

Explaining the Long-term Hostility between the  
United States and Iran: A Historical, Theoretical  
and Methodological Framework

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# I Introduction

## ***Summary***

It is unfortunate that the long-term hostility between Iran and the United States has come to be seen in the oversimplified and narrowly defined terms of Islamic fundamentalism. This paper investigates a new approach for understanding the enduring animosity between the two nations. The long-term hostility between the United States and Iran is not an exceptional case in modern American diplomatic history. During 20<sup>th</sup> century, the United States became involved in several bilateral relationships characterized by protracted antagonism short of war.

The paper argues that prolonged hostility between the states is significantly out of balance with the relatively few substantive sources of conflict between them. In other words, the rational actor model does not serve to explain enduring U.S.-Iranian hostility. Instead, we are left to explore the realm of psychological and emotional aspects at play in both states that add undue weight to the impact of recent historical events, which alone do not explain the nature of the states' ties. This paper lays the foundation for a policy-relevant theory that explains the long-term animosity between the United States and Iran.

## ***NATO and Iran***

Iran fiercely opposes several of NATO's current long-term objectives. The Iranian theocracy promotes a system of governance that fundamentally contradicts the core interests and values upon which the NATO alliance was founded. This is particularly true in the realm of basic human rights, such as the systematic use of torture and executions, freedom of speech and freedom of religion, and more generally the adherence to the principles of peaceful coexistence in the international system. In fact, Iran is perhaps second only to Russia in the threat it poses to the to the long-term objectives of the NATO alliance. It is therefore not surprising that there have been a warming of ties between these two historical enemies in the

1990s.<sup>1</sup> If NATO wants to continue to be successful in its second fifty years, it must seek to influence and accommodate Tehran.

Iran will continue to challenge core NATO objectives in the future for several important reasons. First, it is clearly in the interest of the NATO alliance to reach a comprehensive peace settlement between Israel and its Arab neighbors. Iran has made no secret of its strong opposition to the U.S.-sponsored Middle East Peace Process. Since the Iranian Revolution in 1978-79, Iran has actively sought to obstruct any accommodation by the Muslim World of the State of Israel, which it perceives as a continuation of the painful legacy of Western imperialism.

Second, Iran is the only remaining nation with a common border with a NATO that has explicitly and repeatedly declared its hostile intentions against at least one of members of the alliance. During the Cold War, Norway and Turkey were the only two members of the alliance with a shared physical border with the Soviet Union. While the commitment to defend the northern NATO flank in North Norway was a symbolic goal rather than a militarily realistic objective against the largest military complex in the world at that time on the Kola Peninsula. Yet, it sent a powerful message that the alliance was committed to defending its territory. The most realistic territorial threat against NATO in the future will come from Turkey's eastern neighbors. With the possible integration of Turkey into the European Union, the Kurdish problem in the east will most likely become a more serious source of instability than in the past since the traditional harsh methods of suppression will not be available to the central Turkish government. In addition, the ongoing dispute over access to scarce water resources — now predominantly controlled by Turkey — will become increasingly contentious as the regional consumption of water is dramatically increased due to extreme high rates of population growth, rapid urbanization, and improved standards of living. Water scarcity issues suggest that by the year 2010, NATO will now have to make a commitment to stabilize its southeastern flank against external pressure. Iran has tremendous leverage over any lasting settlement of ties between Turkey and the larger NATO alliance, and states in the Middle East and Central Asia. In short, it is clearly in NATO's interest to

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<sup>1</sup> For a more detailed assessment of Iranian-Russian relations, see Galia Golan, "Russia and Iran: A Strategic Partnership?" (London: The Royal Institute of International Affairs, Russia and Eurasia Programme, 1998).

reach a comprehensive and lasting accommodation with the government in Tehran over trans-border issues involving Turkey.

Third, Iran is one of the key players in an emerging regional and international nuclear arms race, not so much for its capabilities as for its perceived hostile intentions. Publicly, the United States quotes missile attack from “rogue states,” such as Iran and North Korea, as the justification for developing and deploying a missile defense system. However, many analysts believe that the system is intended to counter the missile threat from China since Iran’s and North Korea’s overall offensive capabilities are disproportionate to the planned U.S. defensive capacity. Moreover, many analysts believe that such a system will have the unintended effect of provoking a large-scale missile build-up. The real question is not whether Iran has the intention or technical will to acquire nuclear weapons or not; it is which strategic variables factor into the Iranian regime’s threat-response and cost-benefit analyses. It has surely not escaped the decision-makers in Tehran that deployment of nuclear missiles will almost certainly trigger a regional and international arms race.<sup>2</sup> If NATO intends to prevent a serious build-up of weapons of mass destruction capabilities on its southeastern border, it must influence Iran’s ever more rational decision-makers by acknowledging Iran’s legitimate security concerns.

Fourth, the conflict with Iran will in the future test the internal unity of NATO. The United States perceives the conflicts in the Middle East in the context of terrorism, weapons of mass destruction, and the flow of oil to the world market. The European Union is increasingly concerned with the influx of refugees from the Middle East and North Africa to Western Europe. Illegal immigration is challenging the core values of all liberal democracies in the Europe. Over the last two decades, the far right in nearly every European country has seen a tremendous increase in support by exploiting dark xenophobic undercurrents in the population at large. Newly arrived immigrants in Western Europe have not assimilated over time in the same way as massive immigration has in the United States. European politicians increasingly see illegal immigration as a serious challenge to the social fabric of Europe, and there is building consensus that future immigration must be seriously curtailed. Iran is a vital

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<sup>2</sup> For a good assessment of Iran’s conventional and unconventional military capabilities, see Anthony H. Cordesman and Ahmed S. Hashim, *Iran : dilemmas of dual containment* (Boulder, Colo.: WestviewPress, 1997). For a discussion of the wider implications of a regional arms race, see Geoffrey Kemp and Robert E. Harkavy,

important player in Europe's immigration woes. Iran has for many years given shelter to the largest refugee population in the world, and has the power to control several regional conflicts that can create massive refugee problems, which will eventually spill over to Europe. Rather than deal solely at home with the difficult issues surrounding immigration, Europe and the NATO alliance will be forced to deal with political and economic conditions which give rise to immigration at the source. Iran's partnership in this process will be critical to its success.

Finally, Iran has for a long time been the most effective barrier against drug trafficking from Afghanistan and Pakistan. Governments in most countries in the West now list the threat from international organized crime as a threat to national security. A change in policy within Iran would effectively undermine the effort to stop the flow of narcotics to the markets in Western Europe.

For the above reasons, and due to the fact that differences between U.S. and European approaches to dealing with the Iranian clergy have a potential to weaken the NATO alliance, overcoming long-term hostility between Washington and Tehran is a central component in NATO's future. Yet, the true nature of U.S.-Iranian hostility remains elusive and poorly understood. The following sections outline the problem. The paper is divided into five sections. Section II defines long-term hostility by describing the contemporary and historical background for the conflict and by distinguishing between different categories of the phenomenon. Section III evaluates alternative approaches for explaining long-term hostility. Section IV looks at how improvements in research methodology will yield more reliable and valid findings. Finally, I propose in Section V a different contextual approach for understanding the conflict.

### ***Academic Shortcomings in the Study of U.S.-Iranian Relations***

This study is distinct from the majority of the scholarly literature on political relations between the United States and Iran, which observes the conflict in rather narrowly defined terms. Similarly, it is a departure from the debate in policy journals and in other serious forms of media, which focus predominantly on unique events and for the most part is a repetition of

politically charged arguments that do not approach a better understanding of the core issues at play in U.S.-Iranian relations. The problem with the existing literature is not so much a gap in empirical knowledge as it is an unwillingness to see the conflict in a broader and more macro-causal context. Unique events are fundamental in our understanding of the conflict but they cannot by themselves explain the larger puzzle. Social science attempts to look past specific historical events. On the other hand, social science research that draws conclusions about classes of events or processes without addressing the impact of highly idiosyncratic events in the course of history is only marginally useful. Social science is an iterative process between the specific and the general. The Iranian Revolution, the Hostage Crisis, the Rushdie Fatwa, the U.S.-Iranian naval confrontation, or the American policy of actively containing Iran tell us little about the nature of U.S.-Iranian relations. These events must be related to antecedent conditions, such as Iran's encounter with European imperialism, the Cold War, Political Islam, the Middle East peace process, and the world's supply and demand for oil.

In the literature, with a few notable exceptions, the causal linkages between isolated events and a larger political, economic, and socio-cultural context are by design, ambiguous. There are several reasons why this is the case. Ideological and political bias toward one of the parties to the conflict is clearly the most obvious reason for the shortcomings. In these writings, the analytical map being laid out for the reader rarely matches the factual political terrain. In science, confirmatory research nearly always contradicts insight. In summary, the body literature on U.S.-Iranian relations has not been able to satisfactorily explain what caused the long and extremely bitter conflict between these two countries.

## II Defining Long-term Hostility

### ***Definition of Long-term Hostility***

In this study long-term hostility is defined as a protracted conflict between two parties short of war. The definition of the dependent variable, long-term hostility, has four separate components: diplomatic, economic, political, and military. The diplomatic component refers to formal diplomatic relations, bilateral informal diplomatic exchange between the two countries, and multilateral diplomacy performed by both parties to the conflict. The economic component is predominantly concerned with U.S. economic sanctions, nationalization of U.S. property, but also a wider international effort of the United States to discourage economic activity in Iran. For example, the Iran and Libya Sanctions Act of 1996 specifically targets Iran's revenues from its oil and gas resources, which are believed to be the cornerstone in sustaining its program for weapons of mass destruction and providing the financial means for Iran's support for international terrorist groups. The political component consists mainly of domestic politics in both the United States and Iran and how different interest groups influence the formulation and implementation of foreign policy. The military component of long-term hostility is made up of the conventional military confrontation between the United States and Iran, U.S. forward deployment in the Persian Gulf, Iran's program for acquisition of weapons of mass destruction, and Iran's direct and indirect involvement in international terrorism.

### ***The Research Puzzle***

This study seeks to explain the enduring hostility between the United States and Iran. In modern diplomatic history, U.S.-Iranian relations are on the face of it an extraordinary case of enduring hostility.<sup>3</sup> Despite the passing away of Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989, U.S.-Iranian

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<sup>3</sup> For a discussion of different perspectives of Iranian and American foreign policy, see Shaul Bakhash, "How Iranian Leaders View America and the World," in *America and the Muslim Middle East: Memos to the President*, ed. Philip D. Zelikow and Robert B. Zoellick (Washington, DC: The Aspen Institute, 1998)., Anoushiravan Ehteshami, *After Khomeini : the Iranian Second Republic* (London ; New York: Routledge, 1995)., Shahram Chubin, *Iran's national security policy : intentions, capabilities, and impact* (Washington, D.C.:



relations have remained virtually frozen for two decades. In the aftermath of the Iranian Revolution in 1978-79, Iran became in due course the permanent enemy of the United States. The 19th century British foreign secretary and prime minister, Lord Palmerston, famously proclaimed that England “has no permanent friends; she has only permanent interests.” Correspondingly, one needs to ask the question why the United States, the world’s most powerful and prosperous country in the 20th century as a matter of fact, does have several “permanent enemies.”

Since Ayatollah Khomeini denounced the United States as the "Great Satan" and approved the seizure of the American embassy in Tehran in November 1979, the U.S. has treated The Islamic Republic of Iran as one of the most extreme, irrational, and dangerous governments in the world. President Clinton’s national security advisor, Anthony Lake, characterized Iran as a “backlash” state and concluded “[Iran’s] revolutionary and militant messages are openly hostile to the United States and its core interests. This basic political reality will shape relations for the foreseeable future.”<sup>4</sup> The Clinton Administration then called for a policy of “dual containment” of Iran and Iraq, which culminated in the Iran and Libya Sanctions Act of 1996. Despite the extremely ideological and hostile rhetoric coming out of Iran, the argument can be made that Iran’s foreign policy since the death of Ayatollah Khomeini has been predominantly pragmatic and above all rooted in *realpolitik* dictated by economic, demographic, and legitimate security problems.<sup>5</sup> However, two years into the second Clinton Administration, U.S. foreign policy toward Iran was paradoxically more uncompromising than at any time since the Hostage Crisis. The nature of long-term hostility can be sought after through addressing this paradox. What is the relationship between the perceived threat from Iran to U.S. interest and the actual U.S. response to those threats?

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Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1993)., Anthony H. Cordesman and Ahmed S. Hashim, *Iran : dilemmas of dual containment* (Boulder, Colo.: WestviewPress, 1997)., Geoffrey Kemp, *America and Iran: Road Maps and Realism* (Washington, DC: The Nixon Center, 1998)., or go to the homepage of Institute for Political and International Studies in Tehran; [http://www.iran-ipis.org/index\\_english.html](http://www.iran-ipis.org/index_english.html)

<sup>4</sup> Anthony Lake, “Confronting Backlash States,” *Foreign Affairs* 72, no. 2 (1994).

