

## Iran and China: Continued cooperation despite Xinjiang explained



### **MA Thesis Middle Eastern Studies**

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## Introduction

The Islamic Republic of Iran and the People's Republic of China, two countries that are usually seen as enemies of 'the West'.<sup>1</sup> What is often forgotten is that these two countries have a long and turbulent history together. After the 1979 Iranian Revolution, the two were on bad terms due to China's visit to the Shah in 1978. However, the Iran-Iraq War forced Iran to become closer to Beijing. From then on, their relationship has seen many ups and downs, often due to outside influences. Since Xi Jinping came to power in 2012 their relationship seems to have increased massively and the two have become close trading partners. However, there is one major issue that could potentially pose a threat to this increasing cooperation, the Uyghur issue. While Uyghurs have been treated differently from other citizens of China since the Chinese Communist Party (CCP) came to power in 1949, the situation has worsened since protests in 2009. Especially since 2017, many disturbing rumors are coming out of Xinjiang province, the home of the Uyghurs. Those who have escaped speak of education centers in the style of concentration camps in which Uyghurs are placed when expressing the slightest sign of what is characterized by the Chinese government as Islamic extremism. Something as small as growing a beard or owning a Quran could now be dangerous when living in Xinjiang. According to many reports and investigations, within these camps, Uyghurs are being beaten, raped and occasionally even murdered.<sup>2</sup> As the Uyghurs are a Muslim minority, and Iran has been repeating its commitment to protecting Muslim minorities since the 1979 revolution, one might expect this situation to strain Sino-Iranian relations. However, so far, Iran has been supportive of Beijing. They even signed a letter in support of China in the Uyghur issue, as did many other Muslim countries in the region.<sup>3</sup> We can thus see an inconsistency with what Iran is presenting as its foreign policy and what it is doing in practice. This thesis aims to find out why Iran is supporting China in this case instead of pressuring it to treat the Uyghurs humanely and fairly. To do so, this thesis tries to answer the following question: What explains continued cooperation between Iran and China despite the Uyghur issue in Xinjiang province?

In the first section, this thesis will explain and use some foreign policy theories to make sense of Iranian foreign policy since 1979, and especially in recent years. This section will largely serve as a

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<sup>1</sup> From now on the Islamic Republic of Iran will be referred to as Iran and The People's Republic of China will be referred to as China in this thesis.

<sup>2</sup> "Like we were enemies in a war. China's mass internment torture and persecution of Muslims in Xinjiang," Amnesty International, June 10, 2021, [https://xinjiang.amnesty.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/ASA\\_17\\_4137-2021\\_Full\\_report\\_ENG.pdf](https://xinjiang.amnesty.org/wp-content/uploads/2021/06/ASA_17_4137-2021_Full_report_ENG.pdf); "The Uyghur genocide: An examination of China's breaches of the 1948 genocide convention," Newline Institute for Strategy and Policy and Raoul Wallenberg centre for Human Rights, March 8, 2021, <https://newlinesinstitute.org/wp-content/uploads/Chinas-Breaches-of-the-GC3.pdf>.

<sup>3</sup> Catherine Putz, "2020 edition: Which countries are for or against China's Xinjiang policies?," *The Diplomat*, October 9, 2020, <https://thediplomat.com/2020/10/2020-edition-which-countries-are-for-or-against-chinas-xinjiang-policies>.

literature review as it will also look at some studies similar to this one. The second section looks at the general history between Iran and China to see how the relationship between the two countries has taken shape and what the continuing themes and challenges of their relationship are. This section will focus on the beginning of the relationship in the 1980s and 1990s and examine how it has evolved from there. In doing so it will use both secondary and primary sources. It will also look at the more recent history between the two countries and focus on some of the challenges they have faced in the past decade. In this last part, there will be a small discussion of the Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) as this is changing Sino-Iranian relations and the economics within this framework is the main way in which the two cooperate.<sup>4</sup> This section will help find any changes or continuations in the relationship between Iran and China. The third, and final, section of this thesis will take the theories explained and discussed in the first chapter and applies these to the current situation. It will see how they well they fit and in how far they can explain Iranian foreign policy towards China in the twenty-first century. With the historical information in mind, it then becomes possible to understand Iran's behavior towards China in general and the Uyghur issue more specifically.

While there have been many studies on the (economic) relationship between Iran and China, most of them focus only on the current period and are written from an international studies perspective. While this study also uses theories from the field of international studies it adds a historical perspective and is grounded in Iranian and Middle Eastern studies. By incorporating the history of the relationship between Iran and China from the Iranian perspective it becomes possible to notice long-term trends and developments. It also gives a better understanding of how the two act towards each other in general. By looking at the history first it also becomes clear that the relationship between Iran and China is not something that only developed fully after the BRI was announced by Chinese President Xi Jinping, but has been building up in the decades prior. The same goes for incorporating both economic data and primary source material. Most studies focus on one or the other and thereby miss some information to understand the bigger picture of Iranian-Sino relations.<sup>5</sup> This has resulted in many academics arguing that the relations between the two are mainly economic

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<sup>4</sup> See, for example, Mohsen Shariatnia and Hamidreza Azizi, "Iran-China cooperation in the Silk Road Economic Belt: from strategic understanding to operational understanding" *China and World Economy* 25, no. 5 (2017): 46-61; Manochehr Dorraj and Jean-Marc Blanchard, "Iran in China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative (MSRI): Bounded progress and bounded promise," in *China's Maritime Silk Road Initiative, Africa, and the Middle East*, ed. Jean Marc Blanchard (Singapore: Pan Macmillan, 2021), 165-197.

<sup>5</sup> For examples of literature more focussed on the history between the countries see, John Garver, *China and Iran. Ancient partners in a post-imperial world* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006); Shirzad Azad, *Iran and China. A new approach to their bilateral relations* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017). For examples of literature more focussed on the economic relation between Iran and China see Zhao Hong, "China's dilemma on Iran: between energy security and a responsible rising power," *Journal of Contemporary China* 23, no. 87 (2014): 408-424; Sara Bazoobandi, "Sanctions and isolation, the driving force of Sino-Iranian relations," *East Asia* 32, no. 3 (2015): 257-271; Mohsen Shariatnia and Hamidreza Azizi, "Iran and the Belt and Road Initiative: amid hope and fear," *Journal of Contemporary China* 28, no. 120 (2019): 984-994.

and relatively recent. At first, this seems to be the case indeed but their relationship has more layers that hide below the surface. Furthermore, no newer studies focus on the influence of the Uyghur issue on the relationship between Iran and China. There have been studies looking at how the treatment of Muslim minorities in China influences the relationship between them and the Middle East general but none of them focus on Iran solely.<sup>6</sup> By focusing on the influence of the Uyghur persecutions on Iranian-Sino cooperation on a broader spectrum than just the economy this study will add to the already existing literature.

This thesis proposes that while the economic aspect of the relations between China and Iran likely plays a role in Iran's stance on the Uyghur issue, multiple other dynamics are also needed to explain Iran's position. First, it finds that Iran's national and religious identities often conflict with each other, resulting in seemingly uncharacteristic moves in international politics. Looking closer at these identities, however, shows us that they may not be so contradicting after all and that the separation between the two can help in explaining Iran's continued cooperation with China. Second, this thesis also finds that Iran's domestic politics and conflicts influence its foreign policy. To protect itself from foreign influence in their domestic issues, Iran may take a safe path by defending China on their domestic conflicts. Finally, it argues that Iran's rivalry with Saudi Arabia complicates matters and impacts Iranian foreign policy. These three dynamics together, combined with the economic incentives, explain Iran's reaction to the Uyghur issue and its continued cooperation with China. As becomes clear in this thesis, all of these patterns are visible in the history between the two countries in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century as well. Iran's current position thus is not such an anomaly as could be expected.

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<sup>6</sup> For examples see, Barbara Kelemen and Richard Turcsányi, "It's the politics stupid: China's relations with Muslim countries on the background of Xinjiang crackdown," *Asian Ethnicity* 21, no. 2 (2020): 223-243; Robert Bianchi, "The perception of the 2009 Ürümqi conflict across the Islamic World," in *Toward well-oiled relations: China's presence in the Middle East following the Arab Spring*, ed. Niv Horesh (London: Palgrave MacMillan, 2019), 48-68; Michael Clarke, "China and the Uyghurs: the 'Palestinization' of Xinjiang?" *Middle East Policy* 22, no. 3 (2015).

## Methodology

As the aim of this thesis is to understand some of the standpoints of the Iranian government it will approach the research from an interpretivist standpoint. By uncovering patterns and processes and using context to make sense of them it answers why Iran is acting in a certain way. Much of this thesis is also based on the idea of constructivism. Ingrained here is the belief that relations between countries are constructed by interactions between people and countries and have the ability to change over time.<sup>7</sup> This is thus also the case with the relations between Iran and China. Constructivism, therefore, is the primary theoretical concept of this thesis. The theories and ideas discussed in the first chapter are for the most part derived from the idea of constructivism as well. The only part where this belief is somewhat less present is the section on economic incentives, which relies more on realist theories.<sup>8</sup> Due to this approach, the answer to the research question is also based on the interpretation of the author. The data collected and analyzed in this thesis is interpreted in a certain way which influences the final answer. It must also be mentioned here that this thesis looks at the situation from the Iranian perspective. It aims to gain a better understanding of Iranian actions and policy. Therefore, most of the sources are being looked at from this point of view. This is also the reason why a large number of sources that have been selected are written by Iranian scholars. However, in the theoretical parts especially sources from scholars from other parts of the world have been used as well.

Qualitative sources play a main role in the analysis. Official documents such as government statements will be used for an in-depth analysis of the history between the two countries since 1979. Many news reports will be used to bring some more current affairs into the discussion as well. These documents are valuable as they can tell a different story than economic datasets or provide explanations for an increase or decrease in imports and exports. They are also helpful in providing context for some of the trends in the relationship between Iran and China.<sup>9</sup> Often these sources are made public by either the Iranian or Chinese government or international organizations such as the United Nations (UN) and are thus easily accessible online. Most of these documents have been translated into English. However, one of the limitations of this thesis is that some of these documents are not translated into English and are only available in Mandarin. These documents are not used in this thesis as the language barrier would be too large to ensure a fulfilling analysis of the source.

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<sup>7</sup> Emanuel Adler, "Constructivism in international relations: sources, contributions, and debates," in *Handbook of international relations*, ed. Walter Carlsnaes, Thomas Risse and Beth Simmons (London: Sage Publications, 2013), 121.

<sup>8</sup> William Wohlforth, "Realism," in *The Oxford handbook of international relations*, ed. Christian Reus-Smit and Duncan Snidal (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2010), 131-149.

<sup>9</sup> Alan Bryman, *Social research methods* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2012), 402-403.

Mostly the sources that have been used will provide the necessary context for general trends explained below. A general qualitative content analysis will thus be the main form of analysis in this thesis. In practice, this means that there will be given a small insight into the contents of the sources as well as a context in which to place them.<sup>10</sup>

Overall, there is a large historical angle to the thesis. This angle is chosen to incorporate the long-term development of the relationship between Iran and China. It can show us whether the policy has remained largely the same or whether different administrations have used different approaches towards the other country. It also shows whether there have been any large fluctuations in the relationship between the two countries. Finally, using history helps explain more recent actions as they are often influenced by historical events.<sup>11</sup> In general, a historical perspective shows us how relations are being constructed and can change over time. The starting point for this thesis is 1979. In Iran, this was the year of the Iranian Revolution, while for China this was a period in which the country was in a period of change after the death of Mao Zedong in 1976. This period is thus important for both countries and also represents a shift in relations between the two.

In the third chapter, there is also a more quantitative aspect when economic data is analyzed. The main quantitative source of this thesis is IMF data on the economic relationship between Iran and China. In the third chapter of the thesis, which evaluates the economic relationship between the two countries, a general evaluation of these datasets is done. In practice, this means that secondary analysis of official data is performed.<sup>12</sup> The data used in this thesis starts in 2009. While data from before this period could be useful as well, it is not very reliable and has therefore not been included here. Microsoft Excel files are used to analyze the data as there is a very global analysis done and this program provides the necessary tools. The choice to only focus on imports and exports between Iran and China has been made due to the larger picture it provides. While it is not a very precise or detailed way to analyze economic cooperation, it helps show the bigger picture and larger trends. This is also done with the length of this thesis in mind. As economic analysis is not the main point of this analysis, using many data sets would take the focus away from other important matters.

