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# **SYMBOLIC POLITICS AT THE INTERSECTION OF DOMESTIC POLITICS AND FOREIGN POLICY IN THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN AND THE REPUBLIC OF TURKEY**

Olivia Isabell Glombitza

PhD Thesis

**PhD Programme in Politics, Policies and International Relations**

Department of Public Law and Legal History Studies  
Department of Political Science and Public Law  
Institute of Government and Public Policy

Directors

**Dr. Ferran Izquierdo Brichs**  
Autonomous University of Barcelona  
**Dr. Luciano Zaccara**  
Qatar University

**February 2022**



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## ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

Over the course of my PhD, I have been fortunate enough to have had the possibility to meet and work with a number of fabulous individuals with big minds, but also – and above all – big hearts. I am thankful to all of them. However, I would like to express my sincere gratitude to some of the most important ones, to my directors, Ferran Izquierdo and Luciano Zaccara, as well as to Laura Feliu and Simon Mabon. All of them have been instrumental for my endeavour in many different ways and they have supported me throughout my PhD as well as the different projects that I have been conducting on the side. They have enriched my journey and generously and patiently shared their time and knowledge with me.

In this context, I also would like to thank Xavi Giró, who directed my MA thesis in Media, Communication and Culture at the Faculty of Communication and who first introduced me to the approach of Critical Discourse Analysis, which was to become absolutely central in my research. Friends and fellows from project SEPAD and the PhD group at Lancaster University as well as the TRANSMENA research group at UAB have been invaluable. I treasure the experiences I have made and the people I have met.

My parents have been the most important and indispensable companions along the way. Having instilled in me an ever-lasting curiosity and zest for knowledge, they have always done their utmost to give me every possibility to learn and grow. They have gifted me their love and have always and unconditionally supported and encouraged me throughout all my endeavours. Without them, none of this would have been possible. I am deeply grateful to them, and I owe them more than words can express. I am very happy to have wonderful parents, but also to have an equally wonderful sister and a great grandma, who are and have always been there for me.

The years of my PhD have been years of immense enjoyment, great freedom, and many new adventures. I got to learn so much, make so many new experiences and discoveries, and I got to meet so many amazing people on the way. I thoroughly enjoyed this incredible and exciting opportunity, and I am grateful to have had the chance to jump into this second and completely different, but most joyful life.

## ABSTRACT

Symbolic politics serve several important functions in political and social life. They are a means to create, legitimize, and sustain but also to mobilize, contest as well as transform political orders and state-society relations. To this end, leaders appeal to salient identities, common beliefs and emotions that resonate with their audiences. This article-based thesis focuses on the symbolic aspects of authoritarian rule in the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Turkey at the intersection of domestic politics and foreign policy. While Iran and Turkey can be considered “not quite enemies, but less than friends” (Akbarzadeh and Barry, 2016, p. 980), they share several commonalities and similarities which enable interesting comparative analyses. These go beyond occupying a similar position as non-Arab Muslim states in a region with primarily Arab neighbouring states and a shared historical and cultural ground. From a political point of view, while there are significant differences in their current respective political structures, they have experienced similar trajectories of change and reform and today, both are considered to have authoritarian governments. Furthermore, throughout the past and present, these have pursued similar domestic policies and strategies. However, despite their authoritarian style of governing, the thesis argues that they are not exercising and projecting political power only through material or coercive means, but they equally draw on a large repertoire of symbolic strategies. In this context, Lisa Wedeen (2015, p. 30) has remarked that “politics is not merely about material interests but also about contests over the symbolic world, over the management and appropriation of meanings.” The thesis thus explores how the political elites in the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Turkey use symbolic politics to create, sustain, and change political arrangements in their domestic and foreign policies and how they use symbolic politics to solicit and mobilize support both at home and abroad. The thesis therefore analyses how the political elites use symbolic means and strategies to shape their political and social environment. Because of the inherent interconnectedness between the domestic and the international sphere, domestic processes have important implications for foreign policy and *vice versa*. These implications will equally be addressed. The thesis offers new perspectives on the use of symbolic politics in general and the two countries in particular by drawing synergies through analysing and contrasting the Islamic Republic of Iran’s and the Republic of Turkey’s domestic and foreign policy approaches.

**Keywords:** Symbolic Politics, Islamic Republic of Iran, Republic of Turkey, Domestic Politics, Foreign Policy

# 1 INTRODUCTION

Symbolic politics serve several important functions in political and social life. They are a means to create, legitimize, and sustain but also to mobilize, contest as well as transform political orders and state-society relations. To this end, political leaders appeal to common beliefs, salient identities and emotions that resonate with their intended audiences. This thesis focuses on the symbolic aspects of authoritarian rule in the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Turkey at the intersection of domestic politics and foreign policy. While Iran and Turkey can be considered “not quite enemies, but less than friends” (Akbarzadeh and Barry, 2016, p. 980), they share several commonalities and similarities which enable interesting comparative analyses. These go beyond occupying a similar position as non-Arab Muslim states in a region with primarily Arab neighbouring states and a shared historical and cultural ground.