<sup>5</sup> With regard to Iran’s foreign policy, Olivier Roy observes, “The impact of the Iranian revolution is thus largely an optical illusion, revealing what already existed but hardly changing the actual situation. The real changes took place between 1960 and 1978, not between 1978 and 1980.” “There is no middle ground between pure Shiite revolutionarism and a nationalist, pragmatic policy. Prisoner of its own symbolism and its revolutionary legitimacy, Iran was unable to make the strategic choices that would have restored it to its place as a great regional power.” Olivier Roy, *The failure of political Islam* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), 185 and 193.

The enduring hostility between the United States and Iran is not an exceptional case in modern American diplomatic history. Contrary to other great powers in the 20<sup>th</sup> century, such as Great Britain and France, it seems to take the United States much longer time to formally accept some of the more undesirable outcomes of history. In fact, during 20<sup>th</sup> century, the United States became involved in several bilateral relations characterized by protracted antagonism short of war. The United States was the last major power to establish diplomatic relations with the Soviet Union. The U.S. Government refused for 16 years to recognize the USSR on the grounds that the communist regime routinely violated accepted norms of international behavior. The United States only very reluctantly came to terms with the de facto realities of the Bolshevik Revolution. After 1947, the two countries engaged in a Cold War along an Iron Curtain that symbolically ended with the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989.

During the Cold War, Cuba became arguably the most extreme case of ideological entrapment. Just before leaving office in early 1960, President Eisenhower broke off diplomatic relations with Cuba, which have not since been reestablished. Similarly, “the loss of China” to the communist revolutionaries under Mao tormented American domestic politics and foreign policy for more than two decades. The People’s Republic of China came into being in 1949 but it took the United States until 1972 to establish diplomatic relations with the new regime. The United States and China fought an undeclared war in Korea and the perceived threat from Communist China to a considerable degree motivated U.S. engagement in Vietnam and the conduct of the war itself. Moreover, the American involvement in Vietnam came to symbolize the limits of U.S. military and moral power. Many argued that George Kennan’s original concept of selectively containing Soviet expansionism had been turned into an indiscriminate crusade against communism anywhere, which the United States clearly could never win. The nation has still to come to terms with its failed policy in South-east Asia 25 years after the fall of Saigon. Though the United States and North Vietnam reached a peace accord in 1973, diplomatic relations with the united Vietnam was not established until August 5, 1995, more than two decades after the Vietnam War ended. This repetitive pattern of long-term animosity in US diplomatic history needs to be carefully considered when analyzing U.S.-Iranian relations.

The United States and Iran have come to see several contested military and political issues in an entirely different light. The United States considers Iran’s effort to strengthen its

military capability as destabilizing to the region. There is widespread agreement in the United States that Iran intends to acquire nuclear weapons. Iran's program for acquisition of weapons of mass destruction is of great concern not only to the United States and Israel, but also to countries in Europe. However, Iran is nearly completely surrounded by countries with nuclear, chemical, or bacteriological capabilities. The eight year long war with Iraq taught Iran an extremely costly lesson not ever to fight another war without access to unconventional military capabilities. Moreover, Iran is geographically located within a conventional regional security environment that is extremely unstable. The region has seen three major wars over the last two decades — the Iran-Iraq War, the Gulf War, and the never-ending war in Afghanistan — in addition to a nuclear build-up between Pakistan and India. The region has in the same period experienced numerous smaller wars and armed conflicts in places like Tajikistan, Nagorno-Karabakh, Georgia, Chechnya, and "Kurdistan." The conflict in southern Lebanon between Israel and Hezbollah is particularly illuminating with regard to the United States and Iran's diametrical perception of the same disputed issues. The United States has branded the Hezbollah a terrorist organization, while Tehran sincerely considers the guerilla to be freedom fighters worthy of military and ideological support. Iran's persistent resistance to a comprehensive Middle East peace settlement particularly infuriates the United States. In Iran, however, an overwhelming majority of the population are deeply offended that their country is not allowed, as a sovereign state, to have its rightful opinion about a highly contested area of great emotional concern to Iranians.

Despite the debate of what constitutes a legitimate armed struggle, Iran has nevertheless beyond any reasonable doubt sponsored international terrorism. In 1997, a German court ruled that Iran was directly linked to the killing of Kurdish-Iranian dissidents in a Berlin restaurant. The court concluded that the assassinations were ordered and approved by the Committee for Special Operations whose members included, among others, President Hashemi Rafsanjani, the country's supreme leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, and Iran's foreign minister at the time. Furthermore, Iran is strongly believed to have sponsored the assassination of foreign national associated with publishing Salman Rushdie's *The Satanic Verses*. Recently, Iran's involvement in terrorism seems to have subsided and what remains is mainly targeted against the Mujahedin'e Khalq, which the U.S. State Department itself has put on its list of terrorist organizations. Paradoxically, Iran and the United States have had

essentially common interests in Afghanistan, in Yugoslavia, and in the fight against international drug trafficking. Neither of the two countries has even contemplated public acknowledgment that this has been the case. The time has come to demystify the conflict between Iran and the United States. The first step in this process is to clearly distinguish between Iran's legitimate national interest and its illegitimate objectives and actions.

### ***The Historical Context***

For the sake of this analysis, the history of Iran may be divided into four phases: (1) the prehistoric period; (2) the rise of the Achaemenian Empire under Cyrus the Great (590-580 BC) to the Arab conquest of the Sasanian Empire between 636 and 642 AD; (3) the rule of Arab, Turkic, and Mongol princes from 640 to 1502; and (4) the modern Iranian historical era under the Safavids (1502-1736), the Qajars (1779-1925), the Pahlavi dynasty (1925-79), and the Islamic Republic.

The rise of Safavid dynasty contains several key characteristics that have repeatedly come to define modern Iranian history. The Safavid movement began as a puritanical Sufi order in reaction to the perceived corruption of Islamic values under Turkic and Mongol rule. By the late 15<sup>th</sup> century, the movement had developed into a distinct Shia Islamic uprising with explicit political and military goals. By the early 1500 hundreds, the first Safavid ruler, Esmail, had conquered all of present day Iran. Although far from universally accepted, the Safavid rulers proclaimed divine legitimacy to power based on lineage to the great martyr Ali. Thus, the shape of the modern Iranian nation-state based on Shi'ism was in place.

Throughout its history, Iran has been involved in protracted conflicts with a number major powers. The United States is in a macro-historical Iranian perspective only the latest of a string of permanent enemies. Iran has traditionally found itself in protracted warfare with preeminent Mediterranean powers; ancient Greece, the Roman Empire, the Byzantine Empire, and the Ottoman Empire. With the exception of the campaign of Alexander the Great, these prolonged conflicts usually ended up in military stalemate with a severe drainage on available resources. As a result, the Arab conquest in the 7<sup>th</sup> century was only possible because the Sasanian Empire had been severely weakened by long-drawn-out wars with Byzantium. Moreover, Iran has seen numerous nomadic invaders from the north and east, who ruled the

country for several hundred years. In the 19<sup>th</sup> century, the nomadic threat from the northeast was geographically replaced by external pressure from Russia in the north and the English colonial empire in India in the east. Iran lost its possessions in the Caucasus to Russia by the treaties of Golestan in 1813 and Turkmanchay in 1828. For nearly 150 years, Britain exerted relentless economic leverage over internal Iranian affairs culminating with the overthrow of premier Mossadeq in 1953. On August 31, 1907, Russia and Britain signed a treaty, which divided Iran into spheres of interest without consulting the Iranian government. Thus, in a historical and spiritual context, the overwhelming U.S. presence in Iran after the Second World War was to many Iranians psychologically indistinguishable to any other foreign intrusion of the Iranian polity throughout the centuries.<sup>6</sup>

The nature of conflict between Iran and the United States is multi-dimensional. Iran prides itself rightfully as one of the most ancient cultures in the world. At the same time, Iranians have come to suffer from a deep sense of insecurity and vulnerability due to repeated conquests by foreigners. From 640 to 1502, non-Persian Islamic princes ruled Iran. The current conflict between the United States and Iran has its immediate historical roots in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century when Iran declined into a semi-colonial state under British and Russian dominance. The first U.S. involvement in Iranian affairs began between the two world wars. The Iranian government asked for American administrative and economic assistance. Moreover, American businessmen were drawn to Iran's oil reserves; however, it proved difficult to dislodge entrenched British interests.<sup>7</sup> The United States did not become directly involved in Iranian affairs before 1941 when it helped Britain and the Soviet Union to occupy the country to counter German influence and to secure supply routes to the Soviet war effort against Nazi-Germany. After the Second World War, the United States was instrumental in compelling Stalin to leave Iran in 1946 and the United States assumed a position of major influence after 1947 through a series of military and economic agreements. The CIA and British intelligence initiated in 1953 the overthrow of the elected prime minister, Mohammad Mossadegh, who was perceived as allied with the communists. During the 1950s and 60s, the

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<sup>6</sup> Graham Fuller describes this phenomenon as the culture of conquest by foreigners. Graham E. Fuller, *The center of the universe: the geopolitics of Iran*, A Rand Corporation research study (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1991), 19.

<sup>7</sup> The official American policy partly prevented Iran from becoming a virtual British colony, see Nikki R. Keddie and Yann Richard, *Roots of revolution: an interpretive history of modern Iran* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 86.

United States poured in massive economic and military aid under the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi. In the 1970s, Iran became the de facto regional strong man against international communism as a result of the British military pull-out of the region and President Nixon's doctrine on increased military self-reliance of U.S. allies. The Iranian Revolution was therefore a severe blow to U.S. interest. Furthermore, speculation around the strategic intentions behind the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan made things look extremely bleak in 1979. Today, the collision between Iran and the United States is directly and indirectly related to parallel armed conflicts in the region. The United States explicitly links the clash with Iran to its involvement in international terrorism and Iran's program for acquisition of weapons of mass destruction. In summary, external processes such as British and Russian imperialism, the Cold War, the revival of Islamic fundamentalism, the Middle East peace process, and the world's supply and demand for petroleum have to an extraordinary degree influenced modern Iranian history and the conflict with the United States.

### ***Four Categories of Long-term Hostility***

For the sake of this analysis, we can distinguish between four separate groups of long-term enemies in U.S. diplomatic history: (1) Revolutionary states; (2) Countries in the Muslim World; (3) Countries in the Western Hemisphere; and (4) Strongly nationalistic countries. Moreover, under each main group we have important subcategories, which structural and historical characteristics are enormously significant for a causal description of the research problem. The phenomenon of long-term hostility must also be seen in the context of the traditional policy of the United States of being an "offshore balancer." From its undisputed position as the regional hegemon of the Western Hemisphere, the United States seeks to project power to three regions of the world, namely: Europe, the Persian Gulf, and Northeast Asia. In other words, the main foreign policy objective of the United States has been to prevent any single state from becoming the unquestionable hegemon in any one of these regions, which has been deemed to have serious repercussions on U.S. national interests.

Within the group of truly revolutionary states, we find the most prominent enemies of the United States throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century: The Soviet Union, The People Republic of

China, North Korea, Vietnam, Cuba, Nicaragua, and Iran.<sup>8</sup> During the Cold War, the Soviet Union built up an impressive number of vassal states, which could at times be more belligerent than the USSR itself. However, as soon as the Bolshevik vessel was about to sink, the satellite states promptly abandoned the communist ship with two very significant exceptions: Vietnam and North Korea. The apparent paradox is that the countries where the United States committed its own troops to fight a war against communist expansionism — namely in Korea between 1950 and 1953 and in Vietnam between 1965 and 1973 — are the only remaining communist states beside Cuba stubbornly clinging on to the original dogmas of the communist ideology. In fact, the same argument could indeed be made about Cuba since the U.S. during the Missile Crisis was willing to fight an all out war, including a land invasion of Cuba itself. In addition, Iran belongs to a subcategory of politically ambitious countries with relatively recent memories of a great imperial past.

After the Second World War, the United States in due course acquired a number of outspoken enemies within the Muslim World. This phenomenon is most strongly correlated with U.S. support for the State of Israel — particularly after 1967 — and the subsequent rise of the different ideologies of radical political Islam.<sup>9</sup> The secular and spiritual ideologies of Pan-Islamism, Pan-Arabism, and political Islam have one central underlying theme in common: how to historically explain colonial subjugation to western powers and the striking economic, technological, and military weaknesses of all Islamic societies relative to the “inferior infidels” in the West. As the sole western superpower, and now debatably the unipolar hegemon, the United States has come to epitomize to Iran a much needed external enemy, which could explain away homegrown problem, such as corruption, nepotism, and

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<sup>8</sup> I have partly borrowed the definition of revolutionary states from Stephen Walt. “A revolution is the destruction of an independent state by members of its own society and its replacement of by a regime based on new political principles.” “A revolution is more than just the a rearrangement of the administrative apparatus or replacement of old elite.” However, I have chosen to include cases of colonial liberation where the new ideology successfully prevailed over numerous other opposition groups to the old regime. Walt also acknowledges the many similarities between national liberation movements and revolutionary organizations, see Stephen M. Walt, “Revolution and War,” *World Politics* 44, no. No. 3, April (1992), 323-324.