Finally, the possible implications of the Covid-19 pandemic need to be discussed in this section. As this thesis is written in the spring of 2021 some limitations apply. Due to Covid-19 closures and restrictions, it is in some cases impossible to reach sources. While all the sources that were necessary to write this thesis could be accessed through the internet it is possible that some sources

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<sup>10</sup> Bryman, *Social research methods*, 557-559.

<sup>11</sup> Barbara Lawrence, "Historical perspective: Using the past to study the present," *The Academy of Management Review* 9, no. 2 (April 1984): 307-312.

<sup>12</sup> Bryman, *Social research methods*, 310-328.

remained unknown due to a lack of access to some archives. However, based on the secondary research done and a search in online archives no pivotal sources have been excluded.



## Chapter 1. Theoretical framework

To understand Iran's motives for continued cooperation with China, it is important to create a basic framework first. Yet, before we can dive into the theories that have been put forward by other scholars we must first define and clarify one of the basic assumptions of this thesis. Namely, that the Iranian government sees itself as the protector of Muslims. This claim will be built and made clear in the first section of this chapter. After that, this chapter aims to present some theories that other scholars have argued apply to Iranian foreign policy. This is useful in our understanding of both Iranian foreign politics as well as Sino-Iranian politics. The examples below consist of both specific examples of Iranian society, often put forward by researchers with an Iranian background, as well as some more general theories that can be linked to Iranian politics specifically, and Middle Eastern politics in general. In doing so it will provide a general but definitely not a complete overview of possible explanations of Iranian foreign policy. It will first examine the theories of economic (inter)dependence. These theories are some of the most used ones to describe foreign politics in general and must thus be included here as they possibly play a role in Iranian foreign politics as well. Secondly, the theory of identity will be examined. With the coming of constructivism, identity has become an important concept in international relations. Identity can often be used to explain some of the decisions made by countries. There is also the theory that domestic politics is the main driver of foreign policy. This chapter will thus also look at scholars who have stressed the importance of domestic politics and issues when it comes to explaining seemingly contradictory situations. Finally, the chapter will also look at some of the theories that stress that the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia plays a significant role in foreign politics in the region. This rivalry has a large impact on national security issues in the Middle East. By examining these four different approaches to international relations this chapter aims to answer what drives Iranian foreign policy in the twenty-first century.

### Protecting Muslim minorities

Before delving into theories that can serve as possible explanations for Iran's response on the Uyghur issue it is important to first establish how Iran has portrayed itself in the world. Ever since 1979 the country has viewed itself as a protector of Muslim minorities in the region but also around the world. This started when the Palestine Liberation Organization (PLO) opened its embassy in Tehran when Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini was still in the process of consolidating his power. Before that time, under the Shah, Iran had been somewhat of a friend of Israel. In that same year, the constitution of Iran was written. In article 154 of that constitution it was stated that "While practicing complete self-restraint from any kind of influence in the internal affairs of other nations, it will protect the struggles

of the weak against the arrogant, in any part of the world.”<sup>13</sup> While it could of course be discussed whether speaking out against what is happening in Xinjiang would be a form of interference in internal affairs or whether the struggle is just, the article clearly lays out Iran’s self-image.

This role is taken on by Iran since 1979 has been discussed by other scholars as well. They have defined how this works in practice. Most of these scholars focus on Shia minorities living in Sunni majority countries such as Lebanon and Afghanistan. One of the academics paying attention to this is Ervand Abrahamian who in his book on the history of Iran mentions that minorities in these countries see Iran as their main protector in the world.<sup>14</sup> While he does not specifically go into how Iranians look at this themselves this indicates that at least they are perceived as such. Afshon Ostovar, another scholar of Iranian history, mentions that this protection included Sunni minorities as well. He does, however, mention that this way of thinking was especially prevalent in the years after the revolution and does not go into depth on more recent periods.<sup>15</sup> Valeri Modebadze looks at more recent developments and argues that many minorities in the region look at either Iran or Saudi Arabia as their protector. According to her, the role that both countries have taken on in the late twentieth and early twenty-first century has intensified the conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia.<sup>16</sup> Based on these arguments it thus becomes clear that Iran still tries to live by article 154 of their constitution and that it, therefore, influences Iranian foreign policy.

### Economic (inter)dependence

At first sight theories of economic dependency seem to apply to the situation. Often economic incentives are mentioned when discussing Iran's position towards China. As an economically strong country, China seems to have control over Iran, a country that is said to rely heavily on China as a trading partner due to sanctions from the West. However, the classical dependency theory as proposed by Wallerstein under the name of world-systems theory does not seem to apply to the situation. In Wallerstein's theory, there is a core and a periphery. The countries in the periphery usually produce some natural resources such as oil which are needed in the core countries.<sup>17</sup> While China is to some extent using Iran to get enough raw materials, Iran does not seem to be having the status of a peripheral country due to its role in the region. Within the Middle East, they are

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<sup>13</sup> While there are multiple translations of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran in this thesis I have used Rouhollah Ramazani, “Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran,” *Middle East Journal* 34, no. 2 (Spring 1980): 202.

<sup>14</sup> Ervand Abrahamian, *A History of Modern Iran* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2018), 204.

<sup>15</sup> Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguard of the Imam: Religion, Politics, and Iran’s Revolutionary Guards* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2016), 105.

<sup>16</sup> Valeri Modebadze, “The battle for regional dominance between the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia and the Islamic Republic of Iran,” *Journal of Liberty and International Affairs* 4, no. 3 (2018): 70.

<sup>17</sup> Immanuel Wallerstein, *World-systems analysis* (Durham: Duke University Press, 2004), 29.

continuously competing with Saudi Arabia (and to a lesser extent Turkey) to become the hegemonic power. Iran thus seems to be a so-called middle power or semi-peripheral country. Besides this, China also relies on Iran to a certain extent. Without Iranian oil, China would face some problems in the short term. However, as many countries in the region produce oil, it would probably be relatively easy for them to get their supply from another country. For Iran trade with China can decrease dependence on the West. In an article from 2019, Jörg Friedrichs argues exactly this.<sup>18</sup> While he focuses on the Middle East and Africa as regions in relation to China, this theory also seems to apply to the case of Iran and China. By stabilizing or even increasing their (economic) relationship with China, Iran becomes less dependent on the West. This is important as international sanctions make it almost impossible for the Iranians to have any kind of beneficial relationship with either America or Europe.

Wallerstein's world-systems theory is often also applied to the Middle East. Most of the countries in the region were part of Europe's imperial system in one way or another in the twentieth century. This, combined with Cold War foreign policy in the latter part of that century, has led them to be 'easy victims' of the system. Add the increasing importance of oil to this mix and you find a seemingly perfect periphery state for the United States of America (USA).<sup>19</sup> However, not all is as it appears. During the century many countries resisted this system by aligning themselves with the Soviet Union in opposition to the USA. Iran was among these states when they elected Mossadegh as their Prime Minister in 1953. However, this does not mean that Iran has never been a client state of any other country during that time, as Hinnebusch also argues that the position of a country can change over time and is not static.<sup>20</sup> The economic position of a country within the world-systems theory also determines its agency in some ways. Countries that are dependent on a 'core' state, that provides them with the necessary funds and investments are often obliged to keep in line and not involve themselves in any action against the 'core' power. An example of this was Jordan in the twentieth century. While gaining benefits from siding with the USA, such as security and economic benefits, they were unable to defend some of the causes that other Arab states were advocating for, such as the Palestinian cause.<sup>21</sup>

Some Iranian scholars place Iran in this system of world theory. While this is often done in relation to the USA, it is clear that China is a new rising power which in this framework has established itself as a core state, particularly through the BRI. One of the scholars who places Iran in the World-Systems framework is Anoushiravan Ehteshami. In her book, co-written with the earlier mentioned

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<sup>18</sup> Jörg Friedrichs, "Explaining China's popularity in the Middle East and Africa," *Third World Quarterly* 40, no. 9 (2019): 1642.

<sup>19</sup> Raymond Hinnebusch, "The Middle East in the world hierarchy: imperialism and resistance," *Journal of International Relations and Development* 14 (2011): 218-222.

<sup>20</sup> Hinnebusch, "The Middle East," 229.

<sup>21</sup> *Ibid*, 226-227.

Hinnebusch, on the place of Iran and Syria in the international system, she mentions that both countries can be placed in the theory of world-systems. According to their analysis, the regional system in the Middle East lacks economic autonomy, which also influences Iranian and Syrian foreign policy. However, both countries are trying to minimize their dependency on other countries.<sup>22</sup> That it is important for Iran not to depend too much on other countries, especially Western countries, is also visible in one of the revolutionary slogans, "Khod kafe-ya," which means self-sufficiency. Ehteshami and Hinnebusch argue that this is an important part of Iranian foreign policy.<sup>23</sup> That independence is important for Iran is something that other scholars agree upon as well. Suzanne Maloney argues that this was indeed one of the revolutionary slogans, as Ehteshami and Hinnebusch also state. According to Maloney this is part of Iranian identity since the revolution and does not just apply to economics.<sup>24</sup> Based on these arguments and evidence it is unlikely that Iran is completely dependent on China.

A theory of interdependence could possibly be more fitting to the situation. An example of such an interdependence theory is one proposed by Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye. They believe that international exchanges and connections often result in vulnerabilities and that these connections can be very costly to interrupt.<sup>25</sup> In theory, this could lead to a situation in which a country may need to keep silent on an issue as speaking up may result in a disruption of the connection with the other country. Important is also their definition of the word interdependence. They argue that interdependence always includes costs because it restricts the autonomy or agency of the countries involved. But there are also benefits as a result of the relationship. It is, however, not always clear whether the benefits outweigh the costs, so one can then never say whether the relationship is beneficial for both countries.<sup>26</sup> By this reasoning, the relationship between Iran and China could in some regards be described as interdependence. However, it is also important to mention that the two can very well survive without trade with the other, especially China. It thus seems unlikely that there is an interdependent relationship in the classic sense.

However, some scholars describe the relationship between Iran and China as one of interdependence. The first argument is built on Chinese reliance on Middle Eastern oil. Roland Dannreuther has argued in 2011, a decade ago at the time of writing, that China became more reliant on oil.<sup>27</sup> This continued, and Dannreuther made the same statement again in 2019 when he mentions

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<sup>22</sup> Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Raymond Hinnebusch, *Syria and Iran: Middle Powers in a penetrated regional system* (London: Routledge, 1997), 10.

<sup>23</sup> Ehteshami and Hinnebusch, *Syria and Iran*, 28.

<sup>24</sup> Suzanne Maloney, "Identity and change in Iran's foreign policy," in *Identity and foreign policy in the Middle East* ed. Sibley Telhami and Micheal Barnett (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 2002), 101-102.

<sup>25</sup> Robert Keohane and Joseph Nye, *Power and interdependence* (Boston: Longman, 2012), 8.

<sup>26</sup> Keohane and Nye, *Power and interdependence*, 8.

<sup>27</sup> Roland Dannreuther, "China and global oil: vulnerability and opportunity," *International Affairs* 87, no. 6 (2011): 1364.

that China has become the most important importer of Middle Eastern oil and surpassed the USA.<sup>28</sup> This thus is an argument in favor of interdependence. China needs Middle Eastern oil while Iran needs a market for its oil. However, in the case of China, it is not necessarily a dependence on Iran but on the Middle East in general as there are many countries that they can turn to in the region and which are already supplying China with oil. The last part of this argument, that Iran needs a market for its oil, is especially relevant as many countries in the Western world, which are large importers of oil, are prohibited from importing energy from Iran due to sanctions. Sara Bazoobandi argues that this isolation of Iran has a large impact on their relationship with China. In fact, she argues that this is the main reason that the two cooperate not only economically but also on a broader scale.<sup>29</sup> Yet, that this cooperation is very significant is argued against by Shariatinia and Azizi. They argue that in many regards the relationship between Iran and China is underdeveloped and mainly focussed on the economic aspects.<sup>30</sup>

Scholars are thus divided about the role of dependency theory in the relations between Iran and China. At first sight, the theory seems fitting to the situation, especially considering sanctions imposed on Iran by the West. However, scholars focussing on Iran specifically and the Middle East more broadly seem to agree that the situation is more complex and does not fit in the classic idea of (inter)dependence.