From a political point of view, while there are significant differences in their current respective political structures, they have experienced similar trajectories of change and reform and today, both are considered to have authoritarian governments. Furthermore, throughout the past and present, their respective governments have pursued similar domestic policies and strategies. However, despite their authoritarian style of governing, neither of the two countries’ governments is exercising and projecting political power solely through material or coercive means, but equally draws on a large repertoire of symbolic strategies. In this context, Lisa Wedeen (2015, p. 30) reminds us that “politics is not merely about material interests but also about contests over the symbolic world, over the management and appropriation of meanings.”

The thesis is comprised of three peer-reviewed journal articles and one peer-reviewed book chapter, which together explore the following overarching questions: *how do the political elites in the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Turkey use symbolic politics in their domestic and foreign policies to create, sustain, and change political arrangements? And how do they use symbolic politics to solicit and mobilize political support both at the domestic and international level?* The articles and the book chapter therefore analyse how the political elites use symbolic means and strategies to shape their political and social environment. The thesis is particularly interested in the discursive manifestations of symbolic



power and thus, symbolic politics, which it analyses within their domestic and international political context. Because of the inherent interconnectedness between the domestic and the international sphere, domestic processes also have important implications for foreign policy and *vice versa*. These implications will equally be addressed. The thesis offers new perspectives on the use of symbolic politics in general and the two countries in particular by drawing synergies through analysing and contrasting the Islamic Republic of Iran's and the Republic of Turkey's domestic and foreign policy approaches.

The thesis' main argument maintains that *political power is not exercised and projected merely through material or coercive means, but also through a large repertoire of symbolic strategies*. Therefore, to better *understand* rather than *explain* the approaches of the Iranian and Turkish political elites, the thesis offers an interpretivist-constructivist approach, in other words, the thesis is situated within an interpretivist epistemology and adheres to a constructivist ontology and contributes a comprehensive qualitative study of the Iranian and Turkish political elites' symbolic discursive strategies. With this, it contributes a systematic and theoretically grounded account of the mechanisms of symbolic politics in both countries.

Focusing on symbolic politics, the thesis highlights the importance of ideas and beliefs in the political dynamics of the region, which are often accorded only a subordinate role in favour of material factors. In doing so, the thesis demonstrates that symbolic politics and a repertoire of different symbolic discursive strategies in combination with structural ideational factors are indispensable instruments in domestic politics and foreign policy. Taken together, the articles and the book chapter of this thesis seek to add an optimistic piece to the puzzle and to improve our understanding of the socio-political dynamics and developments in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf region by providing important insights into regional and international relations and affairs from a symbolic politics perspective.

The thesis is located at the intersection of domestic politics and foreign policy and studies the symbolic aspects of authoritarian rule and their discursive manifestation in the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Turkey. It therefore provides valuable insights into the making and construction of Iran's and Turkey's domestic politics and foreign policies. Highlighting the inherent connection between the domestic and international spheres and their reciprocal influence, the thesis contributes to the much-needed dialogue and cross-fertilization between the disciplines of International Relations and Area Studies, i.e., Studies of the Middle East and the Persian Gulf region. While advocating for dialogue between these two disciplines in which the publications are situated, the thesis furthermore crosses several other disciplines by employing theories and methods applied in Media and Communication Studies, Linguistics, Sociology, and International Relations.

The thesis applies methods of critical discourse analysis and utilizes a wide range of primary and secondary sources such as official speeches, statements, agreements, documents, and interviews as well as newspaper articles to study the symbolic discursive strategies as well as the context from which they emerge. The thesis spans over the timeframe of the rule of the Justice and Development Party (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* – AKP) in the Republic of Turkey and the presidencies of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Hassan Rouhani in the Islamic Republic of Iran, i.e., from 2002, the year the AKP came to power and 2005, the year Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was elected president for the first time, respectively.

The thesis is organized as follows. The next sections place the thesis' publications into the context of symbolic politics, their discursive enactment and the role of ideas and beliefs in it and locates the thesis at the intersection of domestic politics and foreign policy. Moreover, these sections define and present important concepts and ideas that the publications are based on and give an overview of each of the publications' abstracts, the thesis' main argument as well as its research questions, hypotheses and objectives, the thesis' theoretical and empirical contributions to existing scholarship and end with a justification for the choice of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Turkey as case studies. The chapter thereafter elaborates on the analytical and theoretical framework that have provided the lens through which the cases have been studied. The next chapter presents the methodology that has been guiding the thesis. This is followed by another four chapters, each presenting one of the thesis' publications. The thesis concludes with a discussion of the main findings, limitations to the research as well as avenues for future research.

## 1.1 POLITICS, SYMBOLIC POWER & DISCOURSE

The influence of ideas and beliefs and how they are employed by the Iranian and Turkish elites to influence their domestic and international political environment by using different symbolic discursive means such as narratives, frames, and rituals while at the same time, appealing to the hearts and minds of their intended audiences, are the subject of this thesis. The Iranian and Turkish elites' use of symbolic power is therefore the central focus of the thesis' contributions. However, what does the term *symbolic politics* or *symbolic power*, for that matter, mean and how does the thesis define and conceptualize the terms? What drives symbolic politics, how can we observe them, and how do they function? We'll begin thus with the thesis' conceptualization of the term symbolic power. According to Bourdieu (1991, p.