<sup>9</sup> I deliberate use the term political Islam as opposed to Islamic fundamentalism. Political Islam is a break with the past while Islamic fundamentalism as practiced in Saudi Arabia is the exact opposite. Both brands of Islamic fundamentalism claim legitimacy by referring to the pure and uncorrupted societies of early Islam. However, so-called fundamentalist countries differ so significantly in its ideological approach on how to deal with modernity that an undifferentiated comparison would completely miss the point. As an example, Iran and the Taliban nearly went to war over political differences. The ruling clergy in Iran shows a despicable contempt for Taliban’s Stone Age version of Islam. Iran, Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Pakistan, and Sudan do have a shared belief in the overall principles of Islam, but they have apparently very little else in common, not even a hatred for the United States.

lack of democratic institutions. This is not to say that the United States has not acted to the detriment of legitimate interests of Muslim countries on several occasions. Yet, the extreme hostility toward the United States cannot be explained by U.S. behavior. Rather, it is explained by what the United States emotionally represents. In short, the answer to the question of Iranian hostility to the United States is not to be found in a rational analysis of tangible national interests but in an examination of the emotional relationship between historical grievances and current policies.

The United States had an extraordinarily ambivalent relationship to countries in the Western Hemisphere throughout the 20<sup>th</sup> century. Today, few countries are directly hostile to the United States on the diplomatic level. However, on the popular level, we can observe widespread dislike among people in all walks of life of the dominant role the U.S. government has played in the hemisphere. At same time, we can observe a love for American culture and values. Mexico is probably the best example of this type of ambivalent bilateral relationship. Lately, the newly elected president in Venezuela, Hugo Chávez Frías, has made anti-American slur an integral part of his popular support. This resentment has its historical roots in the power politics of the 19<sup>th</sup> century. Though it was adopted very reluctantly and the government was too weak to effectively enforce it for many years, the Monroe doctrine became the cornerstone of U.S. *realpolitik* in the Western Hemisphere.<sup>10</sup> The doctrine unilaterally declared all of the Americas within the exclusive U.S. sphere of interest with the exception of existing European colonies in the Western Hemisphere. With the emergence of the United States as a world power in the late 19<sup>th</sup> century, the United States declared its right to intervene in the internal affairs of Latin American countries due to “wrongdoings” or “mismanagement.” These guiding principles of U.S. foreign policy were somewhat modified during the Franklin Roosevelt’s “good neighbor policy. Yet, the United States has in practice retained its right to act unilaterally when needed. Despite its declared good intentions, the Monroe doctrine has by many countries in Latin America come to symbolize the semi-colonial status of the continent.

Lastly, a diverse group of highly nationalistic countries have over the years had continued strained relationship with the United States. France, Japan, and Greece are

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<sup>10</sup> For an excellent account of how domestic policy can influence foreign policy, see, Ernest R. May, *The making of the Monroe doctrine* (Cambridge, Mass.: Belknap Press of Harvard University Press, 1975).



nominally close allies of the United States but act within many fora as if they were the adversaries of the United States. These countries all have a strong internal sense of common ancestry, clearly defined historical memories, and distinct emphasis on common cultural values such as language, customs, or religion. In the academic literature, high score on these independent variables correlates positively with the strongest form of nationalism: ethno-nationalism.<sup>11</sup> A somewhat simplistic synthesis of the argument predicts that if people have a strong sense of belonging to an “in-group,” they will also find it intuitively much easier to dislike competing “out-groups.” France is debatably a multi-ethnic society, but both Japan and Greece are clearly ethnically homogenous nation-states with a strong sense of common ancestry. Exacerbating the discord, many analysts and politicians would argue that the United States often behaves much like a belligerent nationalistic state despite the fact that it lacks the structural characteristics. In conclusion, the long, but relatively light form of hostility between the United States and some “western” democracies can be explained by the build-in contentious behavior of highly nationalistic states.

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<sup>11</sup> See, John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism*, Oxford readers (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). and John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith, *Ethnicity*, Oxford readers (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1996). For a more detailed analysis of the formation of ethnic groups and conflict, see Donald L. Horowitz, *Ethnic groups in conflict* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1985).

### III Competing and Complementary Explanations

#### *Realism and Long-term Hostility*

The overall theoretical framework of the realist paradigm of international relations best expresses the fundamentals of the conflict between the United States and Iran; however, some of the basic assumptions of realist theory contradict empirical historical observations. Interests and power are the two dominating variables in traditional realist theory. A hierarchy of interests drives the actors in the international system. At the bottom of the interest pyramid is the fundamental desire for self-preservation. Survival always takes precedence over “higher” needs. Each contender is first and foremost driven by fear of annihilation and extinction. The international system is one characterized by scarcity and anarchy. Scarce resources are negotiated through politics, which is defined as the struggle for power, in both a domestic and international political setting.<sup>12</sup>

The raw struggle for power is a brutal acknowledgement of human nature. It is a pessimistic and deterministic worldview. Competitors are fundamentally untrustworthy and survival in the system is only possible through self-help. Each unitary actor (individuals, institutions, or nation states) has two fundamental alternatives in its pursuit of interests: competition or alignment of interests with other contenders. Cooperation or alliance only takes place when the participants in the power struggle find that their interests are coinciding. In an international system composed of independent nation-states, the survival of both the polity and the whole system depends on the rational pursuit of the national interests combined with a realistic assessment of national strength. In short, rivalry, competition, and conflict result from conflicting needs and interests.

International relations theory, however, has so far been unable to explain how fear on an individual and collective level is transformed into foreign policy objectives. The

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<sup>12</sup> Carl von Clausewitz did not distinguish between peaceful distribution of goods and institutionalized violence: “War is Merely the Continuation of Policy by Other Means.” “The political object is the goal, war is the means of reaching it, and means can never be considered in isolation from their purpose.” Also, Clausewitz’ understanding of the relationship between war and emotions is highly revealing: “Consequently, it would be an obvious fallacy to imagine war between civilized peoples as resulting merely from a rational act on the part of their government and to conceive of war as gradually ridding itself from passion, .....” “If war is an act of force, the emotions cannot fail to be involved.” Carl von Clausewitz, Michael Eliot Howard, and Peter Paret, *On war* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1984), 87 and 76.

mainstream of realist thought assumes a rational cost-benefit analysis of the national interest detached from emotional influences. This has clearly not been the case in U.S.-Iranian relations. Though arguable, the foreign policy of Iran after the death of Khomeini has been conducted increasingly in a *realpolitik* paradigm particularly in its relationship with Russia where ideological and emotional issues have been put on the back burner for the benefit of a cynical calculation of substantive issues. In the war between Azerbaijan and Armenia over Nagorno-Karabakh and the civil war in Tajikistan, Iran has taken positions reminiscent of classical balance-of-power politics.<sup>13</sup>

The systemic neo-realist approach to explaining state behavior in the international system deliberately downplays the influence of sub-unit level actors and processes such as factional domestic politics, religion, and historical memory. As a matter of fact, sub-unit level interest groups have to an extraordinary degree been able to influence national policies in both Iran and the United States. Iran's foreign policy toward the United States has been in many respects contradictory to a cool and clear-headed calculation of national interests. Iran's attachment to state sponsored international terrorism would clearly not pass a prudent cost-benefit analysis. Furthermore, Iran's fierce resistance to a comprehensive Middle East Process, which secures the right of the state of Israel to exist, cannot be understood within the realist paradigm. A correct assessment of the Iranian national interest will need to take into consideration an emotional understanding of how Iran's historical experience finds its way into its formulation of foreign policy objectives. The same can clearly be said about the conduct of U.S. foreign policy. Thus, when searching for an explanation of the enduring hostility between the United States and Iran, we need to go beyond the traditional understanding of a rational actor.

### ***Revolutionary States***

The Iranian Revolution falls under the proposition that revolutionary states cause conflict and war for a number of reasons. There is a close correlation between major social revolutions and the new regime fighting a war against one of its neighbors shortly after

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<sup>13</sup> See Olivier Roy, *The failure of political Islam* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), 184.

coming to power. Social revolutions are also a major source of instability to the balance-of-power in the international system by creating windows of opportunity. Just when the Shah's autocratic regime was about to be swept away by the united force behind the revolution, the Soviet Union invaded Afghanistan on December 25, 1979. It was widely believed at the time that the Kremlin had seized the opportunity to revive its old design on the Persian Gulf and access to the Indian Ocean. On September 22, 1980, after a series of mutual provocations, Iraq invaded Iran. Saddam Hussein gravely miscalculated the cohesion of the Iranian state and the ability of Iran's armed force to repulse the invasion. In fact, Iraq's adventurism cemented the revolution in favor of the radical clergy. Preceding the Iraqi invasion, vigilante groups under the nominal control of Khomeini had seized the American Embassy and had been holding the embassy staff hostage for nearly one year. In front of the rest of the world, the new regime in Tehran had humiliated the United States arguably more than any single event since the attack on Pearl Harbor in 1941.

Stephen Walt argues that revolutions cause war by increasing the perceived level of threats between the new regime and its adversaries because both parties consider preemptive or preventive use of force as the best solution to the perceived increase in external threats.<sup>14</sup> Social revolutions confuse the traditional measures of balance-of-power, which in turn make grave miscalculation more prevalent. Both sides exaggerate the hostile intentions from its alleged enemy causing the threat-response cycle to spiral. Both sides tend to simultaneously overemphasize its own vulnerability and the other side's weaknesses. Yet, the paradox is that the perceived increase of threats and vulnerability are not real since most empirical evidence suggests that social revolutions neither spread easily to other countries nor can they be simply overturned by external forces once the victorious faction is firmly in power. In short, social revolutions create a security environment of increased threats and open illusory windows of opportunity to both the new regime and powers with regional interests.

Theories on revolutions and war go a long way to explain how hostility between the United States and Iran came about. However, it does not explain the particular longevity of hostile relations between revolutionary regimes and United States. France and Great Britain came to terms with the new regimes in Russia, China, and Iran much faster than the United States. The theory correctly prescribes that revolutionary states cause conflict and war

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<sup>14</sup> Stephen M. Walt, "Revolution and War," *World Politics* 44, no. No. 3, April (1992).

because the revolutionary ideology command the followers to export the rebellion to other countries. Yet, all modern revolutions experience a rapid fading away of revolutionary fervor when ideological intoxication gives away to less romantic economic problems. In the case of Iran, the country had to fight an extremely bloody and financially devastating war between 1980 and 1988. One would intuitively assume that the overwhelming problems facing Iran in 1988 would have made the regime more amenable to pragmatically revise its uncompromising hostility toward the United States. Yet, we have seen few genuine signs that the hard-line ruling clergy in Tehran is in fact mellowing down.

Similarly, during and after the Gulf War, one can argue that a rational calculation of U.S. interest in the Persian Gulf region should have encouraged a detente with the theocrats in power. Despite unambiguous signals from both President Bush and President Rafsanjani, rapprochement did not take place; rather, the Clinton administration passed in 1996 the comprehensive Iran and Libya Sanctions Act, which in many respects formalized the hostility between the two countries.<sup>15</sup> I will argue that the solution to this puzzle is to be found in the continued ideological legitimacy and survival of the Iranian regime and the political reelection of successive U.S. administrations.<sup>16</sup> In short, both governments found themselves in a political and ideological entrapment primarily with domestic constituencies.

### ***Domestic politics***

Theories on domestic interest groups' influence on the formulation and implementation of foreign policy objectives need to be consulted when seeking an

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<sup>15</sup> In his inauguration speech on January 20, 1989, George Bush specifically addressed the Iranian leadership by conveying, "good will begets good will." To its great disappointment, the noticeable restraint by Iranian leadership during Desert Storm was not rewarded in any substantial or symbolic way.

<sup>16</sup> As early as 1947, George Kennan observed that the hostility of Soviet foreign policy was to be found "not in the realities of foreign antagonism but in the necessity of explaining away maintenance of dictatorial authority at home." George F. Kennan, "The Source of Soviet Conduct," in *The American encounter: the United States and the making of the modern world: essays from 75 years of Foreign affairs*, ed. James F. Hoge and Fareed Zakaria (New York: BasicBooks, 1997), 159. Kennan saw the Soviet challenge as largely psychological in nature. His recommendations for dealing with it tended to take on a psychological character as well. "It is the shadows rather than the substance of things that move the hearts, and sway the deeds, of statesmen." John Lewis Gaddis concluded that the U.S. policy of containing the Soviet Union was, not so much about what the Russians actually did, but more about of internal forces in the US. John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of containment: a critical appraisal of postwar American national security policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982). Later, Gaddis criticized the political analysis during the Cold War because "It tended to overlook ideas – what people believed, or wanted to believe." Furthermore, he concluded, "There was no military defeat or economic crash; but there was a collapse of legitimacy." John Lewis Gaddis, *We now know: rethinking Cold War history* (Oxford New York: Clarendon Press; Oxford University Press, 1997), 282-283.

explanation to U.S.-Iranian antagonism. The conduct of diplomacy and foreign policy changed dramatically around the First World War for two separate reasons. First, the new and powerful role of the printed press as an inter-mediator between foreign policy officials and the electorate in democratic societies blurred the line between foreign and domestic policy. Gone were the days of secret diplomacy, which emphasized above all compromise, mutual advantage, and lasting interests. The conduct of foreign policy was increasingly aimed at pleasing domestic constituencies and interest groups. Second, the coming of extreme ideological and totalitarian regimes signaled a significant break with the past. These new revolutionary regimes did not generally honor established diplomatic rules and complied with international law only in cases where it was beneficial. Confrontation, rather than accommodation, was the name of the game.