### Identity as a driver for foreign policy

Besides the argument that economic incentives are a big driver of foreign policy decisions, there is also a large group of scholars that argue that identity politics are the main driver of international decisions. The theories that make this assumption usually come from the constructivist perspective. While this is a relatively new approach to international relations in the Middle East and Asia many of the theories within this spectrum seem to fit the situation on the ground quite well. A core concept of constructivism is identity. For constructivists identity plays an important role in foreign politics and the decisions countries and organizations make on an international level.<sup>31</sup> This argument was first made in 1992 by Alexander Wendt who stated in his article on power politics that countries were driven by their own identities.<sup>32</sup> One of the scholars that have put forward the idea of explaining

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<sup>28</sup> Roland Dannreuther, "Russia, China, and the Middle East," in *International Relations of the Middle East*, ed. Louise Fawcett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 404.

<sup>29</sup> Sara Bazoobandi, "Sanctions and isolation, the driving force of Sino-Iranian relations," *East Asia* 32, no. 3 (2015): 269.

<sup>30</sup> Shariatinia and Azizi, "Iran-China cooperation," 58.

<sup>31</sup> Christian Reus-Smit, "Constructivism," in *Theories of international relations*, ed. Scott Burchil et al. (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2005), 217

<sup>32</sup> Alexander Wendt, "Anarchy is what states make of it: The social construction of power politics," *International Organization* 46, no. 2 (1992): 398

Iranian foreign policy through a constructivist perspective is Maaïke Warnaar. In her 2013 book on Iranian foreign policy under Ahmadinejad, she uses two case studies to show why constructivism explains Iranian policy better than more realist approaches.<sup>33</sup> She also uses the opening chapter of her book as an introduction to the constructivist approach to Iranian foreign policy and shows that there are many different points of view within this perspective. One of these perspectives is that of the role of identity.

Warnaar is not the only scholar of Iranian foreign policy that argues that identity may play a significant role. According to Sharam Akbarzadeh and James Barry different aspects of Iranian identity are important in understanding its foreign policy. The three they name are Iranianism, Islam and Shiism.<sup>34</sup> According to Akbarzadeh and Barry, it is important to notice that nationalism, or Iranianism as they call it, has been a part of the Iranian identity since the 1979 revolution and even before that. Assuming that Iran solely makes its foreign policy based on Islam or Shiism is thus a mistake. This could explain some of the contradictions within Iranian foreign policy.<sup>35</sup> The idea of protecting vulnerable Muslims is part of Iran's Islamic and Shia identity, while the relations they have with China and other countries may be part of their Iranian or national identity. Akbarzadeh and Barry call this Iran's corporate identity. They conclude that this corporate identity can explain many decisions made by Iran that at first sight seem to be contradicting other decisions.<sup>36</sup> They also believe that the leadership of Iran is aware of this and does not believe that their Islamic identity should always be put at the forefront. According to Akbarzadeh and Barry, the leadership does not think that the revolutionary ideals should always be actively promoted.<sup>37</sup> This statement goes against what has been stated by the scholars in the first section of this chapter and the Iranian constitution itself that states that the export of the revolution is important.

The examples above mainly theorize the importance of identity in Iranian foreign policy. Homeira Moshirzadeh uses the example of Iran's nuclear policy as an example. Her article looks at how Iranian identity impacts decisions made concerning this topic. She argues that it is important for Iranians to see themselves as an independent country that is not relying on others. Nuclear energy, therefore, is important for this independence. This explains why Iran is always referring to their right to self-sufficiency in the debate on whether they should be allowed to create nuclear energy

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<sup>33</sup> Maaïke Warnaar, *Iranian foreign policy during Ahmadinejad: Ideology and Action* (New York: Palgrave MacMillan, 2013), 11-33.

<sup>34</sup> Shahram Akbarzadeh and James Barry, "State identity in Iranian foreign policy," *British Journal of Middle Eastern Studies* 43, no. 4 (2016): 614.

<sup>35</sup> Akbarzadeh and Barry, "State identity," 618.

<sup>36</sup> *Ibid*, 628.

<sup>37</sup> *Ibid*, 629.

themselves.<sup>38</sup> Besides the emphasis on self-sufficiency, the concept of justice is also important for Iranians. They, therefore, argue that it would be unjust to not be allowed to build and use nuclear plants within their country.<sup>39</sup> This concrete example shows us that the importance of identity is not just a theoretical concept but one that can actually be applied to real-life situations in Iran.

### Domestic politics matter

Another possible driver for foreign policy that is used by other scholars is the idea of protecting domestic politics. Part of this fits under the umbrella of identity, but as the idea of domestic politics is broader than that, it has been included as a separate section in this thesis. Scholars who have studied this theory have come up with different ways in which domestic politics may affect the foreign policy perspective of a country. It could for example be driven by interest groups in a society. These could, for example, be lobbyists, a certain class or the ruling elite. An example of this is when politicians use foreign policy to settle domestic issues. It thus becomes, as Robert Putnam argues, a "two-level game."<sup>40</sup> There is also a model called the bureaucratic model which fits into the theory of Putnam. This model argues that foreign policy is influenced by different groups in a society, which could possibly also have conflicts with each other. These conflicts and positions of different groups in society determine the foreign policy to a certain extent.<sup>41</sup>

A similar research project to this one, although not involving Iran is one of the examples where domestic policy is said to have been the main force behind the decision. The study in case is one by Barbara Kelemen and Richard Turcsányi. In their 2020 article, they look at the Uyghurs in Xinjiang and the reactions of Saudi Arabia, Pakistan and Turkey. They found that the economic aspect may have had an influence on the decision of these three countries to remain silent on the issue but that politics in itself had been enough of a reason to do so.<sup>42</sup> For Saudi Arabia, the reason to do so would have been that by agreeing with China's right to act in their own territory in whatever way they see fit would implicitly give Saudi-Arabia the right to do so as well. In Pakistan, the view of China is very favorable creating no need for the government to speak out against the Uyghur atrocities to keep their voters.<sup>43</sup> Turkey was the only country in which the situation was a little different. Many in the country do not have a favorable view of China and the Uyghurs are Turkic people. This forced the

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<sup>38</sup> Homeira Moshirzadeh, "Discursive foundations of Iran's nuclear policy," *Security Dialogue* 38, no. 4 (2007): 538.

<sup>39</sup> Moshirzadeh, "Discursive foundations," 538.

<sup>40</sup> Robert Putnam, "Diplomacy and domestic politics: the logic of two-level games," *International Organization* 42, no. 3 (summer 1988): 434.

<sup>41</sup> Morton Halperin, Priscilla Clapp and Arnold Kanter, *Bureaucratic politics and foreign policy, second edition* (Washington DC: Brookings Institution Press, 2006), 4.

<sup>42</sup> Kelemen and Turcsányi, "It's the politics stupid," 234-235.

<sup>43</sup> *Ibid*, 232-233.

government to make some mentions of it, although these seem to have died down recently.<sup>44</sup> Finally, a reason for all countries included in the research seems to have been political ties with China. While economically they are all already growing towards China, the trend seems to be that the same thing is happening on the political front.<sup>45</sup>

### The impact of Saudi Arabia on Iranian foreign policy

A fourth possible driver of foreign policy that is being explored in this thesis is that of a threat as a driver of foreign policy. In the case of Iran, this would be Saudi Arabia.<sup>46</sup> This threat could have such a significant impact on a country that it influences its foreign policy decisions. Usually, this is to protect its national security. The conflict between the two countries is also not something very recent but has been going on at least since the Iranian Revolution of 1979. Since the Iraq War in the early twenty-first century, the conflict has intensified even more as sectarian differences have been coming to the forefront more often.

The importance of this conflict for foreign policy is linked to the idea of national security. When a country finds itself in a heightened conflict it will probably pay more attention to its national security. For this section, we will use the constructivist approach to security, which argues that if something is viewed as a threat and is labeled as such this becomes a political act.<sup>47</sup> For Iran, Saudi Arabia is viewed as a threat and thus labeled as such. This also means that this will have an impact on their foreign policy, especially in the region but also on a larger scale. For this reason, this final theory can be very much linked to the theories discussed above, especially those of identity and the role of domestic politics.

One of the scholars arguing for the returning importance of the conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia is Vali Nasr. His book, *The Shia Revival*, argues that the Sunni-Shia conflict will gain in importance in the Middle East in the near future.<sup>48</sup> While Nasr may have been one of the first to argue the importance of the return of the Sunni-Shia divide in the region, he is not the only one. In an essay published in 2020, John Calabrese looks at the rivalry between the two countries and argues that the rivalry has intensified since the Arab Spring. This has not only led to retaliations between the two

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<sup>44</sup> Kelemen and Turcsányi, "It's the politics stupid," 233-234.

<sup>45</sup> Ibid, 236.

<sup>46</sup> Other countries are being viewed by Iran as an active threat (for example, Israel and the United States) but the rivalry between Saudi Arabia is the one that is important for this thesis specifically.

<sup>47</sup> Marina Calulli, "Middle East security: The politics of violence after the 2003 Iraq War," in *International relations of the Middle East*, ed. Louise Fawcett (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2019), 227.

<sup>48</sup> Vali Nasr, *The Shia revival. How conflicts within Islam will shape the future* (W.W Norton: New York, 2006), 253.



countries according to Calabrese but also to a globalization of the conflict.<sup>49</sup> While he is not arguing that the conflict has been impacting both countries' views of China, and its reliance on the country for their own safety, the idea that the conflict has become globalized implies that decisions regarding Xinjiang province could very well be made with this rivalry in mind. Someone with a slightly different perspective on the influence of the rivalry between the two is Keynoush Banafsheh. In his 2016 book on the diplomacy between the two, he argues that while relations between the two countries are at a very low point right now, and there is a huge distrust of the other, this may not necessarily be unchangeable in recent years.<sup>50</sup> He does at the same time acknowledge that at this point the rivalry does impact regional and possibly also international politics. This thus means that the theory that relations between Iran and Saudi Arabia are influencing the Iranian response towards China could very well still be credible, especially since Saudi Arabia also signed the regional statement in support of Chinese actions.

Based on what has been discussed in this chapter it can be argued that there are multiple possible explanations for Iran's response to the repression of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang. There are arguments in favor of it being an economically motivated decision, which is often argued by scholars that focus on the economic relationship between the two. However, there are also alternative explanations that are discussed much less often in relation to this issue. Three of the most prominent of those are identity politics, domestic affairs and the Iran-Saudi Arabia rivalry. All of these have been shortly discussed in a theoretical form in the section above. They all seem to propose a different way of looking at international politics and all seem, at first sight, to be possible explanations for Iran's behavior. The final chapter of this thesis will return to these theories and apply them to real-life situations to evaluate how relevant they are in this specific situation. However, before this thesis moves on to do so it is important to first discuss the history between Iran and China to get a better perspective on their relationship.

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<sup>49</sup> John Calabrese, "The Saudi-Iran strategic rivalry," in *Shocks and rivalries in the Middle East and North Africa*, ed. Imad Mansour and William Thompson (Washington: Georgetown University Press, 2020), 72-75.

<sup>50</sup> Banafsheh Keynoush, *Saudi Arabia and Iran. Friend or foes* (New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2016), 238.

## Chapter 2. Sino-Iranian relations since 1979

While it is easy to focus on the current state of Sino-Iranian relations when trying to find an explanation for Iran defending China in Xinjiang, a historical perspective can help create a better understanding. Creating this historical overview of the relationship between the two countries is the aim of this chapter. It will start in 1979 as this was the year that the Iranian leadership changed significantly due to the Iranian Revolution. However, the two countries have been interacting with each other for as long as we know, through many different empires, and the history between them is long. The 1980s, however, are often viewed as the start of the modern relationship between the two. With the new Iranian government trying to establish itself and China leaving the era of Mao behind they both found themselves in changing relationships with each other as well as with the world. These changes reshaped the way they viewed, and relied, on each other. Since then, relations between the two countries have been relatively stable. At the same time, however, some factors in the relationship have changed over time and have impacted how the two countries communicate and rely on each other. While this chapter will mainly focus on some of the most transformative events for the two, it also provides a general overview of their relationship as a whole. To do so, the following question will be central here: How has the relationship between Iran and China developed since 1979? The focus here will be on the decades before the 2010s as more recent events will be discussed in the third chapter of this thesis.