163-164), in a world where power is visible everywhere, symbolic power, in contrast, is an “invisible power which can be exercised only with the complicity of those who do not want to know that they are subject to it or even that they themselves exercise it.” In other words, in line with Bourdieu (1991, pp. 163-164), symbolic power is not necessarily an obvious, easily recognizable form of power and even those exercising it or being subjected to it might not necessarily be aware of it.

Among these invisible forms of power that Bourdieu is referring to range for example prestige, status, social recognition, honour, etc. (Farrés Fernández, 2018, p. 67) and importantly, legitimacy. In this sense, symbolic power is not only invisible, but more concretely, also an immaterial form of power. Symbolic power ranges, according to Aslan (2020, p.2) among one of three means to control and govern a society, whether in an authoritarian or democratic context. Grouped broadly into three categories, these means are: coercion (force), legitimacy (persuasion), and cooptation (exchange). In this sense, concentrating on the symbolic, immaterial, i.e., the category of legitimacy (persuasion) as stipulated by Aslan, symbolic power is inherently connected to the power of influence. The exercise of influence in turn - and in our case it is influence exercised discursively - is what political elites will resort to in order to maintain or change political arrangements.

According to Brysk (1995, p. 561), relations of power can be maintained or transformed for example by communicating representations that connect to norms and values and which appeal to emotions. In consequence, symbolic politics has an important stake in preserving or changing both the political and social order. If the power to influence is a characteristic of symbolic politics, then one of the drivers behind the exercise of political power are interests. In general terms, political interests of certain individuals or groups can be both, material as well as immaterial (Eickelman and Piscatori, 1996, p. 9) and therefore visible or invisible, such as interests related to ideology or identity. Lisa Wedeen (2015, p. 30) reminds us in this context that the contests over symbolic means, i.e., over the management and appropriation of meanings are as inherent to politics as are contests over material interests.

Along these lines, Eickelman and Piscatori (1996, p. 9) point to observations by Pekonen (1989) and Geertz (1973) which help to define the concept further and where politics are seen as “a struggle about people’s imaginations” (Pekonen, 1989, p. 132) and “as a competition and struggle over the meanings of symbols” (for example, Geertz, 1973, pp.193-233). Such perspective adds an important additional explanatory dimension in comparison to approaches centring on power and interests alone. However, interests are an abstract concept. How can these interests be made intelligible or ‘discovered’? Brysk (1995, p. 561) has argued that “interests are not fixed needs, but rather deeply subsumed stories about needs,” and that political actors can therefore “create new political opportunities by revealing,

challenging, and changing narratives about interests and identities.” It is therefore in politicians’ discourses that interests become observable or ‘discoverable’.

From a research perspective, focusing on symbolic politics bears several advantages compared to materialist and rationalist approaches. Studying collective action, Brysk (1995, p. 559) has observed that a focus on symbolic politics is an effective means to explain political outcomes and therefore to overcome the deficiencies of the mentioned approaches, which do not take into account, amongst others, the impact of normative and affective representations. In this context, stressing the symbolic component of politics, Eickelman and Piscatori (1996, p. 11) have argued that it may serve both as instrument of persuasion as well as instrument of coercion. Taking this idea further, and importantly, referring to bargaining models of politics, they conclude that “persuasion, rather than force, is increasingly considered to be the basis of politics” (Eickelman and Piscatori, 1996, p. 11).

In line with Aslan (2020) and Eickelman and Piscatori (1996), Brysk (1995, p. 564) has argued that “both instrumental and normative communication create and sustain power. That is, persuasion can be used to redefine actors’ goals or interests as well as the strategies to secure those ends. Part of politics is convincing people of what they want. This implies that a power relationship can take at least three basic forms: coercion (force), bargaining (exchange), and persuasion (manipulation of meanings).” The idea that persuasion can change hearts and minds and the means to achieve this can be considered the symbolic politics mechanism (Brysk, 1995, p. 564). Processes of change driven by symbolic politics take place in two stages: “first the projection or performance of narratives opens hearts and changes minds, and then changes in consciousness produce changes in political behaviour” (Brysk, 1995, p. 574).

Symbolic discursive strategies can therefore be defined according to Hegghammer (2017, p. 16) as “emotional persuasion tools.” Through these tools, political elites are able to convey their worldview, while at the same time, appeal to, but also construct a corresponding identity that is connected to strong emotions (Aslan, 2020, p. 2). Both, a common identity, and the emotional component are significant for political leaders for the exercise of power. A common identity and therefore a common interpretation of the political and social environment helps political leaders to justify their objectives and to solicit support (Aslan, 2020, p. 4). Kaufman (2001, p. 29) and Sears (2001) for example have underlined that it is not only rational calculations or material interests that form the basis for political decisions, but emotions as well. Aslan (2020, p. 2) points out that “[e]motions influence how people process information, define their interests, and identify themselves and others. Therefore, they play a significant role in political action.”