The advent of the Islamic Republic of Iran did not break with this pattern. The international behavior of Iran after the revolution proved to be more outrageous than early Bolshevik foreign policy. The radical clergy showed little respect for diplomatic immunity and the principle of extraterritoriality. The regime in Tehran adopted an extreme aggressive and offensive form of diplomacy with the aim of scoring propaganda victories rather than serving the long-term interest of the country. In retrospect, it is apparent that the conduct of Iranian foreign policy in the early period of the Islamic Republic primarily targeted a domestic audience.<sup>17</sup> This approach soon backfired and Iran became isolated even within the Islamic World. Today, very few within the current Iranian establishment — or even among those who participated themselves in the excesses of this period — defend these actions. Still, the hollow anti-American and anti-Western slogans persist in official rhetoric despite the fact that the public sentiment is unmistakably sick and tired of Iran's self-inflicted isolationism and international pariah status.

It is important to consider, and often under-appreciated, how much the policy of containing Iran has been strongly influenced by U.S. domestic politics and the interest of certain lobby groups. As a result, two years into the second Clinton Administration, U.S. foreign policy toward Iran was paradoxically more hostile than at any time since the Hostage Crisis despite the arguable fact that the real threat from Iran had subsided. Systemic theories

such as neorealist balance-of-power and deterrence theories often deliberately downplay the impact from sub-unit-level actors.<sup>18</sup> As a matter of fact, very little work has been done to incorporate the domestic politics variable into a causal description or causal explanation of post-Cold War deterrence. “As a discipline, international relations is nowhere near understanding these aspects of deterrence in a coherent and theoretically rigorous manner.”<sup>19</sup> After the end of the Cold War empirical evidence to a much lesser degree support the predictions of structural realist theories. As a discipline, the academic field of international relations is moving toward integrating systemic theories of what other states find acceptable with the pressure from domestic political constituencies on foreign policy decision-making. As a result, a satisfactory analysis of long-term hostility between Iran and the United States must clearly take into account domestic political forces.

### ***Deterrence and Containment***

The conflict between Iran and the United States can be partly explained within the framework of traditional containment of a “non-status quo challenger.” Deterrence is the handmaiden of containment.<sup>20</sup> The fundamental principles of deterrence center on national interests and objectives; some form of rationality in the government decision-making process; the deterrer targets what the adversary values most; deterrer communicates clearly intent and commitment; and above all the credibility of threat to retaliate. Deterrence theory is intimately related to the realist paradigm of international relations theory and its emphasis on the concept of interests and power. At heart, deterrence is a strategy under which one power uses the threat of reprisal effectively to preclude an attack from an adversary power. Protecting one’s interests requires military, political, diplomatic, and economic capabilities and willingness to exercise these capabilities to credibly discourage the adversary power from undertaking a

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<sup>17</sup> Dilip Hiro, *Iran under the Ayatollahs* (London; New York: Routledge & Kegan Paul, 1987), 136-163, and Nikki R. Keddie and Yann Richard, *Roots of revolution: an interpretive history of modern Iran* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 262.

<sup>18</sup> See Kenneth Neal Waltz, *Theory of international politics*, Addison-Wesley series in political science (Reading, Mass.: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co., 1979).

<sup>19</sup> Christopher H. Achen and Duncan Snidal, “Rational Deterrence Theory and Comparative Case Studies,” *World Politics* 41, no. January (1989), 155.

specific action by threatening to harm what the adversary values most. The U.S. policy of containing Iran presumes an overall deterrent purpose based on U.S. value judgments; i.e. a threat to national interests. George F. Kennan, the father of the modern concept of containment, assumed a combination of diplomatic instruments, along with political and economic leverages available in addition to military means that would make containment successful.

U.S. containment of Iran has clearly been modeled on America's Cold War experience. In his famous study, John Lewis Gaddis concluded that the perceived Soviet threats had been allowed to determine U.S. interests, rather than the other way around. Gaddis also found an incoherent relationship between U.S. interests and commitments, and between political ends and applied means.<sup>21</sup> In the case of Iran, Gary Sick concluded correspondingly, "the [dual-containment] policy lost sight of its objectives and became an end in itself."<sup>22</sup> However, despite the obvious similarities between the current conflict with Iran and containment of Soviet military and ideological expansionism, there are considerable differences. Keith Payne points to the apparent differences between major-power Cold War deterrence and regional post-Cold War deterrence in an entirely new context where nuclear weapons will not necessarily deter reliably and predictably as was the case during the Cold War within an Assured Vulnerability framework.<sup>23</sup> More importantly, the essential characteristics of U.S.-Iranian antagonism have changed significantly during the period 1979 to 1997.

In a general analysis of deterrence, one differentiates between general and immediate deterrence. Raymond Aron argues, however, that "there is no deterrent in a general or abstract sense; it is a case of knowing who can deter whom, from what, in what circumstances, by what means." In Aron's analysis, deterrence must always be assessed carefully in case-specific and concrete terms. What deters one government might not deter another. What

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<sup>20</sup> Alexander L. George and Richard Smoke, *Deterrence in American foreign policy: theory and practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), 4.

<sup>21</sup> John Lewis Gaddis, *Strategies of containment: a critical appraisal of postwar American national security policy* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1982) and John Lewis Gaddis, *We now know: rethinking Cold War history* (Oxford, New York: Clarendon Press ; Oxford University Press, 1997).

<sup>22</sup> Gary Sick, "Rethinking Dual Containment," *Survival* 40, no. April (1998), 26 (online).

<sup>23</sup> Keith B. Payne, "Post-Cold War Requirements for U.S. Nuclear Deterrence," *Comparative Strategy* 17 (1998), 227.



succeeds in one geographical-cultural context might fail in another.<sup>24</sup> George and Smoke distinguish between three levels of deterrence: strategic thermonuclear, limited war, and crisis and crisis-preventive diplomacy.<sup>25</sup> Since the Islamic Revolution, U.S. efforts to deter Iran have moved from crisis diplomacy (Hostage Crisis), through limited war (the Iran-Iraq war), to the first stages of strategic deterrence (denying Iran weapons of mass destruction). In parallel, the focus of U.S. containment of Iran has shifted from immediate to general deterrence.

There are two major competing schools of deterrence: the abstract-deductive school and the historical-comparative school. At the center of the debate is the dispute over how to represent rationality in decision-making. On the one side of the spectrum we find Verba's procedural rationality performed as a "cool and clearheaded end-means calculation."<sup>26</sup> On the other side of the spectrum we find the historical approach and Jervis' emphasis on emotions and perceptions in the actual decision-making process accused by critics of providing no more than a list of variables. In-between the two, Zagare claims that there is a crucial "difference between the [procedural] rational actor model and the assumption of [instrumental] rational choices." "An instrumentally rational actor makes simple decisions based on preferred outcomes involving misperceptions or other deficiencies of human cognition."<sup>27</sup> The best way to understand Hitler or Khomeini, in Zagare's analysis, is simply to understand their goals. Unfortunately, Cold War deterrence literature came to draw heavily on rational behavioral expectations leaving little room for competing explanations.

### ***Political Islam, Third Worldism, and the Clash of Civilizations***

Marxist theory and economic causes of international conflict should be consulted, obviously not for the accuracy of their predictions; rather, because the influence these theories have had on the formulation of revolutionary ideologies, the formative years of decision-makers, and state behavior. The Iranian Revolution and the Islamic Republic of Iran were

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<sup>24</sup> Raymond Aron cited in James E. Dougherty and Robert L. Pfaltzgraff, *Contending theories of international relations: a comprehensive survey*, 4th ed. (New York: Longman, 1997), 392-393.

<sup>25</sup> Alexander L. George and Richard Smoke, *Deterrence in American foreign policy: theory and practice* (New York: Columbia University Press, 1974), 38.

<sup>26</sup> Sidney Verba Cited in Frank Zagare, "Rationality and Deterrence," *World Politics* 42 (1990), 238

<sup>27</sup> *Ibid.*, 238.

distinct breaks with the past, which the western media explained within the stereotypical framework of Islamic fundamentalism. “The “Republic of Ayatollahs” is a journalistic invention.”<sup>28</sup> In fact, the Iranian revolution had very little support from the fundamentalist but highly traditionalist Shiite clergy. “The Iranian Revolution is the only Islamist movement in which the clergy played a decisive role, but it was also the most overtly ideological one: a Third World revolutionary movement generated by an unprecedented alliance between a radical intelligentsia and a [radical] fundamentalist clergy.”<sup>29</sup> In western discourse, the focus has primarily been on the religious element of the revolution. In Olivier Roy’s observations, “The other tendency, more recent and therefore more difficult to see, is that of anticolonialism, of anti-imperialism, which today has simply become anti-Western — from Cairo to Tehran, the crowds that in the 1950s demonstrated red or national flag now march beneath the green banner.” “There is an abundance of coming and going and of connections between Marxist groups and the Islamist sphere.”<sup>30</sup> Similarly, in Val Moghadam’s analysis, “The revolution that ushered in the Islamic Republic has been inaccurately labeled the “Islamic Revolution.” It is more properly a populist, anti-imperialist social revolution.”<sup>31</sup> Though the Iranian Revolution was a natural continuation of Islamic revivalism that began in 19<sup>th</sup> century, the Iranian Revolution is a product of highly idiosyncratic Shiite, Marxist, and Iranian nationalistic perspectives.

Structural theories of international relations deliberately downplay the role of “culture” and “civilizations.” Samuel Huntington tried to bridge the gap between the traditional realist concept of power and interest with the strength of shared cultural values within separate “civilizations.” With regard to Islam, Huntington argued, “The underlying problem for the West is not Islamic fundamentalism. It is Islam, a different civilization whose people are convinced of the superiority of their culture and are obsessed with the inferiority of their power.”<sup>32</sup> According to the editors of *Foreign Affairs*, Huntington’s first article triggered an academic debate more heated than what had been seen since the 1940s. Huntington’s initiative got unexpected support from very distant quarters within the academic community.

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<sup>28</sup> Olivier Roy, *The failure of political Islam* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), 180.

<sup>29</sup> *Ibid.*, 168.

<sup>30</sup> *Ibid.*, 4.

<sup>31</sup> Val Moghadam, “Populist Revolution and Islamic State in Iran,” in *Revolution in the world-system: Studies in the political economy of the world-system*, ed. Terry Boswell (New York: Greenwood Press, 1989), 149.

The well-renowned Islamic scholar, Bassam Tibi, came partly to Huntington's support: "Indeed, the recent debate over the "clash of civilizations" provoked by the Harvard scholar Samuel P. Huntington indicates — despite its deplorable shortcomings — a welcome change in perspective among many in the international relations community. In this context I have suggested that we might view fundamentalism as an ideology contributing to what I have called the "War of Civilizations."<sup>33</sup>

There is a fundamental difference between Islamist thought in the Arab World and how the similar ideas have been implemented in Iran. Understanding the conflict between Iran and the United States requires a keen appreciation of the fact that the Islamic state in Iran is very different from any other Muslim polity in the world. Political Islam outside Iran has essentially failed because these ideologies have made no room for a politically secular space. Politics can only be founded on individual virtues of man, which of course non-utopians know are a very scarce commodity anywhere. Political Islam is only able to point to the apparent shortcomings of the world's political system without proposing any new realistic alternatives (we can observe the same phenomenon among extreme radical environmentalists in the West, so-called "eco-fundamentalists"). Kari Vogt observes that Islamists reject the western democratic model since democracy inevitably decays into capitalistic exploitation, imperialism, and moral anarchy.<sup>34</sup> In Iran, however, the principles of the revolution take precedence over Islamic utopianism. "Imam Khomeini always imposed revolutionary logic, represented in the guide's will, if need be over the Sharia."<sup>35</sup> In Olivier Roy's analysis, Iran is theoretically a secular country. "Iran has been able to find a political space, beyond Islamist and revolutionary rhetoric, that does not depend on the impossible virtue of its members, but rather functions on the basis of institutions that survive in the absence of the divine word." "We are dealing here with a modern configuration, in which the state is the source of law and the source of its own legitimacy. The Iranian model is in fact a "secular" model, in the sense

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<sup>32</sup> Samuel P. Huntington, *The clash of civilizations and the remaking of world order* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996), 217.

<sup>33</sup> Bassam Tibi, *The challenge of fundamentalism: political Islam and the new world disorder*, Comparative studies in religion and society. ; 9 (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1998), 16.

<sup>34</sup> Karl Vogt, *Islams hus: verdensreligion på fremmarsj* (Oslo: J.W. Cappelens Forlag a.s., 1993), 224.