### The beginning

By the time of the Iranian Revolution in late 1978 and early 1979 the Chinese leader for almost thirty years, Mao Zedong, had passed away and the country was on a new path of economic development under Deng Xiaoping. During that same period, Ayatollah Khomeini was still in the process of establishing his power. One of the legacies of the two old systems, that of the Shah and Mao, is that they had worked together. In the final years of the Shah's reign, China had supported his regime. It is thus not surprising that in the heat of the Iranian Revolution Khomeini pointed China out as one of the enemies of the Iranian people, together with the USA and the Soviet Union. However, there was one main thing that Iran and China did have in common: they both resented the overwhelming influence of the West in the region, in particular the influence of the USA. Due to this commonality, the two countries started building a relationship in the early 1980s. While there were still some issues at the time, for example, China delivered some military equipment to Iraq around the start of the Iran-Iraq War, the two started to grow their relationship and discovered each other's countries. While the description above sounds like a win-win situation for both parties, it also brought some problems, especially for China. After Deng consolidated his power in 1978 one of the main goals of China became

economic growth and an increase in living standards. To achieve this, the country needed to be on good terms with the USA. An increasingly growing relationship with Iran, which was seen as one of the main enemies by the USA, could endanger support for China.<sup>51</sup> The beginning of the relationship between Iran and China thus also meant the beginning of a balancing game for Chinese governments between accommodating Tehran and Washington, something which remains visible in their foreign policy until the twenty-first century.

When it comes to the establishment of the friendship between Iran and China, Beijing was the one who kept trying to get Tehran on its side. There was a brief interaction between the Chinese ambassador in Tehran and Mehdi Bazargan, leader of the interim government in Iran, in the spring of 1979, in which the ambassador emphasized that Beijing would like to establish formal relations with the new Iranian government, but not much happened after this meeting. One of the reasons for China to keep pressing the new Iranian government for an official relationship was the status of the Soviet Union. The Soviet Union and China were at this time not friendly towards each other. One of China's greatest fears was that Iran under its new leadership was moving away from China and moving into the Soviet camp. This fear was made even more realistic by Soviet involvement in Afghanistan.<sup>52</sup> What also made this potential threat for China more realistic was the way the Soviet Union used the friendship between China and the USA to keep the Iranian leadership away from the Chinese. The friendship between China and the USA was a common theme in Soviet propaganda.<sup>53</sup> China was not very successful in trying to establish ties with Iran until well into the 1980s. While this had to do in part with the bond with the USA, it was also the result of an internal Iranian struggle. In the years after Khomeini came to power, there was a struggle between realists on one side and idealists on the other side. These terms were based on concepts of international relations and are often used by scholars of Iranian descent as well to describe the two camps in Iran at the time.<sup>54</sup> The realists were in favor of establishing ties with some powerful countries to further Iranian national interest while the idealists wanted to put Islamic values above everything and were therefore in favor of distancing themselves from countries such as China. In the end, the idealist camp won this internal struggle, resulting in the Iran we saw in the 1980s.<sup>55</sup>

While Iran and China were still trying to understand each other better in the 1980s, the decade also already holds some of the main events which consolidated the relationship between the two. One

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<sup>51</sup> John Garver, *China and Iran. Ancient partners in a post-imperial world* (Seattle: University of Washington Press, 2006), 60.

<sup>52</sup> Garver, *China and Iran*, 64.

<sup>53</sup> *Ibid*, 65.

<sup>54</sup> For example, see Rouhollah Ramanzani, "Iran's foreign policy: Contending orientations," *The Middle East Journal* 43, no. 2 (Spring 1989): 202-217.

<sup>55</sup> Ramazani, "Iran's foreign policy," 206-210.

of these events was the Iran-Iraq war. This war significantly changed the relationship between Iran and China. At the beginning of the war, China decided to remain neutral in the conflict as they saw no benefit for either country from this war and their main goal was to stop it from spreading to other countries in the Gulf region. This also resulted in them voting in favor of a UN resolution that urged both Iran and Iraq to stop continuing the use of violence towards each other. Khomeini was not happy about this as he argued that this did not differentiate between Iraq, who was the aggressor, and Iran, the victim.<sup>56</sup> This strained ties between Iran and China even more. However, while Khomeini was still very critical of China, the country also became more isolated as the war continued. This led to problems in the supply of arms for the Iranian army. Eventually, this led them towards China who was willing to step into the vacuum.<sup>57</sup> In February of 1981, Ali Khamenei (who later becomes the supreme leader of Iran after the death of Khomeini) and his delegation visited Beijing. After his visit he was mostly positive about China, saying that China was a close friend of Iran and sympathized with the country.<sup>58</sup> It did not take long for China to become an important arms supplier for Iran. Already in 1982, only one year after Khamenei visited Beijing, China (together with North Korea) was responsible for almost half of the Iranian arms supply.<sup>59</sup> From this point onwards, the relationship between Iran and China also expanded and the start of the modern relationship between the two could be seen.

The increase in cooperation between Iran and China coincided with a change in perspective towards foreign policy in Beijing. In 1982 they started to view the Soviet Union less as a threat, resulting also in less cooperation with the USA. This created more space for an Iranian-Sino relationship. In May of 1982 Iran send its first ambassador to Beijing. The first high-level visit between the two countries was the visit of He Ying, a foreign ministry advisor in China, to Tehran. Here he discussed "the struggle against imperialism and colonialism" with Khamenei. Other visits followed this first one in the following months.<sup>60</sup> In 1983, when the Iranian Foreign Affairs Minister Ali Akbar Velayati visited China, the two countries signed an agreement on cultural, scientific and technological cooperation for the coming five years. Some months later, in the return visit to Tehran, the two countries released a joint statement that said that they wanted to strengthen their "bilateral relations and international cooperation" since they shared common views of the world. However, it was also explicitly said that they did pursue independent foreign policies. As later becomes clear, this statement will come to define the relationship between the two countries in the following decades.<sup>61</sup>

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<sup>56</sup> Garver, *Iran and China*, 70.

<sup>57</sup> *Ibid*, 71.

<sup>58</sup> "China sympathetic to Iran but neutral on War," *Tehran Times*, February 18, 1991.

<sup>59</sup> "Iran's Chinese Air Force," *Mednews* 2, no. 4 (November 1988): 1-2.

<sup>60</sup> Garver, *Iran and China*, 76.

<sup>61</sup> *Ibid*, 77.

## The pivotal year of 1989

Before we move on to the next chapter in Sino-Iranian history, it is important to first touch upon the importance of the year 1989 for both countries. In China, 1989 was a year of protests, especially during the early summer months. The protests started after the death of Hu Yaobang, a general secretary of the CCP in favor of reform. At this time, China was already in the process of some reforms that had started after the death of Mao. While these reforms were welcomed by many Chinese citizens not everyone profited from them. The reforms also brought to light the corruption of the ruling elite and the illegitimacy of the one-party government. This led in April of 1989, in the days after the death of the popular Yaobang, to students protesting in the streets. These protests continued for almost two months until the government violently cracked down on protestors on June 4, killing and imprisoning hundreds.<sup>62</sup> This was a significant event in Chinese history, as well as in the history between Iran and China, because it changed the relations that China had had with powerful Western allies. At the same time, a big change was happening in Iran. One day before the violent crackdown on Tiananmen Square in Beijing, supreme leader Khomeini passed away. An important event in Iranian history as he had been leading the country in the ten years since the Iranian revolution. He was succeeded by Khamenei who was elected as the new supreme leader of Iran on June 4, 1989. For some, this seemed an opportunity for change and reform in Iran. However, the country seems to have continued more or less on the same path since the summer of 1989, and Khamenei's perspective on the world is not significantly different than that of Khomeini, even though, of course, they are not exactly the same either.

As mentioned earlier in this section, these two events that happened so close to each other, influenced how the two countries communicated with each other. In light of what had been happening in Beijing many Western countries, among them the USA and the United Kingdom (UK), severed ties with China. This placed China in an isolation similar to the one that Iran had experienced since 1979. Sanctions were imposed on China and many countries in the region also decided to interact as little as possible with the CCP government. For China this helped in understanding the situation of Iran much better than they had before, resulting in a better relationship between the two.<sup>63</sup> The year 1989 is thus an important year in Sino-Iranian relations. Not only did the two countries both go through some of their most important events of the twentieth century, but they also grew closer together and started to cooperate more. This new cooperation was not necessarily one out of desire but more one

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<sup>62</sup> For a more complete overview of the 1989 protests, I suggest Louisa Lim, *The people's republic of amnesia: Tiananmen revisited* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2015).

<sup>63</sup> Shirzad Azad, *Iran and China. A new approach to their bilateral relations* (Lanham: Lexington Books, 2017), 21.

out of necessity. As we will see later on in this chapter, the events of this year also have a significant impact on how China communicates with different countries in the decades following.

What is important to know however on the importance of the changes brought by the year 1989 is that for China this period of isolation was a situation with which they only had to deal for a short period. During the First Gulf War in 1990, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) needed China's support for actions in the region, resulting in a new start of cooperation between China and the USA.<sup>64</sup> It does seem though, that this short period of isolation has shaped China's approach towards Iran. It also helped China in strengthening its own position in the region. The USA saw China moving closer towards Iran in the lead-up of the First Gulf War. Both Iran and China criticized American involvement in the region heavily, especially after the fall of the Soviet Union. This led the two countries to grow closer together and showed the USA that China was an important ally of them in the region that was now moving closer towards one of the USA's enemies.<sup>65</sup>

### Increased cooperation

After China was back on better terms with Western countries they seemed to become more involved in the world economy at a fast pace. Under the administration of Bill Clinton in the USA, they became a larger part of the international economic system. It was now expected that China and the CCP government would be moving towards a capital system that was already in place in the West. However, even though China had resumed its relationship with Western countries, they maintained their relationship with Iran. The first half of the 1990s was the height of Iranian and Chinese cooperation to counter the hegemonic power of the USA in the Middle East. China was not fully convinced, and not fully in the Iranian camp during this time though. When Iran asked them in the early 1990s to play a larger role in the conflicts in the region, such as the Israel-Palestine conflict, China declined the opportunity and chose to normalize some of its other relations with Western countries, among them Israel.<sup>66</sup> During this period state visits also became more common. In 1991, Li Peng, Premier of China, was the first Chinese premier to visit Iran since the regime change in 1979. During this visit another agreement between the two was signed, one on cultural, scientific and educational exchanges.<sup>67</sup> A year later, in 1992, Iranian president Rafsanjani and Foreign Minister Velayati visited Beijing, this time to discuss their opinions on international issues and align them.<sup>68</sup>

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<sup>64</sup> Azad, *Iran and China*, 21.

<sup>65</sup> Garver, *Iran and China*, 98.

<sup>66</sup> *Ibid*, 107.

<sup>67</sup> *Ibid*.

<sup>68</sup> Michael Dillon, *Xinjiang- China's Muslim far northwest* (London: Routledge, 2004),135-136.

At this point, it is also important to note Iran's relationship with the province of Xinjiang, where the majority of Uyghurs live. During the late 1980s and the early 1990s, Iran was busy trying to export its revolution to other parts of the Muslim world. The Iran-Iraq war had ended and the Soviet Union had fallen, leaving many formerly Muslim states in a vacuum.<sup>69</sup> Xinjiang was no exception to this. Students from the province were invited to study in Iranian seminaries and Iranians were at times building mosques and other religious buildings in the province without Chinese permission. At the same time, Muslims in Xinjiang also became more active in their pursuit of independence or autonomy from China. Inspired by some of the neighboring countries which had become independent after the fall of the Soviets they started to organize more and to even at times use terrorist tactics to try to get what they wanted.<sup>70</sup> When China found out about Iranian investments in the region they were not pleased. They talked to the Iranian government and asked them to stop doing this, something the Iranians complied with.<sup>71</sup> We can thus already see what Iran's position was in the Uyghur issue in the early 1990s. They agreed with China's non-interference policy which stated that another country should never interfere in their own domestic politics. This policy had already been discussed with Iran in the late 1980s when their relationship started to blossom at first.<sup>72</sup>

During the same period that Sino-Iranian relations started to bloom, the USA also started to pressure China on its relationship with Iran. As Clinton came to power in 1992, the relationship between Iran and the USA hardened even more than it had already had before. The USA adopted an Arms Non-Proliferation Pact regarding Iran and Iraq due to fears of nuclear ambitions. That China was still continuing the friendship with Iran also started to threaten their status in the world economy once again.<sup>73</sup> However, China stood up against American pressure to step away from Iran. They stated that every country had the right to have its own paths and ways of living and that other countries should not impose their ways of living on any other country.<sup>74</sup> While Iran was happy with this continued support from China, and the inability of the USA to force them to distance themselves from Iran, China still refused to partake in a 'coalition' with Iran and other anti-USA forces in the Middle East. They had done so in 1991 and did it again in 1996, their relationship with the USA was still too important to them and taking opposition too far could endanger their status in the world.<sup>75</sup> Support for Iran during this time was limited to words instead of actions. Media outlets in China and internationally printed articles in which members of the Chinese government were defending Iran or discussing the

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<sup>69</sup> Garver, *Iran and China*, 130-131.