Indeed, emotions may stimulate or discourage people from mobilizing and taking political action. While emotions such as fear, shame or sadness are likely to dissuade people from taking political action (Aslan, 2020, p.2) because they “increase individuals’ tendencies to make pessimistic assessments, discount prospects of change, privilege information about danger, have a low sense of control, and avert risk” (Pearlman, 2013, p. 392); emotions such as anger, joy, and pride in turn, are likely to motivate people to mobilize and to take political action (Aslan, 2020, p. 2). This is due to the fact that the latter “promote optimistic assessments, a sense of personal efficacy, and risk acceptance” (Pearlman, 2013, p. 392). The objective of political actors is therefore “to shape people’s identities, frame their interests, inculcate beliefs, and impel them to action by stirring up their emotions through symbolic means” (Aslan, 2020, p. 2).

Language plays a pivotal role in this context as persuasion is largely an act of speech. Eickelman and Piscatori (1996, p. 11) assert that the “symbolic and persuasive dimension of politics has become virtually synonymous with the politics of language” and that it is therefore now “commonplace to argue that language is intimately related to how we construct communal identities and promote and defend our aspirations.” Symbols are signs related to value and may be expressed in language and image (Eickelman and Piscatori, 1996, p. 9). Articulating shared symbolic expressions, values, and beliefs through language, creates “a social bond between individuals and groups, since the roles and social relations available in society are transmitted through language” (Pekonen 1989, p. 132). A symbolic politics approach, therefore, can help us to “understand the use of ‘repertoires’ as sites of semantic struggle” (Brysk, 1995, p. 583). In line with above the arguments, it is therefore imperative to conduct research along the lines of symbolic politics and to complement materialist and rationalist approaches.

As the first publication (Turkey’s July 15<sup>th</sup> Coup Attempt) explores, “[b]y constituting social reality through language and symbols, discourse is a form of symbolic power by which it is possible to make people see and believe and to confirm or transform their vision of the world and therefore, ultimately, the world itself” (Glombitza 2021, p. 245). While Bourdieu calls discourse an almost magical power, capable of maintaining and subverting the social order, he simultaneously points to the necessity of believing in the legitimacy of both, the spoken as well as the speaker (Glombitza 2021, p. 245). Thus, this leads us to conclude that power is “not necessarily the power of an individual, but belongs to a group of people, as Arendt put it, who by virtue of their support ‘empowers’ certain individuals to act in their name and simultaneously confers upon them legitimacy” (Glombitza 2021, p. 245).

We are thus advancing the idea that discourse, as a form of symbolic power, may be used for the purposes of persuasion, which in turn is a pivotal instrument in order to solicit legitimacy. The mere

exercise of coercive politics is not sufficiently conducive not even in authoritarian contexts and material politics are backed up by different forms of immaterial and symbolic politics. As we can observe in the context of the Islamic Republic of Iran for example, conducting election campaigns and holding elections are an important means to legitimize pre-selected candidates. The same can be observed in the Turkish case, where a referendum put to the people in 2017 made major changes to the constitution possible and therefore 'legitimately' facilitated President Erdoğan's increasing appropriation of political power.

Preserving their legitimacy. i.e., legitimating their political attitude, actions and position is indispensable for political elites, whether in democratic or authoritarian contexts. Without legitimacy, holders of political power are likely to incur the weakening of relations with other elites (economic, religious, etc.) as well as the weakening of relations with the population. Potential outcomes are various and range from attempts at social change to pre-emptive reform initiatives, civil disobedience and might even go as far as the outbreak of a revolution. This leads us back to and confirms Bourdieu's statement, where symbolic politics largely rests on the consent of the people (Bourdieu, 1991; Arendt, 1970; Edelman, 1985). How this consent is solicited, domestically, regionally as well as internationally is explored in greater detail in the four contributions of the thesis themselves.

## 1.2 ENACTING SYMBOLIC POLITICS: NARRATIVES, FRAMES & RITUALS

The enactment of symbolic politics on part of the elites is studied through their use of symbolic discursive means such as narratives, frames, and rituals. As the different publications evidence, narratives play an important part in political discourses and they are therefore of special significance for the study of elite politics because they have long been regarded as a staple in the ideological construction of events and the manipulation of opinion (De Fina, 2018, p. 233). In this sense, as Bottici (2010, p. 920) has remarked, narratives are a "powerful means to provide meaning to the political world we live in" and "[t]ell us both what is the sense of our political world in general and also of our place within it." Also, one of the prime avenues to persuasion leads through narratives ((Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle 2013, p. 20). Narratives are a form of symbolic politics that makes them tangible and observable. However, what makes narratives persuasive? According to Brysk (1995, p. 576), for narratives to be persuasive, they need to appeal to emotions, be appropriate in their cultural context, possess historical precedent and furthermore be reinforced by other symbols. Moreover, persuasive

narratives “contain the elements of successful communication – legitimate speakers, compelling messages, and satisfying plots – and can compensate for the lack of other resources” (Brysk, 1995, pp. 561-562). Recognizing the importance of narratives in political discourse, they are a central focus of analysis of the first, second and third publication (*The Aftermath of Turkey’s July 15<sup>th</sup> Coup Attempt; Ideology & Narrative; The Deal of Discontent*).

