then lost its power in favor of the deal, which shows that Iran is not driven by a purely economic desire to retain a respectful relationship with Europe.

This outcome will make future deals between the USA and Iran impossible because respect and status recognition will no longer work to build the level of trust on the Iranian side needed to make agreements. The Iranian government has democratic elements but the general line of foreign policy is

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<sup>151</sup>Keohane (2018)

<sup>152</sup>Agence France-Presse (2018)

<sup>153</sup>O'Toole (2017)

determined by people who are not democratically elected. They have observed a sudden change in US politics, that was even unexpected by most Western observers. This change killed the deal, which means that even if Iran feels respected and trusts a Western government it might very likely not make a deal because it has no assurances that after elections a new government might just rip apart any agreed deal.

There is also the domestic aspect. Rouhani is extremely humiliated, because he was the main driving force behind the policy of getting respected and thereby getting a deal. Not only did the deal end, the promised economic growth that respect and a new status should have brought but never materialized.

In future interactions, Iran will most likely instead demand material substantial concessions before even start negotiations, so that any leader engaging in such an endeavor will always be able to claim something material if the negotiations break down or the treaty is again ripped apart. The importance Iran places on having its status recognized will not go away though. Iran will increasingly rely on parallel networks of international cooperation with Russia and China to have its status recognized while trying to increasingly use rift between the US and Europe to get as much as possible from the rest of the deal. For example, trying to get 300 million Euros out of Germany by plane to secure these funds. The US government vehemently opposed to this pressured Germany into finding a way to block the move.

In general, the international situation is in shift, with the USA under President Trump. He has repeatedly attacked NATO, WTO, UNO and of course has ended the Iran nuclear deal. A world without the international organizations that many Western observers see as instrumental to a more peaceful, fairer and more prosperous world which are currently under attack.

## V. Conclusion

It is not possible to entirely appreciate how 'being respected' could open up economic and strategic opportunities for Iran, as the lifting of sanctions determined by the 2015 Iranian deal has not in fact taken place. Iran was indeed able to gain respect and legitimacy for its aspirations as a Middle Eastern power, but only temporarily. The US kept sanctioning Iran for its missile program and President Donald J. Trump has announced a unilateral US withdrawal from the deal, which has simply restored the traditional political mobilization of stigma against Iran. However the mirage of economic growth and political cooperation were conditional to the recognition of Iran's status, as Iran became respected in the eyes of the West, although such recognition ended up being ephemeral. Likewise, the lifting of sanctions and the reaffirmation of the right to a peaceful use of nuclear energy needed for Iran to overcome the stigma of being accused of the pursuit of nuclear weapons has by now been reversed. Therefore, it was more important than all the other factors because, without respect, all other outcomes would have been impossible.

By becoming respected, Iran also became more attracting for investors. This meant that Iran was now a feasible partner for Western states in the Middle East. Especially in Europe, hopes ran high that, together with Iran, ISIS could be defeated and in the long run a peaceful order could be brought to the Middle East. Put it otherwise, Europe was accepting Iran as a regional power and recognized its status. All this created expectations that, in the long run, Iran could secure a legitimized role and

influence in the Middle East, through a trust-building process based on the elimination of the traditional post-1979 stigma and the rise of a new Western narrative of Iran as a ‘trusted partner’. Iran tried to use its cooperation with the IAEA and the treaty as a proof of its commitment to international norms and treaties and a guarantee that Iran can be trusted. Accordingly, the major expectation was that new sanctions and a renewed hostile discourse would be less likely to come back, especially as the EU, China and Russia were trying to save the deal even after Trump ended it.

The vitality of ‘being respected’ for Iran’s international and domestic politics is evidenced by the fact that both Ahmadinejad and Rouhani have sought it, although diverging in style. Both presidents negotiated with the West and both presidents sought to maintain Iran's right to the use of nuclear energy. In addition, both pursued the recognition of Iran’s status. Yet, Ahmadinejad embraced the stigma and the negative discourse that the West was forcing upon Iran.

When being accused of supporting terrorists, he embraced Hezbollah more openly. He appealed to other countries challenging the West, forming alliances against the US and building street credit with the people of the Middle East rather than working with the governments allied with the US. On the contrary, Rouhani recognized how harmful the stigma was to Iran, its people and its economy as well as its status. He continuously challenged the stigma. A first step he took in doing so was making clear that he wanted a deal, that he wanted to normalize relations and that he was willing to compromise. The other aspect was that Ahmadinejad antagonized the West unnecessarily by questioning the Holocaust and attacking Israel.