<sup>70</sup> *Ibid*, 131.

<sup>71</sup> *Ibid*, 133; James Milward, *Eurasian crossroads: a history of Xinjiang* (London: Hurst and Company, 2021), 328-329.

<sup>72</sup> Azad, *Iran and China*, 5.

<sup>73</sup> Garver, *Iran and China*, 111.

<sup>74</sup> *Ibid*, 112.

<sup>75</sup> *Ibid*, 113-114.

ineffectiveness of the sanctions, but not much more was done to improve Iran's position in the world or strengthen their ties militarily. So while officials from China were more than willing to defend Iran verbally when it came to increased pressure from the USA, they were unwilling to join Iran on the ground and actively stand up against American hegemony in the region.<sup>76</sup> While this did not yet raise the Iranian alarm bells this could have been a sign of what was about to happen in 1997.

## Moving into the 21<sup>st</sup> century

The last years of the twentieth century saw some massive events for both countries. In China Deng Xiaoping passed away. Hong Kong was also cautiously returned to the country in June of that year after the end of the treaty signed 100 years prior and a new agreement between the UK and China which stated that 'one country, two systems would be the norm for the following fifty years. Iran saw a change in leadership. While Khamenei was still the supreme leader of the country, Mohammad Khatami was elected president. For many, he resembled a new era of politics, the era of reform. There was also a shift in Sino-Iranian relations in these years, and Chinese politics in general. China had had to deal with multiple issues in their relationship with the USA in the 1990s, starting with the Tiananmen Square massacre in 1989 and continuing with debates over Taiwan's sovereignty and human rights. All in all, this led to China choosing to try to improve their relationship with the USA and, therefore, automatically distancing themselves more from Iran.<sup>77</sup> This change also coincided with reforms of the financial and economic aspects of China, leading to a possible assumption that they calculated that they needed the USA for their own economic growth. Whatever the reason was for China to decide that they needed to improve their relationship with the USA, in the fall of 1997 they stopped cooperation on nuclear development with Iran.<sup>78</sup>

For Iran, this mainly meant that they had to change their views on China. Where before they had hopes of a strong anti-Western alliance with the country, they now started to realize that this did not seem probable in the coming years. However, they did not completely distance themselves from China and continued to maintain their ties with the country as well as possible. What did happen was that the cooperation between the two countries was at its lowest in fourteen years in 1998.<sup>79</sup> The low in this partnership, however, did not last a long time. Just before the turn of the century, in 1999, China tried to repair the relationship with Iran. It must not come as a surprise that once again this

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<sup>76</sup> Garver, *China and Iran*, 115.

<sup>77</sup> Ibid; Avery Goldstein, "The diplomatic face of China's grand strategy: A rising power's emerging choice," *The China Quarterly* 161 (December 2001): 850.

<sup>78</sup> John Garver, "China-Iran relations: Cautious friendship with America's nemesis," *China Report* 49, no. 1 (2013): 74; John Garver, "Is China playing a dual game in Iran?," *The Washington Quarterly* 34, no. 1 (2011): 75.

<sup>79</sup> Garver, *China and Iran*, 118.



change in Chinese policy towards Iran was influenced by a change in the relationship between China and the USA. The event that set this change in motion was the bombing of the Chinese embassy in Belgrade during the war in Eastern Europe. According to Beijing the bombing of their embassy by American planes had been deliberate and wasn't a mistake.<sup>80</sup> China moving closer towards Iran did not mean that everything was back to normal within a short period. While the political visits slowly took place again, the same could not be said for other areas of cooperation. Military exchanges between China and Iran were halted for several years.<sup>81</sup>

In the years after the turn of the century much happened on the world stage, most notably the terrorist attacks in the USA on September 11, 2001, and the subsequent 'War on terror.' It also meant there was a change in leadership in the USA, George W. Bush was the new president. Bush had a much harder line against Iran, something which became visible in his speech in early 2002 where he called Iran, North Korea and Iraq the 'axis of evil.'<sup>82</sup> China immediately responded to these comments by saying that they found those types of comments not suited for international politics and defended Iran.<sup>83</sup> Three months after the January 2002 speech by Bush the Chinese president Jiang Zemin visited Tehran. This visit again made clear that China rejected the claim of the USA that Iran was part of an 'axis of evil.'<sup>84</sup>

## Two decades of change

So far, this chapter has mainly focused on the relationship between Iran and China and occasionally the role of the USA therein in the twentieth and early twenty-first century. This following section, however, will briefly look at some of the developments over the past two decades. By the end of the first decade of the twenty-first century, a new crisis was developing in the Middle East. The protests that had started in Tunisia and spread to several other countries in the Middle East, among which Syria and Egypt, had a big impact on Iran's position in the region.<sup>85</sup> With the 2009 Green Movement protests still in fresh memory, Iran wanted to avoid the spread of the Arab Spring, the term that is often used to describe the protests in other countries, to Iran.<sup>86</sup> China, while not in the Middle East,

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<sup>80</sup> Garver, *China and Iran*, 117-118; Goldstein, "China's grand strategy," 854.

<sup>81</sup> Garver, *China and Iran*, 117.

<sup>82</sup> George W. Bush, "State of the Union Address, January 29, 2002," Miller Center, last accessed June 13, 2021, <https://web.archive.org/web/20111011053416/http://millercenter.org/president/speeches/detail/4540>.

<sup>83</sup> "China berates 'axis of evil' remarks," *CNN News*, January 31, 2002, <https://edition.cnn.com/2002/WORLD/asiapcf/east/01/31/china.bush/index.html?related>.

<sup>84</sup> Garver, "China-Iran relations," 72.

<sup>85</sup> Bulent Aras and Emirhan Yorulmazlar, "Turkey and Iran after the Arab Spring: Finding a middle ground," *Middle East Policy* 21, no. 4 (Winter 2014): 117-119.

<sup>86</sup> The Green Movement is an Iranian protest movement that was started in 2009 after Ahmadinejad won the election instead of Mir Houssein Mousavi. For further reading on this topic see: Sertag Manoukian, "Where is this place? Crowds, audio-vision, and poetry in postelection Iran," *Public Culture* 22, no. 2 (2010): 237-262;

also feared the protest and the possibility of it spreading to their country.<sup>87</sup> In the end, both countries were able to avoid massive protests in their country, and ten years later they are some of the strongest and most legitimate powers in Asia. However, their relations were also influenced by these events in the Middle East. This was most clearly the case when it came to picking sides in involvement in the conflicts in some of the hardest-hit countries in the region. Broadly speaking, on the one hand, there are Iran, Syria and Hezbollah. They are defending the Assad regime in Syria and are mainly advocates of Shia Islam. On the other hand, there are Saudi Arabia and other Sunni countries, often supported by Western powers and Israel. There thus is a clear rivalry in the region that often shapes foreign policy.<sup>88</sup> China, however, is not necessarily in any of these camps. They maintain good relations with multiple countries in the region, among which are both Iran and Saudi Arabia. As we will see in chapter three, China's position in the Middle East may impact the rivalry between the two groups, and specifically the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia.

The twenty-first century has also seen a shift of power in the region. Until the second decade of the twenty-first century, we have seen the large impact that the USA had on Sino-Iranian relations. Most of their relationship was not determined by a change of government within either Iran or China but by American pressure on China. This trend seems to have changed in the last decade. Two major shifts in world politics may have influenced this change. Firstly, China's new leader, Xi Jinping came into power on November 15, 2012. Xi seems to be the only Chinese president that can compare its influence with that of Mao Zedong in some ways.<sup>89</sup> He enjoys more influence than most of his predecessors and even passed a law in 2018 which takes away the rule that limits Chinese presidents to serving only two terms.<sup>90</sup> With the removal of this law Xi could in theory remain president until his death. He also launched the BRI in 2013 which changed China's official line of policy in the region.<sup>91</sup> All in all, China now seems to be an economy that is strong and can easily compete with the largest economic powers in the world, among them the USA. Around the same time, a shift took place in the USA as well. While Barrack Obama easily won his second term in office in the fall of 2012, things seemed to change in American foreign politics. This change was accelerated by the election of Donald

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Hossein Bashiriyeh, "Counter-revolution and revolt in Iran: An interview with Iranian political scientist Hossein Bashiriyeh," *Constellations* 17, no. 1 (March 2010): 61-77.

<sup>87</sup> Ying Chen, "Is the Arab Spring coming to China? The missing piece of the Puzzle," *Journal of International Affairs*, November 5, 2013, <https://jia.sipa.columbia.edu/online-articles/arab-spring-coming-china-missing-piece-puzzle>.

<sup>88</sup> Ali Fathollah-Nejad, "The Iranian-Saudi hegemonic rivalry," Harvard Kennedy School Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, October 25, 2017, <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/iranian-saudi-hegemonic-rivalry>.

<sup>89</sup> Kerry Brown, "The powers of Xi Jinping," *Asian Affairs* 48, no. 1 (2017): 17-18.

<sup>90</sup> Chris Buckley and Keith Bradsher, "China moves to let Xi stay in power by abolishing term limit," *New York Times*, February 25, 2018, <https://www.nytimes.com/2018/02/25/world/asia/china-xi-jinping.html>.

<sup>91</sup> James McBride, "China's Massive Belt and Road Initiative," Council on Foreign Relations, January 28, 2020, <https://www.cfr.org/backgrounder/chinas-massive-belt-and-road-initiative>.

Trump in late 2016. While Trump's policy towards China did not differ that much from his predecessors, there were some changes visible.<sup>92</sup> Trump used much stronger language than Obama to speak about China. His campaign slogan "America First" also showed his views of China. Trump wanted the USA to cooperate either less with China or to force rules that would benefit the USA more. While it is too early to determine the long-term effects of this policy we can see a change in relations between China and the USA in the short term.<sup>93</sup>

This change in the relationship between China and the USA has also led to a change in relations between China and Iran as it so often did in the past decades. The BRI was one of the catalysts of this. While cooperation between the two countries was already increasing before the BRI was introduced in 2013, the BRI, which original aim was to reinstate the ancient silk road and increase connectivity both in Asia as well as between Asia and other regions such as Europe and Africa, increased this cooperation even more.<sup>94</sup> In the years following the implementation of the BRI, we see an increase in Chinese investments in Iran, especially in infrastructure. They were funding and assisting with the building of railroads, ports and highways. All of this also benefits China as they can use these new infrastructure hubs to export oil to their country without relying on trade routes or infrastructure controlled by the West. This gives China much more power.<sup>95</sup> They now don't have to remain friendly with the USA to be able to supply themselves, changing their whole position. Iran is also obviously benefiting from this situation as it creates a market for its oil while they are closed off from large parts of the world. The cooperation between the two is, however, not completely equal. Iran is much more reliant on China, as they are by far their largest trading partner. On the other hand, Iran is only a small trading partner for China.<sup>96</sup> While their strategic location makes them more attractive to the Chinese than many other countries, they would still be able to maintain their status and growth without Iran. These new developments may very well introduce a new phase in relations between the two countries. With the USA becoming less prominent in the region, and China becoming more powerful and influential in Eastern Asia things seem very much different from the decades discussed above.

### What defines Sino-Iranian relations

What the above chapter has shown us is that the main factor in Sino-Iranian relations has been the USA. The line of American politics seems to influence much of what is happening in the relations

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<sup>92</sup> Wu Xinbo, "New phase of the United States' China policy under the Trump administration," *China International Studies* 71 (2018): 24.