Other forms of symbolic politics that are treated in this thesis include frames and rituals. As defined in the first publication (*The Aftermath of Turkey’s July 15<sup>th</sup> Coup Attempt*), “frames are specific metaphors, symbolic representations, and cognitive cues that shape our interpretations of the world. They are established and preconceived ideas that are activated in people’s minds through the use of certain language and terms” (Glombitza, 2021, p. 246). Framing entails the filtering of certain elements of reality and their reassembly to form a comprehensive narrative. Frames are created through repetition and once established, they can be called upon any time using certain terms that connect to that frame. For example, using terms such as military, weapons, enemy, power, etc. draw on a frame of war. Because frames influence how we act, think, feel, form an opinion, and take decisions (Entman, 2007), studying the usage of frames in political contexts provides important clues as to the direction in which the target audience’s thoughts are supposed to be directed and hence, how they are supposed to interpret particular issues.

In his seminal work, *The Symbolic Uses of Politics*, Edelman (1985) has argued that symbolic forms such as rituals and myths are inherently connected to our political institutions. Both are similarly persistent as other institutions that form part of politics such as elections, discussions of politics, or patriotic holiday ceremonies (Edelman, 1985, p. 17). Edelman defines ritual as a “motor activity that involves its participants symbolically in a common enterprise, calling their attention to their relatedness and joint interests in a compelling way” (Edelman, 1985, p. 17). Rituals furthermore provide order, promote conformity, and evoke satisfaction and pride in a collective enterprise and joy in conformity (Edelman, 1985, p. 17). On the one hand, rituals constitute a “simplified model or semblance of reality” which omits “facts that do not fit” (Edelman, 1985, p. 17). On the other hand, “[c]onformity and satisfaction with the basic order are the keynotes; and the acting out of what is to be believed is a psychologically effective mode of instilling conviction and fixing patterns of future behaviour” (Edelman, 1985, p. 17).

There are several different kinds of political rituals. Mass rituals, involving the direct participation of the population in large numbers particularly stand out and constitute an interesting research object. According to Edelman (1985, p. 17), “[m]ost apparent are patriotic ceremonies affirming the greatness, heroism, and nobility of the nation and the pettiness of doubts about the actions it undertakes.” This

type of ritual is also treated by this thesis, particularly in the first publication (Turkey's July 15<sup>th</sup> Coup Attempt) which shows how symbolic strategies such as rituals take part in normalizing and integrating government measures into citizens' daily lives. However, there are also more subtle forms of political rituals which include for example election campaigns or political discussions (Edelman, 1985, p. 17).

As we have seen, language is central to our idea of symbolic politics and symbolic power for that matter, and therefore the examination of discourse is indispensable for their analysis. A structured, comprehensive study of actors' discourses and the various discursive strategies that they use helps us to 'discover' and analyse the ideas and beliefs of different actors in relation to their interests, identities, activities, goals, norms, and values.

### 1.3 DISCOURSE, IDEAS & BELIEFS

The four publications comprising the thesis largely adopt a broad definition of discourse which includes verbal, visual and cultural practices and covers, amongst others, speeches, texts, narratives, policies, political strategies, historical monuments or *lieux de mémoire* (see Gavriely-Nuri, 2012, p. 15; Wodak and Meyer, 2009, pp. 2-3). Furthermore, as explored in the fourth publication (Iran's & Turkey's Foreign Policy), discourse is a form of social practice that is socially constitutive and socially conditioned (Fairclough and Wodak, 1997, p. 258). Discourse is therefore specified as "a system of 'interrelated statements', including concepts, classifications, and analogies that make the world meaningful or in a way construct the world" (Moshirzadeh, 2007, p. 522). Accordingly, foreign policy-related discourse provides "meaning to the outside world and the positions, interests, and interactions of the self and the other in the international system" (Moshirzadeh, 2007, p. 522).

The different publications apply the same set of ideas regarding the relationship between structure and agency, i.e., the relationship between discourse and ideational factors such as ideology and identity. Against the background of ideational factors being constitutive, meaning that they are influencing actor's behaviour, the thesis is primarily interested in the interaction of structurally embedded ideas and beliefs and discourse. More precisely, the thesis is interested in *how* structurally embedded ideas and beliefs are used by the Iranian and Turkish political elites in their discourses to advance their political agendas.