<sup>35</sup> Olivier Roy, *The failure of political Islam* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), 176.

that it is the state that defines the place of the clergy and not the clergy who define the place of politics.”<sup>36</sup>

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<sup>36</sup> *Ibid.*, 177.

## IV Methodology

Choosing the right research methodology is the key to making advances in the theoretical understanding of U.S.-Iranian relations. I suggest that a small-n research design is the best way to analyze the long-term hostility between Iran and the United States since the research topic is blessed with a wealth of empirical observations but at the same time the current theoretical understanding of the phenomenon is very weak. The appropriate research methodology for this particular research problem is therefore a narrative description of the conflict in combination with a structured and focused comparison of the Iranian case with similar historical cases in American diplomatic history.

### ***Narrative Description***

In the scientific literature on research methodology one clearly distinguishes between descriptive research — description, classification, measurement, and comparison — that is intended to reveal what a phenomenon is, and causal research in which we seek to explain how observations are related to one another. Descriptive research is usually the jumping-off point for the study of new areas in social sciences or new approaches to long-standing research problems that have not been adequately explained. Descriptive research is separate from other types of research in the fact that the research problem has not been reduced to a limited number of well-specified variables. Within descriptive research, King, Keohane, and Verba go a step further by distinguishing description — the collection of facts or summarizing of historical details — from descriptive inference, which is defined as “the process of understanding an unobserved phenomenon on the basis of a set of observations.”<sup>37</sup> Despite the fact that we have made numerous observations of hostility between the two countries since 1979, the theoretical explanation of the phenomenon is so poorly understood that we in fact have not measured the true nature of hostility between the United States and Iran with any degree of certainty. In this sense the long-term hostility between the United States and Iran is an “unobserved phenomenon.” In summary, the objective studying U.S.-Iranian should first

and foremost be descriptive inference, which could be the foundation in a policy-relevant theory.

The goal of descriptive research is to distinguish between the systematic components and the nonsystematic components of phenomena. The systematic component, as the term suggest, has a much higher probability of occurring in similar causal chains or patterns than the non-systematic or idiosyncratic features of one particular phenomenon. Yet, it is absolutely necessary to bear in mind that the systematic component is not inherently more important than the non-systematic in explaining the phenomenon. Furthermore, how does one in practice distinguish the systematic from nonsystematic events? For example, was the coup in 1953 against Mossadeq an inevitable by-product of the Cold War or a product of exceptional Iranian circumstances? Was the taking of US hostages in Tehran in 1979 a completely unique event in the history of U.S.-Iranian relations or was it a predictable outcome of the Iranian Revolution? Was the Iranian Revolution truly the first Islamic revolution in history or was it just another violent reaction to foreign economic, political and cultural dominance?

There is a wide scientific gap between a purely historical description of historical events and the academic school of quasi-statistical hypothesis testing that needs to be resolved. Historical description usually involves contextual causality, which has been fervently detested by the hypothesis-testing school of international relations. Yet, James Mahoney concludes that a scholarly consensus has emerged that a narrative analysis of the research problem can be a useful tool for assessing causality in situations where “temporal sequencing, particular events, and path dependence must be taken into account.”<sup>38</sup> George and McKeown suggest a separate but closely related methodology to historical description — the process-tracing procedure — to deal with the difficulties associated with unobserved contextual variables.<sup>39</sup> In George and McKeown’s analysis, process-tracing entails an attempt to reconstruct both the client and patron’s understanding of the events that took place. It is

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<sup>37</sup> Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *Designing social inquiry: scientific inference in qualitative research* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), 55.

<sup>38</sup> James Mahoney, “Nominal, Ordinal, and Narrative Appraisal in Macrocausal Analysis,” *American Journal of Sociology* 104, no. Number 4 (January 1999) (1999), 1164.

<sup>39</sup> Alexander George, *Case Studies and Theory Development*, ed. Paul Lauren, *Diplomacy: New Approaches in History, Theory, & Policy* (Free Press, 1979) and Alexander L. George and Timothy J. McKeown, *Case Studies and Theories of Organizational Decision Making*, ed. Robert Coulam and Richard Smith, 21-58 ed., *Advances in Information Processing in Organizations*, vol. 2 (JAI, 1985).

also an attempt to develop a theory of how and why the actors conduct themselves the way that they did. Consequently, the process-tracing procedure differs sharply with large-n analysis in two important ways. First, a well-developed theory is not a required prerequisite. Second, the emphasis is not on testing causal hypothesis but on mapping actual behavioral patterns. Thus, the process-tracing procedure reduces the difficulties associated with unobserved contextual variables when analyzing human decision-making.

In quasi-statistical research each case is represented as a single data point. By contrast, the construction of a spider web is a good visual analogy of how process-tracing attempts to capture a temporal “stream of behavior” by building up sequential network. “The researcher assembles bits and pieces of evidence into a pattern; whether a piece is to be changed or added depends on whether the change fits with what already has been constructed, and whether it strengthens the web’s structure.”<sup>40</sup> As the procedure’s name implies, one of the objectives of process-tracing is to capture the decision-making process by examining how various initial conditions are translated into actions taken by each actor. “The process-tracing approach attempts to uncover what stimuli the actors attend to; the decision process that makes use of these stimuli to arrive at decisions; the actual behavior that then occurs; the effect of various institutional arrangements on attention, processing, and behavior; and the effect of other variables of interest on attention, processing, and behavior.”<sup>41</sup>

### ***Contextual Variables***

The study of long-term hostility needs to utilize a theoretical framework that addresses contextual variables. As a general rule, one should choose observable rather than unobservable concepts wherever possible. The use of abstract and unobserved concepts such as national interest, culture, religion, nationalism, intentions, and motivations is normally discouraged in political science. However, when analyzing U.S.-Iranian relations, one clearly needs a theory that incorporates contextual observations such as historical grievances, cultural alienation, social injustice, prestige, humiliation, hatred, revenge, perception and

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<sup>40</sup> Alexander L. George and Timothy J. McKeown, *Case Studies and Theories of Organizational Decision Making*, ed. Robert Coulam and Richard Smith, 21-58 ed., *Advances in Information Processing in Organizations*, vol. 2 (JAI, 1985), 36.

<sup>41</sup> *Ibid.*, 35.

misperception. The challenge to social science is on one level of analysis to understand how each actor perceives himself and his adversary. Unfortunately, perception and misperception is just another aspect of normative value judgments. I strongly disagree with Fred Kerlinger's position that "scientific problems are not moral and ethical questions" since "there is no way to test value questions scientifically."<sup>42</sup> Understanding the hostility between the United States and Iran is undoubtedly of great importance to the rest of the world and consequently it is a question that should be subject to scientific inquiry. Unsurprisingly, this particular research problem raises a number of important questions rooted in irreducible human subjective values. This does not in any way imply that U.S.-Iranian relations are a mystery that is off-limits for a serious and rigorous scientific inquiry. The history of U.S.-Iranian relations can never be represented as a mathematical algorithm; science still is unable to understand human psychology in computational terms. The research problem is fundamentally made up of the psychology of individual decision-makers, which in aggregate constitutes the conflict on the national level. The subjectivity of individuals and organizations is in reality the actual facts that we are studying. As scientists, we cannot run away from a research problem because the causality does not lend itself very well to an algorithmic representation. In the field of psychology, where data are fundamentally unobservable, there are well proven techniques to get around seemingly un-testable theories and hypotheses. Simon maintains "the empirical researcher must transform the vague, the unspecified, the abstract, into the specified and concrete, even though precision is hard work and all of us are lazy."<sup>43</sup> As an example, it would be absurd to attempt to explain U.S. escalation of the Vietnam War 1965 without having a good understanding of the inner workings of Lyndon B. Johnson. We cannot abolish a whole field of research because observation is difficult. As a result, I contend that it is permissible that a theory contains contextual variables such as historical grievances, culture alienation, social injustice, prestige, humiliation, hatred, revenge, perception and misperception. The crucial distinction is that any theory must strive to frame hypotheses that yield observable evidence or predictions when possible.

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<sup>42</sup> Fred N. Kerlinger, *Foundations of behavioral research*, 2d ed. (New York: Holt Rinehart and Winston, 1973), 24-25.

<sup>43</sup> Julian Simon, *Basic Research Methods in Social Science* (Random House, 1969), 22.



### ***Choosing Research Methodology***

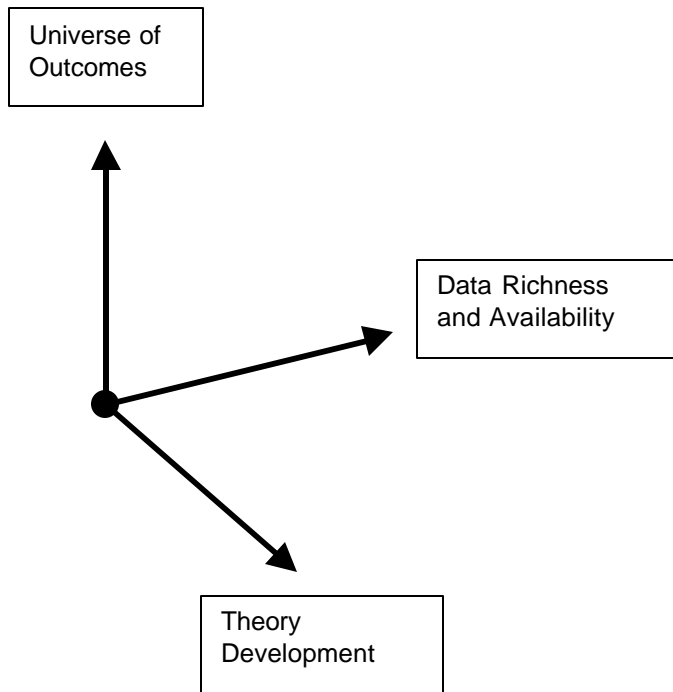
The methodological debate in international relations has for the most part been polarized between staunch advocates of the quasi-statistical medium-n research methodology and proponents of small-n or single case study approach. The divide is essentially between the respective virtues of the hypothesis testing methodology and in-depth/within-case analysis. In general there are two ways to do scientific research: performing controlled experiments or working on empirical observations. As an example, controlled and randomized clinical trials are at the center of all medical research. In the realm of international relations, however, we are unfortunately unable to perform reliable experiments and we are certainly not in the position to replay history. We are therefore left with working on available historical sources. Observation research comes in two main varieties: large-n and small-n analysis where “n” refers to the number of cases or observations that go into the formal analysis. I suggest that within social sciences there are three general questions that need to be answered before selecting research methodology. First, how well developed is the theoretical explanation of the research puzzle? Second, how much reliable data are available? Third, how well can we define the universe of outcomes, i.e. random versus intentional selection of observations? In the field of international relations random selection is generally not an alternative since we are nearly always unable to clearly define the universe of outcomes. Virtually all research in international relations is based on historical records. Historical records are fundamentally intentional or subjective representation of what actually took place.<sup>44</sup> As a result, research in international relations is for all intents and purposes non-random.

The choice of research methodology in international relations is therefore determined by only two variables: the general level of theoretical understanding of the research problem and access to empirical data. Based on the value of these two variables, the goal of research falls into four broad categories: conceptual modeling, theory and hypothesis formation, theory and hypothesis building, and statistical hypothesis testing. When choosing a research methodology, the scholar of international relations research has, broadly speaking, four

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<sup>44</sup> Lustick proposes four strategies for testing historical accounts. Ian S. Lustick, “History, Historiography, and Political Science: Multiple Historical Records and the Problem of Selection Bias,” *American Political Science Review* September (1999).

alternatives at his or her disposal: conceptual analysis, single-case or small-n case studies, medium-n analysis yielding tentative statistical findings, and large-n causal analysis.