<sup>93</sup> Xinbo, "New phase," 24.

<sup>94</sup> Shariatnia and Azizi "Iran-China cooperation," 48.

<sup>95</sup> Michael Dunford and Weidong Liu, "Chinese perspectives on the Belt and Road Initiative," *Cambridge Journal of Regions, Economy and Society* 12 (2019): 146.

<sup>96</sup> See chapter 3 for a more in-depth evaluation of the economic relationship between Iran and China

between China and Iran. To some extent, China has always been dependent on the USA ever since they slowly resumed their relationship in the 1970s. Whether it was the pressure of the USA on China to distance themselves from Iran or factions in the relationship between the Americans and the Chinese, much of the changes have something to do with the USA. However, China has never completely distanced itself from Iran since they resumed ties in 1984. China has almost always supported Iran in the UNSC and has always been in touch with Iran, even in times when most countries placed large boycotts on Iran which isolated the country. This probably has put great trust in China from the Iranian perspective, even though the country may not have been as cooperative as had hoped in the early 1990s when there were hopes of an alliance between the two.

Another pattern that we can see, which is especially interesting when looking at Iran's response to the issues in Xinjiang, is that Iran rarely interferes in Chinese domestic politics. At the time that they did do so, during the 1990s, they complied with Chinese demands to stop doing this. This is an interesting observation as it helps us understand that what Iran is doing currently is part of a larger pattern in the relationship between the two countries. This makes the lack of support of the Uyghurs seem less of an anomaly in Iranian Foreign policy (at least from their foreign policy in theory) and more of a continuing pattern of its relations with China. This would mean that they are more concerned with non-interference in domestic politics of other countries than in their ideals of protecting vulnerable Muslim populations in the world. The following chapter will expand more on this idea but for now, evidence suggests that this is the case. It is also important to note here that China also never interferes in Iranian domestic politics. Again, this supports the thesis of the importance of domestic politics.

More recently, there has also been much financial support for Iran coming from China. Even before the BRI, which changed China's relationship with the region, Iran was somewhat dependent on investments and trade coming from China. The BRI has increased the cooperation between the two countries and economically they have been more connected than ever. At the same time, China has grown so much that they have become less dependent on American influence. They have become one of the most powerful countries of this time and pose some serious competition to the USA. This has led to a smaller influence of the USA on the relationship between Iran and China. This is in part due to China's overall growth over the past twenty years, but also due to a slight downfall of the USA and the investments of the BRI. This seems to have strengthened the relationship between China and Iran even more. Chinese investment in the country is higher than ever and they are consistently Iran's largest trading partner. On the other hand, China has also become more dependent on the Iranian energy supply even though they also get supplies from other countries in the Middle East.

In general, larger trends in the the relations between China and Iran have thus been relatively stable since 1979. China, under multiple leaders, has proven to be a valuable friend to the Iranians. This long history of Chinese support of Iran, even though not always without hesitation, could therefore very well still influence the relations between the two in 2021.

## Chapter 3. Iranian support for China explained

In the earlier two chapters of this study, we have looked at some theories of international relations that help to explain Iranian foreign policy in general. We have also looked at the history and the current state of the relationship between Iran and China. This chapter will combine the findings of these first two chapters and will use the data collected to explain why Iran continues to support China. It will use the theories explained earlier on to make it possible to structure the chapter. Besides the data collected from earlier chapters of this thesis, it will also rely on other sources. The main part of these is primary sources, both in the form of data and written text. These written sources give us an insight into the workings and reasoning of the Iranian government and are therefore very useful in establishing whether a theory can be applied to the situation or not. While the majority of these statements will be coming from the Iranian perspectives, some of the documents included in this analysis will also be coming from organizations. This chapter will also heavily rely on economic datasets. Especially the testing of the first theory, that of economic (inter)dependence will benefit from these datasets. As explained in the methodology section, the data used in this section will come from the IMF.

### Economic (inter)dependence

The first theory proposed in chapter one of this thesis was one of economic (inter)dependence. To test the validity of this theory this thesis will use economic data. As discussed in the methodology section, the scope of this thesis is not broad enough to include all measures of economic (inter)dependency. Instead, it will rely on data regarding import and export as they tell a broad story. Once again, it must be acknowledged that this thesis can, therefore, not come to a definite conclusion on the impact of economics. However, it can give an indication and a better understanding.

We will start this section by looking at the exports from Iran to China. Already in 2009, China seems to be the largest market for Iranian exports. At that point, however, China was closely followed by both India and Japan. In the years following we can see an increase in Iranian exports to China. Exports towards China are almost double as much in 2012 as they were in 2009. We can see exports to countries such as India, Japan and Turkey increase as well during this same period. Yet, China becomes more solidified in its top destination, creating a larger distance between them and these other countries. The same pattern can be seen in the first years of the BRI. Exports towards China increase at a faster pace than exports to other countries. However, something seems to change in 2015. By this year, exports from Iran to China are almost cut in half. This is the same year as the signing of the nuclear accord between Iran and Western powers, something that might have influenced the relationship between Iran and China. 2016 is another year in which exports are lower than in the year

before. In 2017, however, we can see exports increasing again. In 2018, the numbers are almost back at their 2014 height. This time leaving a little less space between China and India, the second-largest destination of Iranian exports. While after this year we can see the numbers go down again, China easily maintains its position as the largest destination for Iranian exports. We can thus see that China is constantly Iran's most important destination for exports in the data available for the twenty-first century.<sup>97</sup>



Figure 1. Exports for Iran to China

*Source:* “Direction of trade statistics the Islamic Republic of Iran,” International Monetary Fund, last accessed 13 June, 2021.

Looking at imports into Iran we see a slightly different story. In 2009, China ranked third on this list, below the United Arab Emirates (UAE) and Germany. One year later, in 2010 they climb to a second position. In the years following they move closer to the UAE, surpassing them in 2014, the year after the BRI was first introduced. From that point on, Iran starts to become more reliant on Chinese imports. We also don't see the same decrease in 2015 as we saw in the data on export. We do see a slight decrease starting in 2018, but again China easily remains Iran's largest partner for imports, importing almost double as much as the UAE, which is Iran's second-largest partner for imports.<sup>98</sup> Chinese imports into Iran thus seem to become more important over time. As these numbers do not

<sup>97</sup> “Direction of trade statistics the Islamic Republic of Iran,” International Monetary Fund, last accessed 13 June, 2021, <https://data.imf.org/?sk=9D6028D4-F14A-464C-A2F2-59B2CD424B85&slid=1514498277103>.

<sup>98</sup> “Direction of trade statistics Iran.”

tell us what is being imported it is hard to establish how reliant Iran actually is on these imports. However, that these numbers are increasing indicates a growth in cooperation.



Figure 2. Imports to Iran from China

*Source:* "Direction of trade statistics the People's Republic of China," International Monetary Fund, last accessed 13 June, 2021.

The data analysis above tells us the story from the Iranian perspective. However, to look at (inter)dependency we must also look at the data from the perspective of the Chinese. When we look at the data from the Chinese point of view we get a completely different picture. When it comes to exports, Iran never even ranks in China's top 20. In 2014, it ranks 23<sup>rd</sup>, which is the highest-ranking it gets between 2009 and 2020. Iran thus does not seem to be a very important partner for exports for China. It is also not consistently climbing the ranks and becoming more important.<sup>99</sup> However, at this point it is important to note that the data used does not specify which goods are being exported, only the millions of American dollars it can be valued at. We can thus not establish how important the exports of these goods are for China, just as we could not do so for Iran. When it comes to imports Iran at first seems to be comfortably in the top 20, usually ranking around the 15<sup>th</sup> place. However, around 2015 they seem to be dropping, becoming a less important partner for China. What is

<sup>99</sup> "Direction of trade statistics People's Republic of China," International Monetary Fund, last accessed 13 June, 2021, <https://data.imf.org/?sk=9D6028D4-F14A-464C-A2F2-59B2CD424B85&slid=1515619375491>.



interesting is that at the same time Saudi Arabia, Iran's biggest rival, becomes a more important partner for China. This leads us to believe that the drop in imports is not due to a lack in need of oil, which is Iran's most exported good. China starts to increase its trade with Saudi Arabia and decrease its trade with Iran in the latest part of the second decade of the twenty-first century.<sup>100</sup> The numbers don't tell us what the reasons are for this. However, again, this coincides with the signing of the nuclear deal.

What we can thus learn from the data used above is that while China has always been a large trading partner for Iran, their role seems to have increased in the second decade of the twenty-first century. While it is not always a steady increase, they are easily Iran's most important trading partner during these years. This data cannot exclusively tell us whether Iran becomes more reliant on China during these years based on these numbers, but it shows us that China is Iran's most important trading partner. On the other hand, China seems to have been moving away from Iranian imports in recent years. It thus seems that they have become less reliant on Iran, diversifying their energy sources more. This could be a reason that Iran responds to the Uyghur issue as it does. If Iran is indeed reliant on China to some extent, they may want to remain silent during a time where export towards the country is already decreasing. Them being vocal about the Uyghur issue could potentially accelerate the decrease in exports towards China. However, as we have seen in the chapter before, Iran was already silent on this issue in the 1990s and early 2000s. At this time China seems to have been a less important trading partner for Iran. Based on these datasets economic (inter)dependency thus does not seem to fully explain why Iran is taking this position as different economic situations in the past led to similar policy in relation to Xinjiang.

### Identity as an explanation

A second possibility that has been discussed in the first chapter of this thesis is the idea of identity and the importance of this for Iranian foreign policy. To recap, Iran has multiple different identities that all compete with each other.<sup>101</sup> Sometimes their more Islamic identity trumps the Iranian identity and at other times it is the other way around. The argument that I will be making in this section is that in the case of the Uyghur issue, the Iranian identity was used to make a decision. Not standing up for the Uyghurs goes against their Islamic identity which holds that they are the protector of oppressed Muslims worldwide. Not doing so thus had many people wondering why Iran was making such a contradictory decision. To make the argument this section will examine two similar situations in which Iran did use its Islamic identity, at least to some extent, to make a decision.

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<sup>100</sup> "Direction of trade statistics China."

<sup>101</sup> Akbarzadeh and Barry, "State identity," 614.

The first situation which will be discussed here is the issue of the Rohingya Muslims in Burma. Continued repression and persecution of the Rohingya Muslims led to many of them fleeing the country in 2015. During this time the situation got worse and Hindu violence against them increased.<sup>102</sup> Many Rohingya were killed during this time and those who were able to flee often ended up being refused to enter other countries or stuck at sea.<sup>103</sup> The response of the Iranian government to this crisis was very different from the response towards the Uyghur issue. First of all, Minister of Foreign Affairs Javad Zarif made a statement against the persecutions and demanded that humanitarian help was provided for the most hard-hit regions. He then also criticized the international community and the UN in particular by saying that they were not doing enough for the Rohingya in a letter to secretary-general Antonio Guterres. Staying silent and passive was not an option according to Zarif.<sup>104</sup> He was not the only Iranian official to stand up for the Muslims in Burma. Iranian President Hassan Rouhani also spoke out against the situation in the country. Just like his Minister of Foreign Affairs Zarif, Rouhani urged the international community to take a more active role and provide more humanitarian aid. He also touched upon the concept of equality by saying that all Muslim societies in the world are equal wherever they are in the world. According to him, it is therefore important that other Muslim countries help those that are in need.

As we can see, this response is very different from the one used for the Uyghur issue. Two of the most important Iranian officials spoke up for the Muslims, the president and the minister of foreign affairs. In the case of the Uyghur issue, no Iranian officials have made any mention except for signing a letter in support of the Chinese government. In the case of the Rohingya, the Islamic nature of the argument is also very prominent. This is especially clear when Rouhani brings up the concept of equality between Muslim societies in the world and asks Muslim communities in particular to make a stand. In this case, we can thus argue that this argument was probably made with Iran's 'Islamic identity.'

The example of the Rohingya Muslims is not the only one that illustrates Iran's response to situations in which Muslims are oppressed. Kashmir province is another example that can be used to illustrate how Iran responds. In 2019, article 370, under which Kashmir had a special status that it could have its own constitution and administrative autonomy, was abrogated by India. This abrogation has led to unrest in the region and many have had their rights revoked due to this. Multiple Iranian

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<sup>102</sup> For a more detailed account of the Rohingya in Myanmar, I suggest Thant Myint-U, *The hidden history of Burma. Race, capitalism and the crisis of democracy in the 21st century* (London: Atlantic Books, 2020).