Moreover, throughout the publications of the thesis, ideologies are conceptualized as the fundamental beliefs of a group and its members. This means that social, political, or religious beliefs may form the base for a shared ideology of a social group or movement (van Dijk, 2000, p. 7). These fundamental, structurally embedded beliefs give information about how an ideological group may perceive itself and as well as its relations with other groups. This in turn provides further insight into questions regarding the group's identity, goals, interests, norms, and values as well as its material or symbolic resources (van Dijk, 2013, p. 178). Furthermore, according to Freedon (2003, p.13), ideologies may include a range of different elements such as shared rituals, prejudices, stories, and histories. These ideas are also further reiterated in the theory section as well as in the individual contributions.

With these thoughts in mind, we can better understand the idea that while actors move within the social structure of their own group's ideas and beliefs, they also move within the social structure of other groups' ideas and beliefs. This means that while an actor's own group's specific ideas and beliefs influence actors' actions, they are also influenced by the structurally embedded ideas and beliefs of other groups in the wider socio-cultural community. The fourth publication (Iran's & Turkey's Foreign Policy) exemplifies this with the Turkish case and the idea of secularism. While not actively pursued by the AKP government, it is nevertheless a concept of great domestic importance which is also enshrined in the Turkish Constitution. The AKP government therefore is unable to ignore secularism in its domestic politics if it wanted to reach a constituency beyond its own followers. As the circumstances demand, actors will therefore seek to invoke different ideas and beliefs in their discourses that resonate with and are meaningful to the audience they seek to address in order to mobilize support for their political ideas and actions.

While structurally embedded ideas and beliefs have a stake in what actors can or cannot do or say, the institutionalized frame of prior discourses constitutes another conditioning factor which enables or constrains actors' discourses. In contrast to structural ideas and beliefs which can only be influenced in the very long term, and which necessitate targeted long-term strategies such as changes to school curricula for example, actors, are however, able to renegotiate, reshape and reorient the discursive frame of prior discourses (Warnaar, 2013, p. 5). This is for example the case when it comes to Iran seeking to influence discourses that portray the country as a threat to the international community, as exposed in the third publication (The Deal of Discontent). These constraints explain why actors' discourses are interspersed with different ideas and do not only and exclusively reflect their own convictions and beliefs when promoting their interests.

However, the thesis does not necessarily focus on whether the Iranian and Turkish public or the international community is convinced or not by the different forms of symbolic politics that the Iranian and Turkish governments employ, or whether the public or the international community believes or will start to believe in the Iranian and Turkish governments' proposals because of them. Rather, it seeks to unravel *how* the discursive processes work and *how* they are a product of and interact with structurally embedded ideas and beliefs. Therefore, the thesis seeks to give a systematic and theoretically grounded account of the mechanism of symbolic politics. The thesis does not mean to tell a single story about how things are or ought to be. Rather, it gives an account of what exists, a snapshot of a multitude of possibilities, strategies and uses. In this spirit, the thesis therefore does not aim to hold the ultimate truth, but to illuminate a piece in a very vast puzzle to further our knowledge and understanding.

#### 1.4 THE INTERSECTION OF DOMESTIC POLITICS & FOREIGN POLICY

The thesis is located at the intersection of Iranian and Turkish domestic politics and foreign policy and thus, highlights how domestic politics influences foreign policy and *vice versa*. Analyzing the international dimension, the collection of publications of the thesis consequently departs from the domestic political arena in its explorations of foreign policy. This inherent connection between domestic politics and foreign policy has long been part and parcel of scholarship on International Relations of the Middle East, which has long valued the “centrality of domestic factors long before attention to domestic politics and decision-making in IR theories” (Darwich and Kaarbo 2019, p. 11). The discipline of International Relations, however, remains hesitant to fully recognise this interdependence.

The so-called Area Studies Controversy (ASC)<sup>1</sup> evidences the existing “significant intellectual gulf” between IR theory and international relations of the Middle East scholarship (Darwich 2021, p. 637)

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<sup>1</sup> The Area Studies Controversy (ASC) refers to debates among scholars of Area Studies and Social Sciences of how to study the various regions of the world. According to Darwich (2021, p. 637), the ASC “evolved as a tradition of debating and contesting whether the Middle East and its international relations is a region ‘like no other’ or ‘like any other’ [Valbjørn, 2004]; whether regional dynamics can best be studied through the lens of general IR theories, or IR theories with their Western origin are not suited to examine the region, and finally to what extent can the Middle East contribute to theory development in International Relations.”

and the ongoing and vibrant debates among scholars of both disciplines. However, in recognition of this divide, numerous scholars have already taken important steps to overcome this division and have stimulated the exchange by advocating interdisciplinary cross-fertilization on the one hand (Gause, 1999; Gerges, 1991; Tessler, Nachtwey and Banda, 1999; Teti, 2007; Valbjørn, 2003; Darwich and Kaarbo, 2019) and by successfully combining International Relations theories with region-based empirical analyses on the other hand (see for example Barnett, 1998; Telhami and Barnett, 2002; Valbjørn and Lawson, 2015; Darwich, 2019; Hintz, 2018; Warnaar, 2013).