First, a purely conceptual analysis requires neither a well-developed theory nor access to rich and detailed information. Second, the objective of theory and hypothesis formation is to develop a stronger theoretical understanding of causality. The researcher usually studies one single case in great detail or the scholar chooses an in-depth focused comparison between a small number of historical cases. Theory and hypothesis formation is accomplished by a detailed narrative description of the research problem, which requires a rich body of literature, available data, or access to historical archives. The researcher who makes use of a single-case study or the small-n controlled comparison strategy seeks to identify the range of different causal patterns with a similar outcome at the same time investigating similar causal patterns with different outcomes. The investigator seeks to distinguish the conditions under which each distinctive type of causal pattern occurs. Alexander George points out that the method of structured and focused comparison is particularly useful for developing a differentiated theory

comprised of conditional generalizations rather than frequency distributions.<sup>45</sup> The main criticism against small-n analysis is first and foremost the criteria for selection of cases and the inference that can be drawn from such a small number of observations.<sup>46</sup>

Third, the researcher can compare a somewhat larger number of historical cases in a medium-n controlled comparison study. The goal is strictly speaking constrained to descriptive inference, but the ultimate goal is definitely causal inference. The quasi-statistical medium-n approach measures how often each outcome occurs or can be expected to occur. At best, the statistical findings of this methodology are only tentative since access to good and representative data is inadequate. Too often medium-n studies are being presented in scholarly literature without addressing the serious limitation to the findings brought on by the relative small number of cases and poor quality of data input.<sup>47</sup>

Finally, the researcher can choose a large-n statistical analysis when seeking a definite causal explanation to the problem. This is only possible when our theory is sufficiently developed to test it against a large body of accessible and reliable empirical observations. Indeed, as we can clearly see from the inherent nature of the field of international relations, very few research topics qualify for this methodological approach.<sup>48</sup>

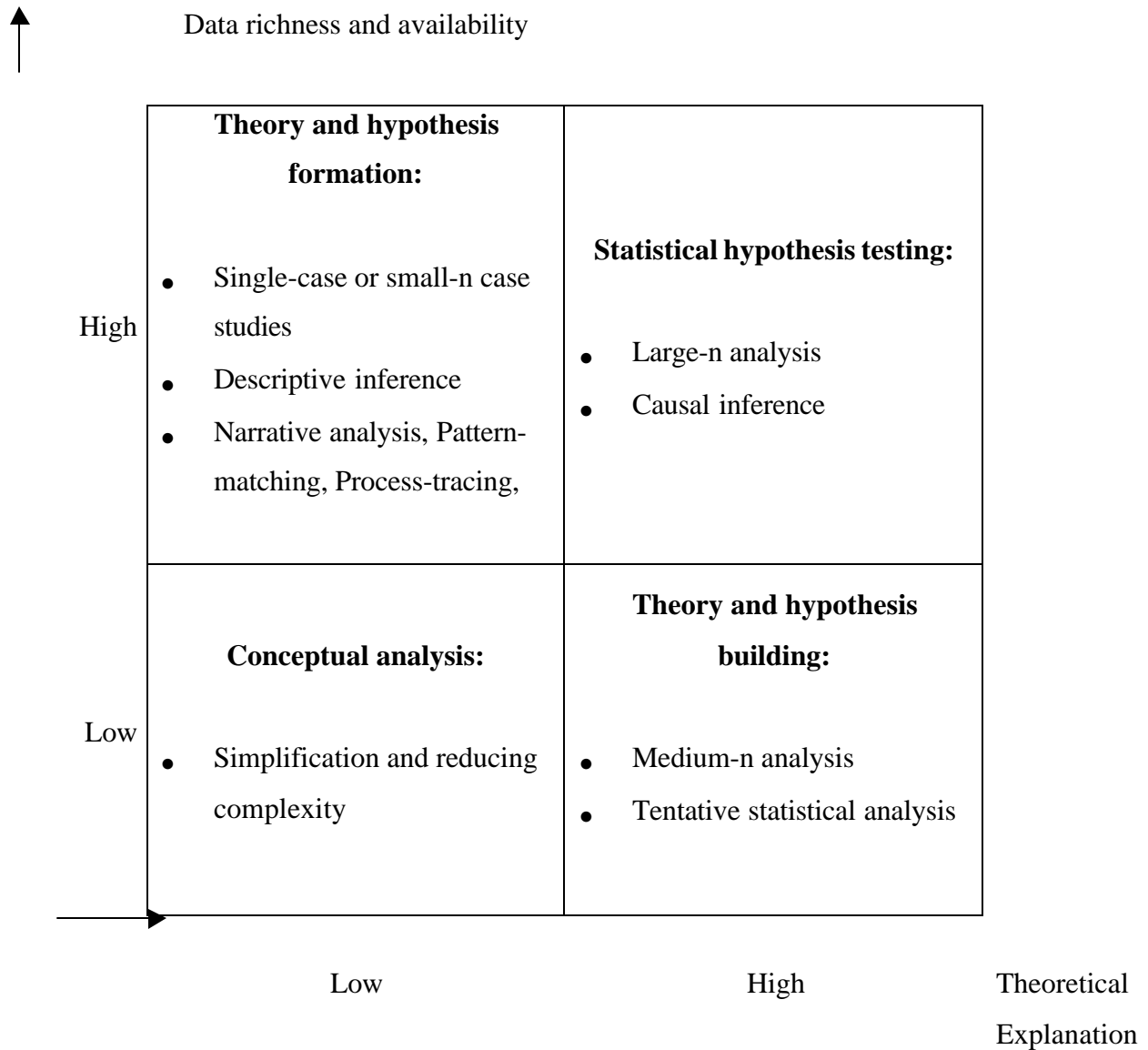
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<sup>45</sup> Alexander George, *Case Studies and Theory Development*, ed. Paul Lauren, *Diplomacy: New Approaches in History, Theory, & Policy* (Free Press, 1979), 60.

<sup>46</sup> Skocpol's impressive work on social revolutions has probably been scrutinized more than any other scholarly work in social science. A majority of critics have criticized the unclear and subjective criteria for selection of historical case (Russia, France, and China) Theda Skocpol, *States and social revolutions : a comparative analysis of France, Russia, and China* (Cambridge ; New York: Cambridge University Press, 1979).

<sup>47</sup> The work of Ted Gurr – *Peoples Against States: Ethnopolitical Conflict And The Changing World System* – is a good example of how statistically vulnerable conclusions from a medium-n study are. From 233 cases of ethnopolitical conflict, the study deduces that “Communal conflicts across fault lines between civilizations and religious traditions are more intense than others but have not increased in relative frequency or severity since the end of the Cold War.” However, the study goes up to 1994 and therefore missed the horrible genocide in Rwanda. From the data, it is clear that this single conflict would have altered the conclusion significantly. Also, one also needs to question the classification concepts. I will argue that some of major conflicts, such as Angola, Afghanistan, and the recent conflict in the Congo, all fall into several categories obviously outside the ethnopolitical conflict paradigm. Ted Robert Gurr and Barbara Harff, *Ethnic conflict in world politics, Dilemmas in world politics* (Boulder: Westview Press, 1994).

<sup>48</sup> The work of Paul Huth and Bruce Russett from 1993 – *General Deterrence between Enduring Rivals: Testing Three Competing Models* – is an example of what I would call methodological over-kill. Unfortunately, the study is of meager value to anybody in the policy world. Through a series of sophisticated regression analysis, the authors arrive at the following conclusion: “The results of a pooled time-series probit analysis indicate that each model includes important elements of truth.” Paul Huth and Bruce Russett, “General Deterrence between Enduring Rivals: Testing Three Competing Models,” *American Political Science Review* 87, no. March (1993).



***A Small-N, In-Depth, Comparative Study***

Statistically, large-n studies should yield more reliable estimates of the variables in question. A majority of social scientists have traditionally regarded small-n case studies the weakest scientific method. Yet, the large-n approach also has serious weaknesses. Van Evera argues convincingly that “large-n provides little or no new insight into the causal process that comprises the hypothesis’ explanation, nor does it generate data that could be used to infer or

test explanations of the process.”<sup>49</sup> George and McKeown draw attention to what is lost in what they call traditional quasi-experimental research when each case is reduced to a single data point. They argue that the “naked” value of the final outcome of the dependent variable cannot by itself explain the phenomenon. The explanation of the puzzle must also account for the stream of behavior leading up to the final outcome. A large-n research design fails to benefit from the fine and important historical details derived from within-case analysis. The large-n approach is particularly ill suited for an exploratory research design and for theory creation.

The hypothesis-testing approach has in my view been allowed to dominate research designs in the social sciences to the exclusion of alternative strategies more appropriate to the research problem in question. Comparison problems are often described as hypothesis-testing research. Hypothesis testing is at the center of experimental research, which in turn relies heavily classical statistics. Large-n hypothesis-testing research is therefore sometimes called quasi-experimental. In a comparison problem, we are essentially interested in comparing the relative measurement of two or more observations of the same phenomenon. A strict statistical comparison is dependent upon assuming causal homogeneity. Comparing observations does not automatically imply that we must use of the hypothetico-deductive model in determining the answer to the question. Relaxing the demands of the hypothetico-deductive model does by no means entail a reduced concern for objectivity. In fact, it entails an increased concern for internal and external validity. The subject matter of the question of validity is to convey to an audience how and why the researcher sees what he or she thinks he or she sees. Since most small-n studies are characterized by causal heterogeneity, the hypothesis-testing methodology will certainly not automatically guarantee valid findings. Many scholars strongly object to the effort to squeeze all research under the hypothesis-testing straightjacket. Kendall and Lazarsfeld believe that “our thinking is rarely far enough progressed to enable us to start out with a sharply formulated hypothesis.” Roberts argues that “hypotheses are likely to be no more than hunches as to where to look for sharper hypotheses.”<sup>50</sup> Kirk and Miller make the point that “hypothesis testing is not the only research

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<sup>49</sup> Stephen Van Evera, *Guide to methods for students of political science* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1997), 55.

<sup>50</sup> Kendall and Lazarsfeld, and Roberts cited in Julian Simon, *Basic Research Methods in Social Science* (Random House, 1969), 63-64.

activity in any scientific discipline. Indeed, the most dramatic discoveries necessarily come about some other way, because in order to test a hypothesis, the investigator must already know what it is he or she is going to discover.”<sup>51</sup> In George and McKeown’s analysis, “the orthodox logic is of little use when one lacks the ingredients upon which its success depends — a reasonably explicit and well developed theory, and enough data to test the theory using standard statistical methods.”<sup>52</sup> In sum, the rigorous hypothesis-testing methodology can turn out to be a serious drawback when applied on a research problem that is theoretically under-developed. However, framing several working hypotheses in an exploratory study is nevertheless extremely useful since it compels the researcher to more clear focus on deriving observable and tangible implications from the theoretical framework.

### ***Selection Bias and Selection of Historical Cases***

Any study in international relations should address potential sources of selection bias. In a small-n qualitative research design, selection bias can be substantially reduced if the researcher adheres to a few indispensable principles. If these fundamental requirements cannot be fully met, the research design can still utilize a second best solution and then adjust the outcome accordingly for possible biases. Selection bias is usually defined as the systematic error in the procedure for collecting research data, which result is invalid scientific inferences. Case selection in qualitative research is unfortunately too often performed implicitly and made without any self-conscious attempt to explicitly evaluate potential biases. A scholarly consensus is slowly emerging in small-n qualitative research that only a small improvement in the methodological approach to intentional selection of cases can yield a large improvement in the quality of the final product.<sup>53</sup> The most understandable source of bias in any research is the desire to confirm one’s hypothesis by consciously or unconsciously allowing the preferred findings guide the selection of cases and observations. In addition, there are numerous systematic biases inherent in the small-n research methodology. In short, a

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<sup>51</sup> Jerome Kirk and Marc L. Miller, *Reliability and validity in qualitative research*, Qualitative research methods; v. 1 (Beverly Hills: Sage Publications, 1986), 17.

<sup>52</sup> Alexander L. George and Timothy J. McKeown, *Case Studies and Theories of Organizational Decision Making*, ed. Robert Coulam and Richard Smith, 21-58 ed., *Advances in Information Processing in Organizations*, vol. 2 (JAI, 1985), 54.

small-n study should compensate for potential bias in intentional selection of cases by clearly defining the selection frame, by selecting cases on the independent variables, by focusing on the score of some specific independent variables believed to be more closely related to the outcome, by avoiding a cluster of cases at the end of time-series, and by including negative cases thereby accounting for the true variation of the dependent variable.

### ***Selecting Cases on the Independent Variables***

An obvious, but often-violated imperative, is to allow for the possibility of at least some variation in the dependent variable. Selecting exclusively among cases of extreme animosity between the United States and some other country distorts the true variation of the phenomenon. The regimes in Tehran and Havana have clearly one obsession in common, a strong dislike for the U.S.-Government in Washington; however, this does not imply that the causal variables that led to the conflict with the United States in the first place are the same. Selecting cases on one specific value of the dependent variable underestimates on average the causal effect in question. In small-n analysis we also run the risk of overestimating the causal explanation by solely working on extreme values of the dependent variable.<sup>54</sup> King, Keohane and Verba argue that “nothing whatsoever can be learned about the causes of the dependent variable without taking into account other instances when the dependent variable takes on other values.”<sup>55</sup> Geddes makes a case that “the only things that can actually be explained using a sample selected on the dependent variable are differences among the selected cases.”<sup>56</sup> Geddes’ argument is that selecting cases on the dependent variable jeopardizes both the internal and external validity of the findings. Selecting on the dependent variable is also a considerable source of omitted explanatory variables. Selecting cases on a specific value of the dependent variable is only permissible in a restricted research project where this is clearly addressed and where the results are the building blocks in further research into the causal

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<sup>53</sup> David Collier, “Translating Quantitative Methods for Qualitative Researchers: The Case of Selection Bias,” *American Political Science Review* 89, no. 2 (1995), 461.

<sup>54</sup> Collier and Mahoney refer to this phenomenon as complexification based on extreme cases. David Collier and James Mahoney, “Insight and Pitfalls: Selection Bias in Qualitative Research,” *World Politics* 49, no. 1 (1996), 71.

<sup>55</sup> Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *Designing social inquiry: scientific inference in qualitative research* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), 129.

relationship. Selecting on the independent variable(s), on the other hand, causes no inference problems. Comparing cases with similar causal characteristics but different outcomes is a prime focus of this study. Covering the whole range of outcomes, ranging from long-term hostility to stable friend and ally, will better explore and uncover where and why similar combination of structural characteristics and historical events took on different outcomes. Such an approach is statistically more representative of the true distribution of U.S. bilateral relations with its former and present client states. At the same time, this approach corresponds more closely to the probabilistic nature of historical events. In conclusion, selection of historical cases must be a transparent and replicable process by selecting cases predominantly on the independent variables.