<sup>103</sup> "Why are so many Rohingya migrants stranded at sea?," *BBC*, May 18, 2015, <https://www.bbc.com/news/world-asia-32740637>.

<sup>104</sup> "Iran urges Myanmar to end violence against Rohingyas, allow access to humanitarian aid," *First Post*, September 8, 2017, <https://www.firstpost.com/world/iran-urges-myanmar-to-end-violence-against-rohingyas-allow-access-to-humanitarian-aid-4023923.html>.

officials and religious figures spoke out against Indian actions in Kashmir. The most important of them was Ayatollah Khamenei himself. He sent out a tweet in which he said that he backed the struggle of the Kashmiri people. In that same tweet, he also asked the Indian government to not implement any policies that could harm the people, and particularly the Muslims, of Kashmir. At the same time, he was also calling India a country with which Iran has good relations, an interesting statement to make at the same time. Khamenei was, however, not the only religious figure to speak out in favor of Kashmir. Grand Ayatollah Mohammad Alavi Gorgani called for action in Kashmir as well. He called on multiple groups, among them the Islamic Ummah, to respond to the issue. According to him this must be done "based on their humanitarian obligation regarding these unjust acts" and to "avoid silence over this major insult."<sup>105</sup> The religious figures in Iran thus strongly supported the Muslim population in Iran despite the importance of Iranian relations with India. In this case, President Rouhani also spoke up again. In a call to Pakistan's Prime Minister Imram Khan, he vowed for a situation in which the people in Kashmir could have their rights and live in peace. He also mentioned that he did not think military action was the solution to this conflict. Minister of Foreign Affairs Zarif also commented on the issue by saying that he hoped that the rights and interests of the Kashmiri people would be returned and secured by dialogue.<sup>106</sup>

The case of Kashmir, which was happening around the same time as the growing attention for the Uyghur issue, is another example of Iran defending a Muslim minority in a non-Muslim country. Again, we can see a more Islamic approach to the issue, especially due to the response of two major Iranian religious figures. This makes it likely that Iran here uses the Islamic identity to defend the Kashmiri people. What is interesting here is that there also seems to be an element of national identity in trying to protect their relationship with India by stating that they are a good friend of Iran. This could be explained by the fact that India is a much more important trading partner to Iran than Burma, as we have seen in the first section of this chapter. Potentially, speaking up felt like a risk to Khamenei and he, therefore, added the positive twist to his tweet.

Comparing the case of the Uyghurs to the two examples used above shows us that the responses are very different and that there are probably different parts of Iranian identity that are being used by the government. However, it does not tell us why the responses are so different. The explanation of identity is thus not sufficient to explain Iran's response to the Uyghur issue. However, it does show us that the response might not be that contradictory in the larger picture of Iranian foreign politics. The country seems to struggle to approach issues that are in line with how they

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<sup>105</sup> Fatemeh Aman, "Iran Issues Rare Criticism of India over Kashmir," Atlantic Council, last modified August 30, 2019, <https://www.atlanticcouncil.org/blogs/iransource/iran-issues-rare-criticism-of-india-over-kashmir>.

<sup>106</sup> Aman, "Iran Issues Rare Criticism."

portray themselves towards the outside world. In this case, their response seems to be going against their constitution but in favor of their national self-interest.

## Domestic politics

Domestic politics as an explanation was proposed by multiple scholars. An example of those are Kelemen and Turcsányi. They did not apply this theory to Iran themselves but instead used other Muslim countries in the region with similar responses to that of Iran. Their finding was that all these countries were influenced by the impact of decisions on their domestic politics. For example, the possible consequences of condemning China's actions in Xinjiang if similar situations would arise in their country. This section aims to execute the same type of research but from the Iranian perspective. It aims to see whether domestic politics can, in the case of Iran, explain their response to the Uyghur issue.

While Iran does not have a minority group that can be easily compared to the Uyghurs in China, multiple minorities are living in the country that have in the past caused the country some trouble. Firstly, the Kurds are living in the western part of Iran. This group makes up about ten percent of the population and is thus a relatively large minority. Ever since the establishment of Iran, there have been groups within the minority that have advocated for separatism. While the Iranians maintain a better relationship with the Kurds than, for example, Turkey does, it is still a minority that could potentially cause unrest in the country in the future. It is also important to keep in mind that there still are problems going on with the Kurdish minority in Iran, even though they may not get as much attention and there is less violence. Activism from Kurdish Iranians has been suppressed by the government, especially since the 1990s. One of the ways in which the Kurds have been suppressed in Iran is through language. While Persian is the official language of the country, many groups, among them the Kurds, speak other languages as well. Under the Pahlavi regime, their right to have their own language was already challenged. At first, this seemed to change under the regime after 1979, which allowed education and press in languages other than Persian. However, in reality, the new Iranian government is also very strict on the official use of Kurdish. In a 2012 article Jaffer Sheyholislami argues that there are three main policies to actively try to prevent people from using a language other than Persian. Firstly, he argues that multilingual education is not taken seriously and that it is seen as a threat to Iranian integrity. Secondly, using any other language than Persian is usually restricted and controlled. And finally, not only the state but also Iranian scholars and the media use Persian to unify

Iran. This leads him to conclude that there definitely are restrictions on the use of Kurdish and that Kurdish people are suppressed in Iran.<sup>107</sup>

There are different ways in which Iran is suppressing the Kurdish as well but this example shows us how they try to suppress a certain culture, just like the Chinese try to do with the Uyghurs. There are thus similarities between the two situations. Both feel slightly distanced from the country they belong to and have a different culture than the one that is being pushed by the government. Both also live in a certain region in the country and are not spread all over, mixing with the majority group. While the situation of the Kurds in Iran is different from that of the Uyghurs in Xinjiang there is always a threat that they could be persecuted. By supporting the Chinese, Iran probably leaves open a door for a situation in which they would like to limit the rights of the Kurds to increase unity in the country. Having the Kurds among their population thus could be a reason for Iran to not protect minorities abroad.

Another example of an Iranian minority is the Sufis. While they do not inhabit a certain region or city in particular they are a large part of Iranian society that has in the past had issues with the government. An example of a Sufi order that has caused the government in Tehran trouble is the Gonabadi order, the largest Sufi order in Iran. While the relationship between the Gonabadi order and the government had long been stable and relatively positive, lately many have been persecuted. The persecution started in the early 2000s, around the same time that Mahmoud Ahmadinejad came to power. After this time many highly placed Sufis were arrested. An example of this is the arrest of over a thousand Sufis at a lodge in Qom in 2006. After the arrests, the lodge was also destroyed.<sup>108</sup> Another moment in which the Sufis, and in particular the Gonabadi order, were challenged by the Iranian government was when they decided to voice their support for Ahmadinejad's opponent, Mir-Hossein Mousavi, in the 2009 elections.<sup>109</sup> There have also been confrontations between the Sufis and the Iranian government more recently. An example of this is the arrest of Nematollah Riahi, a Sufi from the Gonabadi order. The day after his arrest, on February 19, 2018, there were clashes between police and Sufis in Tehran.<sup>110</sup>

While the examples above are on a much smaller scale than what is said to be going on in Xinjiang, the reason behind the persecutions could be eerily similar. It is often argued that the Uyghurs are persecuted because they challenge Chinese unity due to their different culture and traditions. For the Sufis in Iran, the reason for persecution seems to be their challenge to the unity of religious beliefs.

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<sup>107</sup> Jaffer Sheyholislami, "Kurdish in Iran: A case of restricted and controlled tolerance," *International Journal of the Sociology of Language* 217 (2012): 41.

<sup>108</sup> Loes Witsche, "Iran's Gonabadi Dervishes: A 'long history' of persecution," *Al Jazeera*, February 27, 2018, <https://www.aljazeera.com/features/2018/2/27/irans-gonabadi-dervishes-a-long-history-of-persecution>.

<sup>109</sup> Witsche, "Iran's Gonabadi Dervishes."

<sup>110</sup> *Ibid.*

They challenge Shia Islam in a way that part of the clergy and the hardliners do not like. They prefer all of their citizens to have the same opinion on religion and practice in the same way as this would be beneficial in keeping the country together. A challenge from a relatively large minority in the country could challenge their monopoly on religion. They also view the Sufi approach as something that may go against Islam in the same way as unveiling women does. Therefore, they could argue that what the Sufis are doing is illegal by Iranian law. This makes the situation even more potentially dangerous as a lawful basis could mean a harder approach. While the two situations are not the same, and the situation in China seems to be more urgent, there are similarities that the Iranian government may keep in mind when making its foreign policy decisions.

The two groups discussed in the section above both form a threat to the Iranian government in one way or another. While the situation is different from the Uyghurs in China there is a potential that conflicts with these groups will escalate in coming years. In that case, the Iranian government would likely like to act to suppress them in one way or another. One possibility is that they would follow China's example. While this is a very unlikely situation it may influence the decisions to support the Chinese government on the Uyghur issue. If they speak out against China now, chances are that the Chinese government will also attack Iran over suppression of minorities, if only to call out their hypocrisy. It could therefore be a calculated decision by the Iranian government to protect their domestic politics and to keep China in their corner. These examples and comparisons, however, are not enough to fully decide whether this is the reason for Iran to stay silent. As the examples in the section on identity have shown, Iran is not afraid to speak up for minorities even if it could potentially hurt their own politics. Domestic politics can therefore be part of the explanation but cannot explain what is going on in full.

### Could it be rivalry?

A final possibility is that the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia is the main influence on foreign policy. This conflict can be linked with the issue of security and can thus be treated as a security issue. This section looks at whether it is plausible that Iran will not support the Uyghur issue out of fear that China will move even closer towards Saudi Arabia and import less Iranian oil. With Iran already being isolated due to sanctions from the West, this could influence their own national security and leave them weaker in the region. As mentioned in chapter one, this final theory is heavily linked with the theories that have already been discussed above. However, some aspects of this cannot be linked and should thus be discussed individually.

To understand the relevance of this theory it is important to first quickly examine the history of the conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Before 1979, the two countries were on good terms.

However, that year much changed. In Iran Khomeini came to power and changed the outlook of the country. At the same time, in Saudi Arabia, a group of fundamentalists occupied the Holy Mosque in Mecca for multiple days claiming that their leader was the Mahdi. This occupation is much less discussed than the situation in Iran but is just as important in explaining the rivalry between the two countries. The occupation forced the house of Saud to give in to the religious establishment in the country. This, in turn, led to stricter Islamic rules in Saudi Arabia. In the years following the event music became prohibited, women lost many of their rights and religion started to play a significantly larger role in people's everyday lives. This thus shows us that Saudi Arabia and Iran became more religious around the same time.<sup>111</sup>

That the two countries became more religious at first did not seem to cause a conflict between them. In the beginning, the house of Saud was not afraid or angered by Khomeini, instead, they saw him as a possible ally. However, over time this changed, especially due to the Iran-Iraq war. This friendship turning into a rivalry also brought back an old Islamic conflict, that between the Sunni and Shia Muslims. The revival of the conflict was escalated by multiple other conflicts in the region. The Soviet invasion of Afghanistan was one of these conflicts. Happening around the same time as the changes in Iran and Saudi Arabia, the conflict in Afghanistan was one of the first moments where the return of the Sunni-Shia conflict was visible. On the ground, the two countries supported different rebel groups that fought against the Soviets. At the same time, the fighters in Pakistan (which was a base for the groups involved in the conflict) radicalized as well. Sunni books were published on the illegitimacy of Shia Muslims, often funded by Saudi Arabia. In villages close to the Afghan border Shias were murdered for being *Kafir* or infidels. At this time, however, the conflict between the groups did not seem to be at a point of no return. The groups involved were mainly radicalized Muslims on both sides which did not include the majority of 'mainstream' Muslims in the region.<sup>112</sup>

The next moment in which things significantly changed was the Iraq War started by the Bush administration in 2003. With Saddam Hussein gone, both Saudi Arabia and Iran saw opportunities to get the country on their side. Iran tried to mobilize the large Shia population in the country and started to influence Shia culture in Iraq as well. Saudi Arabia was not pleased by this and supported other groups on the ground. The proxy war between the two countries went on for years, with the USA heavily involved as well. Eventually, the proxy war led to the establishment of ISIS (or Daesh). ISIS is a Sunni Muslim group, Saudi Arabia, however, distances itself from the group due to its extreme actions. Eventually, the group was mostly defeated but not before they had killed many and destroyed much

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<sup>111</sup> Kim Ghattas, *Black wave: Saudi Arabia, Iran and the rivalry that unravelled the Middle East* (London: Wildfire, 2020), 73-75.