However, despite the growing engagement and serious exchange between the disciplines in the past two decades or so (Darwich 2021, pp. 637-638), it has nevertheless remained a unidirectional endeavour, “where the interchange has been limited to theory application and adaptation, and the Middle East has hardly contributed to ‘universal’ theories that travel beyond regional confines” (Darwich 2021, pp. 637-8). It is therefore important to not only acknowledge the realities of interdependence of International Relations and Middle East Studies but also to actively engage in the dialogue between the disciplines of International Relations and Area Studies which means contributing to enriching both disciplines through cross-fertilization, i.e., a vibrant exchange of knowledge. This eclectic and interdisciplinary approach, which combines “the rich contextual analysis of Area Studies with the cross-cutting logics of IR theories and approaches” (Fawcett 2020, pp. 179-80) also paves the way towards a more inclusive and global International Relations discipline.

Apart from the disciplinary divides, which must still sufficiently be bridged, mainstream International Relation’s hesitancy to acknowledge the inherent interconnectedness of domestic politics and foreign policy is, as previously pointed out, another issue of debate between International Relations and Middle East Studies. This reluctance results in “a missed opportunity to draw on knowledge and lessons learnt through the study of domestic politics and societies of regions such as the Middle East and the Persian Gulf” (Glombitza and Coates Ulrichsen 2021, p.3). Accordingly, to overcome this shortcoming, the collection of publications of this thesis departs from the premise of the inextricable link between the domestic and the international to study how domestic politics influences foreign policy and *vice versa*, and to further highlight how domestic challenges are mitigated through foreign policy endeavours. The theory of the sociology of power, which is part of the thesis’ theoretical framework and detailed in the theory section, is particularly instrumental for this endeavour as its conception inevitably paves the way for research that is located at the intersection of domestic politics and foreign policy.

Regarding both the domestic and the international sphere as inseparable, the thesis actively takes part in and contributes to these debates. Departing from this vantage point, the thesis is interested in the

role of symbolic politics in domestic and foreign policy in general and in the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Turkey in particular as well as the role of ideational factors such as ideology and identity. The thesis thus unites different research foci in International Relations and Middle East scholarship, i.e., domestic politics, foreign policy as well as ideational factors. Together the articles and the book chapter constitute a comprehensive qualitative study of the discursive practices of the Iranian and Turkish political elites, situated at the intersection of domestic politics and foreign policy. The following sections present an overview of each of the four publications in turn.

## 1.5 ABSTRACTS

### 1.5.1 ABSTRACT PUBLICATION I

#### **THE AFTERMATH OF TURKEY'S JULY 15<sup>TH</sup> COUP ATTEMPT: NORMALIZING THE EXCEPTIONAL THROUGH LEGITIMATION, NARRATIVIZATION AND RITUALIZATION**

The first publication is an exploration of the immediate aftermath of the 2016 failed coup attempt in Turkey and the strategies that the Turkish government employed to normalize the exceptional and transformative measures it had taken. The article focuses on the symbolic aspects of authoritarian rule and analyses the process of normalization through a conceptual framework comprising three symbolic and discursive strategies: legitimation, narrativization, and ritualization. The article argues that these strategies that are employed to seek and build public consent and support through elections and acts of discursive persuasion, contribute to the deepening of the Justice and Development's (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi* – AKP) authoritarian regime formation. In other words, the Turkish government's more coercive measures were backed up by a discourse to solicit legitimacy and the population's consent. Moreover, the aftermath of the failed coup is shaped by a particular context of domestic power relations, i.e., the intense competition for power between the movement of Fethullah Gülen and the governing AKP. In this regard, the article further argues that many postcoup developments are a reflection of this struggle, in which the Gülen movement has increasingly been framed and portrayed as a threat.

Against this background, the article analyses the AKP government's discursive legitimation strategies and demonstrates how the AKP has changed its discourse on the Gülen movement through strategic framing and reframing. In doing so, the article exposes the discursive shift that occurred, i.e., how the government changed from an implicit to an explicit discourse and how, consequently, the Gülen movement changed from friend to foe and from parallel structure to terror organization. The article further shows how the government's legitimation efforts resulted in the institutionalization and integration into everyday Turkish life of the reframed discourse and formed narratives on the Gülen movement and the coup attempt through the establishment of rituals.

**Keywords:** July 15 Coup Attempt, AKP, Gülen Movement, Symbolic Strategies, Discourse, Authoritarianism

## 1.5.2 ABSTRACT PUBLICATION II

### **ISLAMIC REVOLUTIONARY IDEOLOGY & ITS NARRATIVES: THE CONTINUED RELEVANCE OF THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC'S IDEOLOGY**

The second publication focuses on the Islamic Republic of Iran's ideological discourse and asks whether the Islamic Republic's revolutionary ideology is still relevant more than forty years after the revolution. And whether it still relevant in the Islamic Republic's foreign policy and if so, how? While the Islamic Republic's ideology certainly developed over the course of forty years alongside its institutions, this article argues that the Islamic Republic's ideology continues to remain relevant and in fact important. Centring on the Islamic Republic's ideological discourse, it further argues that it contains several dominant and recurring narratives which have remained salient throughout the Islamic Republic's existence: narratives about the revolution; resistance, anti-imperialism, and independence; nationalism; the Iran-Iraq war; and narratives in reference to Islam.