### ***Causal Heterogeneity and Statistical Distribution***

A rigorous research design should ideally meet the requirements of both “conditional independence” and “unit homogeneity.”<sup>57</sup> Conditional independence is taken well care of in the research design I have proposed. Genuine unit homogeneity, however, is much harder to achieve and it is not necessarily the goal of an exploratory study. In most international relations research designs, “constant effect” is the best measure of variation in the independent and dependent variables we can hope for. In qualitative research, unit homogeneity is most of the time confined to a narrow domain of causal homogeneity.<sup>58</sup> Instead, it is more useful in an explanatory study to look for very different causal patterns that can indeed have the same outcome. Charles Ragin argues, “The typical case-oriented inquiry does not assume or even anticipate causal uniformity across positive cases. On the contrary,

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<sup>56</sup> Barbara Geddes, “How the Cases You Choose Affect the Answer You Get: Selection in Comparative Politics,” *Political Analysis*, 132.

<sup>57</sup> King, Keohane and Verba define **conditional independence** as “the assumption that values are assigned to explanatory variables independently of the values taken by the dependent variables.” **Unit homogeneity** is defined as: “Two units are homogeneous when the expected values of the dependent variables from each unit are the same when our explanatory variable takes on a particular value.” “A weaker, but also fully acceptable, version of unit homogeneity is the constant effect assumption. Instead of assuming that the expected value of the dependent variable is the same for different units with the same value of the explanatory variable, we need only to assume that the causal effect is constant.” Gary King, Robert O. Keohane, and Sidney Verba, *Designing social inquiry: scientific inference in qualitative research* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1994), 91-97. In King, Keohane and Verba’s definition the term “explanatory” variable is the same as the more commonly used term for independent variable.



the usual expectation is that different combinations of causes may produce the same outcome.”<sup>59</sup> Ragin builds a logic of necessary and sufficient causes using Boolean algebra.

We are generally only partly able to overcome the statistical weakness of the small-n comparative research methodology. When selecting historical cases in a small-n comparative study, the principal concern is the statistical representativeness of the very limited number of cases that we wish to compare with the Iranian case.<sup>60</sup> The objective of the comparison is to explain as much as statistically possible about U.S.-Iranian hostility by comparing the causal patterns and the structural characteristics of the Iranian case with similar cases in modern history. However, a small-n comparative study can only provide an indication of causality since such a small number of observations cannot by definition provide statistical evidence of scientific causality. As a result, the realistic goal is to strengthen the statistical significance of the small number of cases as much as feasible by selecting a composition of cases that resembles the perceived statistical distribution of the population of cases as a whole.

### ***Counterfactuals***

The use of counterfactuals, which is a methodology that effectively complements a narrative description and pattern-matching across historical cases, should be encouraged. Counterfactuals are usually framed in the form of “if not (x) then (z)” statements. As an example, despite the vilification of the Islamic Republic of Iran, some scholars argue that the foreign policy of any other government in Teheran during this period would not have differed

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<sup>58</sup> David Collier and James Mahoney, “Insight and Pitfalls: Selection Bias in Qualitative Research,” *World Politics* 49, no. 1 (1996), 81.

<sup>59</sup> Charles C. Ragin, “Turning the Tables: How Case-Oriented Research Challenges Variable-Oriented Research,” *Comparative Social Research* 16 (1997), 36. However, this leads Ragin to the conclusion that it is permissible to select cases exclusively on the dependent variable. I will argue that selecting on the dependent variable is only allowed when the goal is clearly restricted to discovering various potential patterns of causality. Comparing cases with the same outcome will nearly automatically confirm the initial hypothesis leaving out contending explanations.

<sup>60</sup> In non-random small-n study, Collier and Mahoney recommend that the researcher deliberately produces a sample in which the variance on the dependent variable is similar to its variance in the larger set of cases. They argue that the larger comparison increases the variance of the dependent variable, which in the end provides a better estimate of the underlying causal pattern that is present in the more limited set of cases, see David Collier and James Mahoney, “Insight and Pitfalls: Selection Bias in Qualitative Research,” *World Politics* 49, no. 1 (1996), 89. This is theoretically correct, but in practice this is unfortunately a somewhat circular argument. The researcher abandoned random sampling in the first place because he or she was unable to clearly define the selection frame, i.e. the researcher could not determine the true variance of the dependent variable. The

significantly from the policy of the current regime with the exception of the prevailing policy on terrorism and Israel's right to exist, i.e. if not (Iranian Revolution) then (Iranian foreign policy almost the same).<sup>61</sup> Similarly, one could speculate about which course history would have taken if Moscow had really wanted to incorporate Iran into the Soviet block in 1946 or if the die-hard revolutionary Mehdi Hashemi had not told the Lebanese newspaper *Al Shiraa* that Robert MacFarlane and Oliver North had paid Tehran a secret visit to Tehran back in May of 1986.<sup>62</sup> Tetlock and Belkin have suggested that there are five ideal style methodologies and six criteria for evaluating counterfactual thought experiments in world politics, of which the ideographic and mental-simulation techniques are most applicable for this study.<sup>63</sup>

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researcher's assessment of the variance in the larger set of cases is therefore only an estimation of the true distribution.

<sup>61</sup> Shahram Chubin, *Iran's national security policy: intentions, capabilities, and impact* (Washington, D.C.: Carnegie Endowment for International Peace, 1993), 79.

<sup>62</sup> Richard K. Herrman and Michael P. Fischerkeller, "Counterfactual Reasoning in Motivational Analysis: U.S. Policy toward Iran," in *Counterfactual thought experiments in world politics: logical, methodological, and psychological perspectives*, ed. Philip Tetlock and Aaron Belkin (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996).

<sup>63</sup> Philip Tetlock and Aaron Belkin, *Counterfactual thought experiments in world politics: logical, methodological, and psychological perspectives* (Princeton, N.J.: Princeton University Press, 1996).

## V Why Long-term Hostility?

### ***The Theoretical Framework***

My main theoretical argument is that the observed hostility between the United States and Iran is a function of specific psychological and emotional aspects of the preceding patron-client relationship and the events that followed the Iranian Revolution. I propose that the longevity of the conflict is first and foremost caused by entrenched emotional issues rather than by specific issues related directly to substantive conflicts of interest.<sup>64</sup> I suggest that Iran's historical experience of foreign dominance and the humiliation of American prestige are the most important explanatory variables when explaining their long-term hostility. Furthermore, Iran falls into one specific category of countries that have relatively recent historical memories of a great imperial past. The collective trauma of severe infringement imposed on its sovereignty or having to totally subjugate to the will of foreign powers have noticeably defined the politics of these countries in the post-colonial era. During the second half of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, most Third World countries were "neo-colonies" in the sense that they had formal political independence, but for a complex variety of reasons, they found themselves in continued economic and military dependency on their former colonial masters or to a new and powerful patron. During the Cold War, the Soviet Union and the United States each built up a network of client states. This particular mixture of memories of western imperialism, post-colonial defenselessness, economic dependency, and superpower rivalry was ripe for local corruption and repression. When violent protests against the authoritarian regime erupted, it was a revolt not only against the local autocracy, kleptocracy or mafocracy,

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<sup>64</sup> For a good survey of the conceptual ground and review of the literature on the relationship between emotions and foreign policy, see Neta C. Crawford, "The Passion of World Politics: Propositions on Emotion and Emotional Relationship," *International Security* 24, no. 4 (2000): 116-156. Herbert Kelman has done extensive work on emotional entrapment in the context of the Arab-Israeli conflict, see Herbert C. Kelman, "Social-Psychological Dimensions of International Conflict," in *Peacemaking in international conflict: methods & techniques*, ed. I. William Zartman and J. Lewis Rasmussen (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1997). The role of emotions is extensively addressed when analyzing ethno-political conflict, for a good overview of different perspectives see John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith, *Nationalism*, Oxford readers (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1994). and John Hutchinson and Anthony D. Smith, *Ethnicity*, Oxford readers (Oxford ; New York: Oxford University Press, 1996).

but also against the global power hierarchy and the international economic order, epitomized by the all-mighty patron, the United States of America.<sup>65</sup>

History is rarely a smooth and continuous process but more often a course of events characterized by abrupt shifts and discontinuity.<sup>66</sup> In the model below, we have along the horizontal timeline several “trigger” or “decision”-points where the course of historical events suddenly changes direction. Snyder and Diesing have termed the factors that trigger a conspicuous change of events for precipitants.<sup>67</sup> The precipitant for formation of a strong and united domestic opposition are some particular combination of the client state’s pre-revolutionary history, foreign policy, domestic economy, authoritarian and repressive governments, social inequalities and/or corruption. Furthermore, we frequently distinguish between a general and specific precipitant, and between an internal and external precipitant. As a general rule, the domestic opposition was decisively able to seriously challenge the autocratic ruler after several failed attempts. In nearly all historical cases the autocracy resisted the challenge by violent means.<sup>68</sup> In most cases, the United States had been on the whole supportive of the autocrat up to this point in time. As the challenge from the united opposition unfolded, the United States had to decide whether to continue to support the regime in power or to withdraw support. The historical events of challenge-and-resistance typically developed along three characteristic causal patterns: the authoritarian regime successfully suppressed the challenge and stayed in power; a new regime came to power through a negotiated peace settlement and the new regime peacefully redefined its relationship with the United States without breaking the hostility threshold; and a revolutionary regime took over power, broke through the hostility threshold, and stayed hostile to the United States for many years. In short, we need to analyze what specific causal factors led to long-term hostility between the former patron and client.

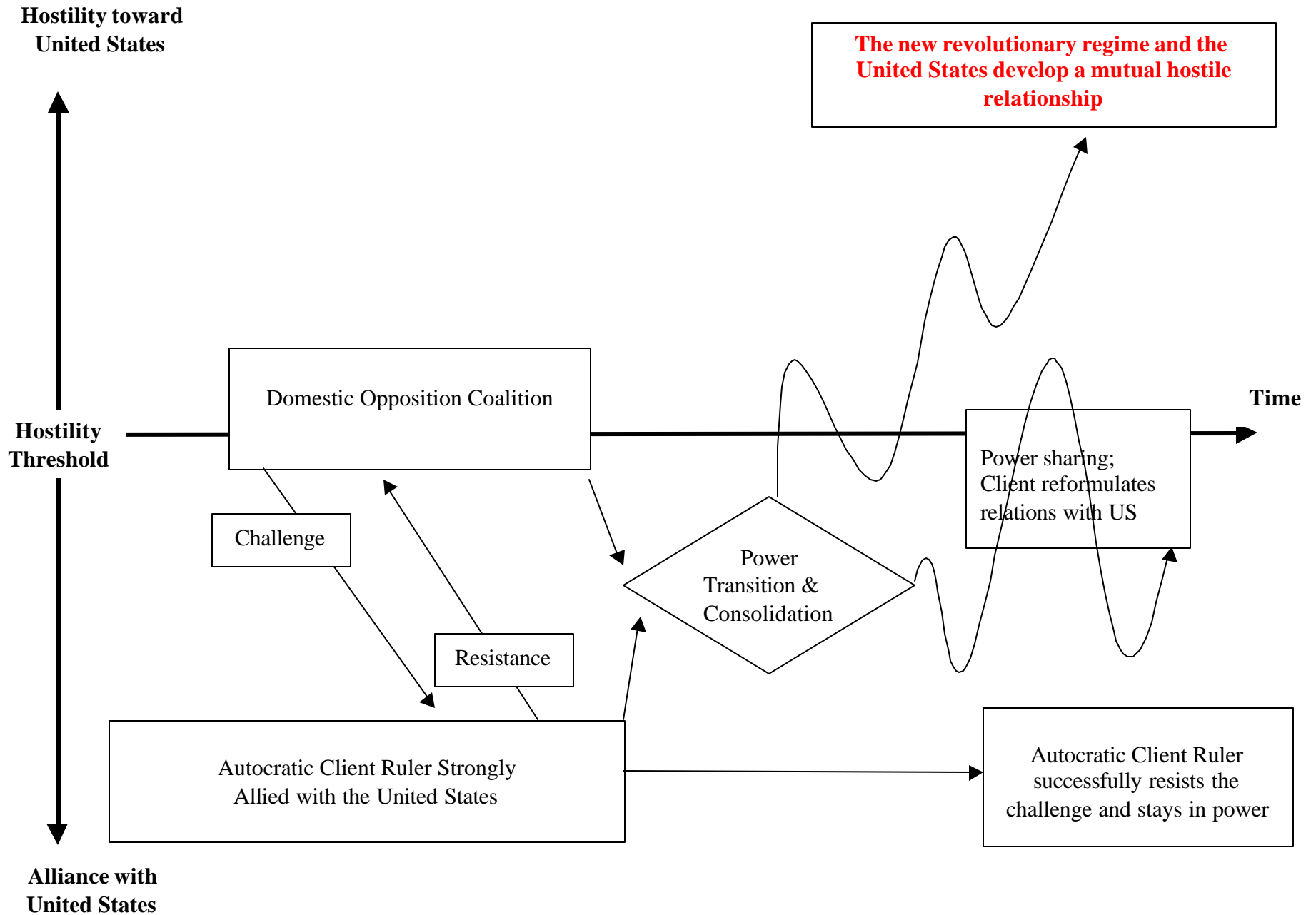
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<sup>65</sup> For a good recent contextual summary, see Robyn Wright, “Iran’s New Revolution,” *Foreign Affairs* 79, no. 133-145 (2000).