<sup>112</sup> Ghattas, *Black Wave*.

of Iraq and Syria. The Iraq War is often mentioned as the starting point of the return of the Sunni-Shia conflict, but as we have seen the revival started in the 1980s already.<sup>113</sup>

The fact that this conflict has been going on for more than some years also potentially means that it has deeper roots in the societies of Iran and Saudi Arabia. The chance that it plays a role in their relationships with China thus also grows as it has been influencing society for a longer time. We have seen in the section on the economic incentives that China seems to be moving more towards Saudi Arabia and slightly away from Iran in recent years. It is important to return to this observation more in-depth at this point. China moving towards Saudi Arabia and away from Iran may at first sight only look as though Iran is possibly losing an important trading partner. However, knowing the history between the two countries and keeping the conflict in mind, it becomes a much larger threat for Iran. If China would choose the side of Saudi Arabia in the conflict this would make Iran very vulnerable. The USA is already working with Saudi Arabia while at the same time sanctioning Iran. That would leave only Russia as a larger power to be in the Iranian camp. Not only is Iran at that point probably losing much of its proxy wars, but its own existence would also become challenged. However, the chances of this happening are slim. China does not often get involved in international conflicts unless one of its own core interests is being challenged. Them getting involved in the conflict between Iran and Saudi Arabia in the Middle East thus seems to be a little far-fetched. Yet, from an Iranian perspective, this can look like a potentially dangerous situation. Their firm support of the Chinese in Xinjiang thus could be a result of this.

The shift in economic alliances of China is not the only argument that can be made in favor of the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia playing a role in Iran's stance on the Uyghur issue. This argument, however, is much less related to the actual actions of the Iranian government. Yet, it is important to include some of the comments discussed below as they can help in explaining what is going on. In August of 2020 Ali Motahari, who is a former member of the Iranian Parliament, sent out a tweet that called the Iranian support for China embarrassing. According to him, the only reason the government was supporting the Chinese was because of economic incentives.<sup>114</sup> On the same day, he also made multiple other accusations against China in relation to the Uyghur issues, accusing them of wanting to cause an uproot in the region.<sup>115</sup> While his comments are not necessarily controversial or related to the Iran-Saudi rivalry, the reactions to his comments were. Many conservative and hardliner Iranians responded in defense of China. Mahmoud Ahmadi Bighash argued that the Chinese did not

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<sup>113</sup> Ghattas, *Black Wave*.

<sup>114</sup> Reza Haqiqatnezhad, "Iran hardliners claim China is serving Islam by suppressing Uyghur Muslims," *Radio Farda*, August 4, 2020, <https://en.radiofarda.com/a/iran-hardliners-claim-china-is-serving-islam-by-suppressing-uyghur-muslims-/30766289.html>.

<sup>115</sup> Haqiqatnezhad, "Iran hardliners."



have any problems with their Muslim populations while at the same time attacking Motahari.<sup>116</sup> What is more interesting though, was the comment made by the editor of a hardline newspaper in the country, Mehdi Hassanzadeh. He tweeted out that the Muslims in Xinjiang province were supported by the Saudi regime as they are, according to him, mainly Wahabi Takfiri Muslims.<sup>117</sup> He thus argues that China is actually serving Iran specifically and the Islamic world in general by fighting the radicalization of these Muslims. Many others on Twitter agreed with Hassanzadeh that China is serving Islam. The main argument of these people is that Saudi Arabia had been heavily investing in this region to promote Wahabism.<sup>118</sup>

The argument made by the hardliners is an interesting one as it firmly brings the position of Iran on the issue into the Iran-Saudi conflict. However, there are also some problems. Firstly, the claim that Saudi has been funding extremism in the region cannot be confirmed. Even if the Saudi government invests in the region the precise allocation of these funds cannot be determined and we can thus not be sure that this goes to extremist groups. Secondly, the hardliners within the Iranian government benefit from placing everything within the rivalry with Saudi Arabia. They benefit from the fear of citizens that feel threatened by the conflict. By explaining everything through this lens the threat seems much greater than it may actually be. Thirdly, the comments made do not come from government officials but from lawyers and journalists. It can thus not be known how much Iranian government officials actually agree with these views and whether it actively influences Iranian foreign policy. Lastly, Saudi Arabia is also on the Chinese side in the case of the Uyghurs. They signed the same letter in support of China as Iran did. If they were indeed sponsoring Muslims in Xinjiang province they would probably have not made such a statement. These four reasons weaken the argument. However, it is important to mention in this thesis as it may help explain why the Iranians themselves do not protest the stance of their country. If this is the argument that they are given by their news sources as an explanation for Iran's position, they are probably much more likely to support their government.

The four theories discussed here could all be used as an explanation for Iran's position on the Uyghur issues. However, none of them can fully explain what is going without a doubt. The economic explanation seems reasonable but does not tell the full story. It can only tell how important the economic relationship between the two countries is for Iran. But this does not explain decisions made by Iran in recent history when their relationship with China seems to have been even more important. Using identity as an explanation could also be valuable and partly explains why what is happening is not necessarily contradictory but it does not explain why in this case Iran's Iranian identity seems to

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<sup>116</sup> Haqiqatnezad, "Iran hardliners."

<sup>117</sup> Ibid.

<sup>118</sup> Ibid.

be more prominent and not its Islamic identity. In similar situations, Iran did use its Islamic identity and did stand up for oppressed Muslims in Kashmir and Burma. The third explanation proposed here is that of domestic politics. While this, again, seems to explain part of what is going on, it cannot account for everything and is therefore not a full explanation. Lastly, the issue of the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia has been discussed here. Some of the arguments in favor of this could be very strong and seem to line up with other arguments discussed earlier in this chapter. However, none of this has been confirmed by the Iranian government and it is therefore not very credible. The sources that have spoken about this are not people connected with the Iranian government but activists or journalists in Iranian society that might want to promote their own agenda. Taking all of these theories together brings us closer to an explanation, but once more, it cannot fully explain without a doubt what is going on. More research is therefore needed. Access to more government documents could be helpful in this as well as conducting interviews with Iranian officials.

## Conclusion

What we have seen is that the relationship between Iran and China is complicated. While at first sight, it seems to be a stable relationship that has evolved, a closer look shows us there are many factors at play. **First**, we have to look at the history between the two countries. Relations were established relatively shortly after the Iranian Revolution of 1979. China especially was interested in developing a relationship with Iran. However, the cooperation between the two countries has been plagued by American interference and pressure on China to distance itself from Iran. This has resulted in a much less close relationship than could have been had there not been any interference from the outside. However, China has often proven a valuable ally for Iran. They have tried to help the country in the UNSC and did not comply with Western sanctions on Iran. They were thus one of Iran's only friends in hard times. This could very well influence the Iranian opinion of the country. They might feel that they are indebted to China and therefore don't stand up against the country. It is also possible that they look at the future and see China as a valuable partner that is needed to keep developing their country.

**Secondly**, Economic and financial incentives play a significant role in how the two interact with each other. Both use the resources of the other country for their prosperity and both see the other as a strategic partner. Especially in the last decades, this has become a large part of the relationship. This focus on the economic side of it all could be a possible explanation for Iran's silence on the Uyghur issue. That argument has two different sides. First of all, it is Iran's economic prosperity that may be challenged when they speak out against China. It is easier for China to move towards one of Iran's competitors in the region, such as their rival Saudi Arabia, than it is for Iran to survive without Chinese support. They might very well hold the Iranian officials back from speaking up in favor of the Uyghurs. At the same time, this argument has a different perspective. By having a mainly economic relationship the political becomes less important. Iran might not speak up because they believe in the idea of non-interference, something which seems to have influenced Iran's stance on the Uyghur issue in the 1990s as well. This would explain why they do not get involved in China's domestic politics. What would work against this argument, however, is that Iran's position towards the Uyghurs seems to have been the same in times when Iran and China were not very strong economic partners. This may point to different explanations of Iran's reaction. At the very least, the economic argument cannot fully explain why Iran is reacting in the way it is.

A **third** possible explanation is that of identity politics. The theory is largely based on the field of constructivism. A conflict between Iranian and Islamic identity in Iran may be one of the reasons why they will not stand up for the Uyghurs in China. Their Islamic identity would maybe be in favor of defending the minority while at the same time their more nationalistic Iranian identity is looking out to protect their own interests. This could very well explain why they are supporting China, which is

economically and politically more beneficial for them. This does, however, not explain the full story as we can also see examples where they are risking their national interests and defend the weaker 'player' in the game, especially when looking at Kashmir and the Rohingya. Kashmir is an especially interesting example as India is also one of Iran's most valuable trading partners. The question remains why they are supporting those Muslims and not the Uyghurs.

The possible explanation above of identity brings us to the **fourth** possible factor, domestic politics. Based on the work of other scholars and the analysis in the last part of this thesis, the influence of domestic politics seems to be a possible explanation. Complying with the policy of non-interference in China's domestic politics could benefit Iran when something controversial happens in their own country. If they would interfere and speak up against China there is a greater chance that China will do something similar, or respond even stronger, when an issue arises in Iranian society. It has been argued by other scholars that this is one of the explanations as to why other Muslim countries in the region have decided to stand by China and defend their policy against the Uyghurs in Xinjiang. While each country seems to have had a slightly different motive for their choice, most seem to have been influenced by what was going on within their own countries and what the risks would be when they would interfere in China's domestic politics. These explanations ranged from an impact on their economy or unemployment to more political reasons such as wanting to prevent minorities in their countries from being given the opportunities to demand more rights. As Iran is a country being build-up of many different minorities, this last reason may very well be one they have in the back of their mind while writing statements that support the Chinese and condemn the 'radical' Uyghurs. This thesis has shown that multiple groups in Iranian society could potentially challenge unity in the country. Iran could very well have this in the back of its mind when deciding how to respond to the Uyghur issue. It does, however, not explain the full picture. None of the minorities in Iran face the same type of oppression at the time of writing, and it seems unlikely that they will soon. Using domestic politics could thus not completely explain Iran's position.

A **fifth** possible explanation included in this thesis has to do with the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia. Unofficial statements have argued that the Uyghurs are pawns of the Saudi regime and should therefore be considered terrorists. While this theory is much less reliable than some of the other theories used in this thesis it has been important to include it here as it could very well be a reason for the Iranians to support China. This theory could become even more relevant when we look at the economic data. Here we can see that China seems to be increasing their imports from Saudi Arabia while at the same time decreasing the imports from Iran. Iran could see this as a threat and could therefore want to increase its relationship with China. Criticizing their approach in Xinjiang

would not be helpful in this situation and could even lead to a larger decrease in exports towards China.

Overall, we can conclude that there are multiple explanations for Iran's behavior in relation to China. The evidence discussed in this thesis suggests that a combination of all these theories can explain Iran's standpoint. None of these theories alone can fully explain why Iran is acting the way it does for the Uyghur issue. However, in the final chapter, we have seen that all these theories explain parts of the question. The answer here is thus that Iran has both economic as well as social and political motives to support China. They are concerned about their economy, but also about domestic and regional politics. All this needs to be taken into account when looking at why Iran acts the way it does. This fits into the historical pattern as well. Already in the 1990s, Iran thought maintaining their relations with China was more important than exporting the revolution. We can thus see that the standpoint of Iran on the Uyghur issue is a continuation instead of an anomaly. Yet, this is an ongoing situation and problem, Iran's behavior might also change in coming years. Therefore, it is important to keep studying and analyzing what is going on between Iran and China and how this influences the region, their domestic politics and economics. The aftershocks of the Covid-19 pandemic may also very well change the situation, as this is likely to impact both countries. Increased media attention from Western countries may also influence the response of the Iranian regime, especially with President Trump gone from office and new possibilities of repairing their relationship with the Americans.

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