President Ahmadinejad demanded respect in the form of a fair and equal treatment, respect for Iranian rights to nuclear energy and that the West would curb Israeli mistreatment of Palestinians and end the privileged Israeli nuclear status. Yet, this was delusional. For countries like the US or especially Germany, the security of Israel is a core *raison d’État*.<sup>154</sup> The form of respect Ahmadinejad wanted he could not get. Hence Iranian rights would not be respected if he threatened Israel in any form, since change in policy with regard to Israel by the West would likewise not happen.

President Hassan Rouhani contributed of course to the “anti-Zionist” line domestically as well but he worked very hard to be perceived as open-minded, reformist and rational in the West. By building up a positive image of himself he was able to challenge the negative discourse around Iran, which had went on for a long time unchallenged under Ahmadinejad. His much softer tone and more compromising approach and the media credit he got beforehand of course helped.

A fact that infuriated the Israeli leadership around Prime Minister Benjamin Netanyahu calling Hassan Rouhani a “wolf in sheep's clothing”<sup>155</sup> President Rouhani recognized that he would only damage Iranian reputation by pounding the Israel issue and trying to remove the root of the problem – Western security concerns about Israel. Instead he took Western concerns seriously and was able to achieve a deal and make Iran a respected country once more. He did not try to win over the wider Muslim world or form alliances with other countries with an anti-imperialist sentiment, he wanted to negotiate with the West and become a normal country once more. In contrast, Ahmadinejad wanted the West to engage in a discussion about Palestine and the Israeli nuclear weapons. While Ahmadinejad was certainly right to lament the different treatment lashed out for Israel and Iran, it didn't lead him anywhere. Rouhani was much more realistic, concluding that the West would never go down this path.

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154Burg (2014)

155Watkins (2013)

He instead engaged in discussion with the West not in terms of justice but in terms of finding a solution that would be a compromise between Iran's right to nuclear energy and Western anxieties.

It was the right conclusion given that anti-Israeli or even more extreme anti-Semitic rhetoric makes leaders persona non-grata in the West and causes massive disrespect for such countries in the media. Any country or group threatening the existence of Israel will be treated accordingly by the West. For a country in the Middle East to be treated normally by the West and even more if it wants to engage in lucrative trade and gain access to military aid it must abide by these rules. Either having peace and relations with Israel like Morocco, Egypt and Jordan or simply ignore the issue and have a *modus operandi* in regard to Israel like Saudi-Arabia.

There was also a difference between both in the way they used respect and associated concepts in the negotiations as concepts. For Rouhani it was about trust, which he needed for his economic policy, and negotiation and cooperation in a mutually respecting manner. For Ahmadinejad respect was about justice and recognition of Iranian rights. Khatami's approach was very similar to Rouhani but he lacked his finesse and ability to challenge the stigma discourse and probably the audience in the West willing to see a different Iran.

Their respective approach was different because they had different goals in mind. While certainly both presidents were driven by an interest in strengthening Iran's position and get its status respected the way they went about to achieve this was completely different. Rouhani wanted to get the nuclear issue out of the way, so to speak, in order to facilitate trade and integrate Iran into the international order. If Iran would lose its pariah status the West would engage with Iran in terms of trade and international cooperation. Then, Iran could present itself as partner and as such legitimize its influence in Iraq and Syria in the eyes of the West. This would mean that not only would Iranian status be recognized but it would also reinforce Iran's position because the West would accept certain influence and Iranian interest in the future. At the same time with the lifting of sanctions and Iran becoming a normal country investments would help the Iranian economy fulfill its potential and increase employment especially for young people where unemployment is notoriously high.

Ahmadinejad wanted the West to accept Iranian rights to nuclear energy and to change the discourse head-on. He wanted the Iranian status recognized by the West by making the West accept that it can not break Iranian willpower. Facing down three rounds of sanctions and attacking Western narratives was his way of trying to deal with the West. Rouhani saw the nuclear deal as a gateway to strengthen Iranian position through cooperation with the West. While Ahmadinejad saw it as an opportunity to challenge the West and stand defiant so that he could improve Iranian prestige with those despising the West and especially the US.

These different strategies make sense when one again considers the different backgrounds. Rouhani was a moderate who had run a campaign that mostly aimed at economic improvement and international normalization. Ahmadinejad was a true believer in the goals of the revolution, among them to overcome imperialism and Western hegemony. President Khatami also wanted to normalize relations with the West, overcome the differences and cooperate in the Middle East. Collaboration with the US in Afghanistan had shown his ability and willingness to go to great lengths for this. President Mohammad Khatami, like Rouhani after him, had aimed at rebuilding Iran after the devastation of the Iran-Iraq war. He needed Western investments for this. His government was quite outspoken about its intention of normalizing relations with the West. These differences all show how

diverse Iranian politics is and that the West can actually get a lot of concessions out of Iran if they offer sincere and substantial concession themselves.

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