<sup>66</sup> On historical discontinuity, see H. Bradford Westerfield, *Inside CIA’s private world: declassified articles from the agency’s internal journal, 1955-1992* (New Haven, CT: Yale University Press, 1995), 241.

<sup>67</sup> Glenn H. Snyder and Paul Diesing, *Conflict among Nations: Bargaining, Decision Making, and System Structure in International Crisis* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1977).

<sup>68</sup> The overthrow of Ferdinand Marcos’ autocratic regime in the Philippines in 1986 is one of the very few peaceful transitions of power. This would most likely not have happened without political pressure from the U.S. government.



### ***Substantive Versus Emotional Issues***

When analyzing the conflict between Iran and the United States, it is extremely useful to sort the specific components of the dispute into two separate categories: substantive issues and emotional issues. I will not argue that substantive issues can be entirely detached from emotional ones. Nikki Keddie acknowledges correctly, “for every strange-seeming [Iranian] character trait, as with “mistrust” or “paranoia,” one can nearly always find partially explanatory causes in Iranian history.” “In both the British and American cases, however exaggerated and paranoid some charges by some Iranians may be, suspiciousness and hostility have their root in real and important occurrences; chiefly, participation in the overthrow of popular revolutionary movements and support for unpopular governments<sup>69</sup> Yet, Keddie does not go into how the psychological issues of “mistrust” operate separately from the substantive issues that caused them in the first place. I will argue the psychological issues on both sides of the conflict have taken on a life of their own, often completely detached from the actual events that defined them in the first place. As an example, recent research suggests the U.S. contribution to the successful coup against Prime Minister Mossadeq in 1953 was far less prominent than previously believed.<sup>70</sup> The coup dramatically changed the course of modern Iranian history and remains in the collective memory of Iranians a deep-seated injustice committed by the interference of foreign powers. The undisputed fact that the Iranian military did all of the “heavy lifting” back in 1953 does not matter much to Iranians any longer. What matters is the belief that foreign conspiracies have the power to overthrow any legitimate government in Iran. As a result, one needs to categorize the actual substance of the different contentious issues that make up the animosity between Iran and the United States.

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<sup>69</sup> See Nikki R. Keddie and Yann Richard, *Roots of revolution: an interpretive history of modern Iran* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 275-276.

<sup>70</sup> “[A] copy of the agency's secret history of the coup has surfaced, revealing the inner workings of a plot that set the stage for the Islamic revolution in 1979, and for a generation of anti-American hatred in one of the Middle East's most powerful countries.” “The secret history, written by the C.I.A.'s chief coup planner and obtained by The New York Times, says the operation's success was mostly a matter of chance. The document shows that the agency had almost complete contempt for the man it was empowering, Shah Mohammed Reza Pahlevi, whom it derided as a vacillating coward.” “The operation, code-named TP-Ajax, was the blueprint for a succession of C.I.A. plots to foment coups and destabilize governments during the cold war — including the agency's successful coup in Guatemala in 1954 and the disastrous Cuban intervention known as the Bay of Pigs in 1961. In more than one instance, such operations led to the same kind of long-term animosity toward the United States that occurred in Iran.” James Risen, “A Secret C.I.A. History: How a Plot Convulsed Iran in '53 (and in '79),” *The New York Times*, Sunday, April 16 2000, A1.

To illustrate my point, I have below set up a table that summarizes the most controversial issues that separate Iran and the United States. My argument is that the substantive issues do not measure up to the degree of observed hostility between the two countries. Therefore, I propose that the causal explanation and solution to the problem must be found in psychological and emotional issues that only partially relate to factual historical events.

| <i>Substantive:</i>   | <i>Emotional:</i>   |
|---|---|
| <b><i>Iran:</i></b>   |   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● U.S. sanctions on trade, aid, and arms</li> <li>● Frozen financial assets</li> <li>● U.S.-Iranian naval confrontation: 1987 – 1988</li> <li>● USS Vincennes’ downing of an Iranian A300 Airbus killing 290 in 1988</li> </ul>  | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● U.S. involvement in the coup against Mossadeq in 1953 and U.S. support for the Shah’s autocratic regime</li> <li>● Cynical exploitation of Iran for U.S.’ own self-interest</li> <li>● U.S. unconditional support for Israel<sup>71</sup></li> <li>● U.S. indirect support for Iraq in the war with Iran</li> <li>● Disrespect for Iranian cultural and religious values</li> </ul>                    |
| <b><i>The United States:</i></b>  |   |
| <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● U.S. hostages in Lebanon and the bombing of U.S. Marines in Beirut in 1983</li> <li>● Weapons of mass destruction</li> <li>● The Khobar Towers bombing in Saudi Arabia in 1996<sup>73</sup></li> <li>● Iran’s opposition to the Middle East Peace Process</li> </ul> | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>● Iranians’ lack of appreciation for U.S. political, economic and military support against Soviet aggression during the Cold War<sup>72</sup></li> <li>● Disrespect for American national values (“The Great Satan”)</li> <li>● Extreme humiliation of U.S. prestige during the Hostage Crisis, 1979-1981</li> <li>● Blaming the United States for what are clearly Iranian domestic problems</li> </ul> |

<sup>71</sup> It is clear that the state of Israel plays a dominant role in the conflict between the United States and Iran. As far back as 1963, opposition to the Jewish state was a crucial component in Khomeini’s ideological fundament, see Nikki R. Keddie and Yann Richard, *Roots of revolution: an interpretive history of modern Iran* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 157.

<sup>72</sup> On the Soviet design on Iranian Azerbaijan, see V. M. Zubok and Konstantin Pleshakov, *Inside the Kremlin's cold war: from Stalin to Khrushchev* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1996).

<sup>73</sup> “Senior American officials publicly acknowledge that they had evidence of Iranian involvement in the bombing,” James Risen, “Terrorism Panel Faults U.S. Effort on Iran and 1996 Bombing,” *The New York Times*, Sunday, June 4 2000, A4.

### ***The Role of Emotions in Long-term Hostility***

The conflict between the United States and Iran has a distinct psychological component that needs to be addressed. Individual and collective psychology has played a prominent role in shaping the conflict between the United States and Iran. I will argue that on one level of analysis the prolonged conflict between the United States and Iran is fundamentally about entrenched psychological issues. Herbert Kelman argues that the nature of international conflict is comprised of psychological processes at the individual and collective levels, which constitute and mediate much of the behavior of nations. Historical, geopolitical, and structural factors provide the context and set the constraints for the operation of psychological factors, but the real conflict is a product of misperception and misunderstanding. The conflict is driven by collective needs and fears, rather than entirely a product of rational calculation of objective national interests on the part of the decision makers.<sup>74</sup> Gary Sick argues “the mirror image of Iranian depictions of the U.S. as the “Great Satan” — had its effects on the media, on the U.S. Congress, on the public and in the attitudes of lower-level bureaucrats.”<sup>75</sup> Though it is possible to understand anti-American feelings among Iranians, anti-foreign propaganda is deliberately used to explain away homegrown problems. The result of the last parliamentary election is a clear indication that scapegoating has lost its effect on the electorate and that a young population with no memories of the revolution is fed up with ideological sloganeering and wants to see practical improvements.

The existing literature on misperception in international relations draws heavily on the field of psychology by asking if policy makers make the same cognitive errors as ordinary people.<sup>76</sup> The fundamental psychological nature of man is deeply drawn toward making sense of uncertainties and apparent chaos by often uncritically attributing systematic properties to events and processes. The probabilistic worldview challenges people’s anxiety of the unknown and people tend to compensate accordingly. There is a well-known human

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<sup>74</sup> Kelman, Herbert C. "Social-Psychological Dimensions of International Conflict." In *Peacemaking in international conflict: methods & techniques*, ed. I. William Zartman and J. Lewis Rasmussen. (Washington, D.C.: United States Institute of Peace Press, 1997).

<sup>75</sup> Gary Sick, “Rethinking Dual Containment,” *Survival* 40, no. April (1998)., Lexis-Nexis/Universe, 6

<sup>76</sup> See Robert Jervis, “Hypotheses on Misperception,” *World Politics* April (1968)., Robert Jervis and Harvard University. Center for International Affairs. *The logic of images in international relations* ([Princeton, N.J.]: Princeton University Press, 1970)., Robert Jervis, Richard Ned Lebow, and Janice Gross Stein, *Psychology and deterrence*, Perspectives in security (Baltimore, Md.: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1985)., and Jonathan



propensity of seeing regularities and patterns despite contradictory evidence that the events are idiosyncratic or generated by accidental processes. The cult of conspiracy theories in Iran is an extreme example of this propensity. For instance, many Iranians to this day seriously believe that Khomeini was the deliberate creation of either the United States or Great Britain.<sup>77</sup> Similarly, the stereotypes of Islamic societies and of Islamic fundamentalism in the West have found their way into academic writings.<sup>78</sup> In conclusion, the unexplained phenomenon in the case of U.S.-Iranian hostility is similar to the dilemma faced by practitioners of psychology. The conflict between the United States and Iran is as much inside people's heads as it is an external and tangible phenomenon.

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Mercer, *Reputation and international politics*, Cornell studies in security affairs (Ithaca, N.Y.: Cornell University Press, 1996).

<sup>77</sup> On the propensity for conspiracy theories, see, Graham E. Fuller, *The center of the universe: the geopolitics of Iran*, A Rand Corporation research study (Boulder, Colo.: Westview Press, 1991), 21. Nikki R. Keddie and Yann Richard, *Roots of revolution : an interpretive history of modern Iran* (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1981), 254. Olivier Roy, *The failure of political Islam* (Cambridge, Mass.: Harvard University Press, 1994), 19. Another aspect of the paranoid fear of foreign conspiracies is the use of systematic torture of perceived enemies of the regime. Under the Mullahs, forced public confessions, which started already under the Shah, surpassed in the 1980s even the impressive records of Stalin and Mao. Ervand Abrahamian, *Tortured confessions: prisons and public recantations in modern Iran* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1999).

<sup>78</sup> Paula de Sutter argues that “[The Iranian] leadership’s commitment to its religious and revolutionary ideology and its risk tolerance indicate that Iran is a state that more closely resembles the early Bolshevik state than the tired Soviet Union the United States deterred and ultimately defeated in the Cold War.” Furthermore, she suggests that there exists a cult of martyrdom and death in today’s Iran and that the “threats of personal or societal death may not carry the same impact for the Islamic leadership that the threat conveys in Western cultures.” Paula de Sutter, *Denial and Jeopardy: Deterring Iranian Use of NBC Weapons* (Washington, DC: National Defense University Press Publications, 1997), 11 and 17.

## VI Conclusion

Several scholars argued at a recent conference that NATO does not have a bright future.<sup>79</sup> NATO as an alliance is no longer as obvious as it was during the Cold War since the glue that kept the members together has vanished. During the first fifty years of the history of the alliance, the common threat from the Soviet Union proved to be much stronger than internal differences within NATO. The Iranian threat does not unite the members of NATO in the same way. Conflicting interests between United States and its European allies over how to deal with the clergy in Tehran have the potential to drive a wedge between close allies and undermine the strength of the North Atlantic Treaty Organization. Thus, reaching a consensus on both sides of the Atlantic Ocean over the nature of the Iranian problem should in future receive higher priority.

Exacerbating the problem that NATO faces with Iran, the long conflict between the United States and Iran is not scientifically well understood within the academic community. The overall theoretical framework of the realist paradigm of international relations best expresses the fundamentals of the conflict between the United States and Iran; however, some of the basic assumptions of realist theory contradict empirical observations. After the end of the Cold War, empirical evidence to a much lesser degree supports the predictions of structural realist theories. As a discipline, the academic field of international relations is moving toward integrating systemic theories of what other states find acceptable with the pressure from domestic political constituencies on foreign policy decision-making. In addition, when searching for an explanation of the enduring hostility between the United States we need to go beyond the traditional understanding of a rational actor. I have suggested that psychological themes on both sides of the conflict have taken on a life of their own nearly completely detached from the actual events that defined them in the first place. Historical, geopolitical, and structural factors provide the context and set the constraints for the operation of psychological factors, but the real conflict is a product of misperception and misunderstanding. Cracking “the wall of mistrust” requires a new conceptual understanding of the conflict, an understanding to which this study is dedicated.

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<sup>79</sup> NATO: The First Fifty Years and Beyond, June 21, 2000, The American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Cambridge, Massachusetts. Cosponsored by NATO and the MIT Security Studies Program.

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