Those narratives are part of the ideological fundament of the Islamic Republic and continue to play an important role in contemporary Iranian domestic politics and foreign policy. Operating at the intersection of domestic and international politics, the narratives are an expression of the Islamic Republic's self-understanding and its relations with others and an important means of symbolic politics to convey political messages and to direct public opinion. As the article demonstrates, placing new events and circumstances within the context of well-known existing narratives that resonate with their audience, helps the political elite to argue for and legitimize their decisions and actions on the domestic and international stage while delegitimizing those of their competitors. The article shows how the narratives contextualize foreign policy issues and how they provide the Islamic Republic with a discursive *raison d'être* and an important source for legitimating and building a coherent argument around political decisions, including those that seem to counter prior argumentation and where a certain path dependency has been established.

Approached through narrative and critical discourse analysis, the article enquires into the strategic discursive employment of these narratives during Ahmadinejad's and Rouhani's presidencies (2005 – 2021) by focusing the analysis on one of the major cases of contention in recent years: the nuclear issue. The article thereby adds to larger debates on the role of ideology in contemporary Iranian domestic politics and foreign policy.

**Keywords:** Islamic Republic of Iran, Ideology, Narrative, Domestic Politics, Foreign Policy, the Nuclear Issue

### 1.5.3 ABSTRACT PUBLICATION III

#### **THE DEAL OF DISCONTENT: IRAN, SAUDI ARABIA, AND THE NUCLEAR DEAL**

Against the background of the Iran nuclear deal or Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, the third publication is a comparison of the Iranian and Saudi elites' strategies to purposefully frame the Islamic Republic of Iran in accordance with their political interests to direct the public perception of the Islamic Republic. The Iran nuclear deal had been preceded by more than ten years of intense negotiations until the final agreement was signed in 2015 by the Islamic Republic of Iran and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council. The deal prompted high expectations and was hailed as a historic deal that would further peace, stability, and security by restraining Iran's nuclear program. However, with alliances seemingly shifting in favour of Iran, tipping the balance of power in the region, the deal became a source of discontent for Saudi Arabia.

Departing from the two countries' contrasting positions, with Saudi Arabia being critical of the nuclear deal and with Iran being in favour of it, the chapter argues that the competition between the two countries has a symbolic dimension, where both parties aim at shaping the image of the Islamic Republic in accordance with their positions towards the nuclear deal. To this end, they are exercising symbolic power, which includes amongst others, the discursive employment of sectarian identities that have the potential to tap and feed into existing sectarian narratives. The chapter further contends that both countries' foreign policy discourses are interdependent and are shaped by the symbolic discursive exchange on the international stage.

The chapter examines Saudi Arabia's and Iran's purposeful construction and strategic framing of the other and the self respectively, and how their discursive interaction and deployment of symbolic power in their foreign policy discourses is on the one hand conducive to obstructing and on the other hand conducive to facilitating endeavours of peace, security, and stability. The timeframe examined ranges primarily from the signing of the deal in 2015 until the United States' unilateral abandonment of it in 2018. Interrogating the creation of meaning for political ends, the chapter contributes to the literature on the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the instrumental mobilization of sectarian identities and to further add to the understanding of the complicated relationship between the two countries.

**Keywords:** Iran, Saudi Arabia, Nuclear Deal, Symbolic Power, Foreign Policy

#### 1.5.4 ABSTRACT PUBLICATION IV

### **A QUESTION OF DISCURSIVE HEGEMONY: IRAN'S & TURKEY'S FOREIGN POLICY TOWARDS THEIR ARAB NEIGHBOURS**

The fourth publication is a comparison of Iran's and Turkey's foreign policy approach towards their Arab neighbours during the Qatar crisis, from 2017 to 2021. It departs from the premise that Iran and Turkey constitute two important actors whose politics and foreign relations have significant impact on their region and pertaining states. Both are non-Arab Muslim states, but while Turkey exhibits a secular political system and an overall Sunni majority population, Iran builds on an Islam inspired political system with an overall Shi'a majority. The article argues that despite contextual differences, Iran and Turkey employ a similar discursive approach towards the Arab world, which is marked by similar ideological undercurrents, but which does not particularly play on sectarian identities. Islam, however, regarded as part of Iran's and Turkey's strategic depth and major component of their state identities and ideologies, nonetheless plays an important role in the politics and social fabric of both states. Particularly after the Islamic Revolution in Iran in 1979, marking the inception of an Islamic Republic and with Recep Tayyip Erdoğan's AKP's (*Justice and Development Party*) ascension to power in Turkey in 2002, which infused Turkish politics with an increased Islamic perspective, contrasting the one of the previous Kemalist and secular oriented regime. Islam therefore plays a pivotal role in the projection of their state identities and both countries use Islamic values, references and symbols that resonate with their audience to compete for discursive hegemony and influence on the regional and domestic stage. The article focuses on state-to-state relations and contributes a comparative study of Iran's and Turkey's foreign policy approach towards their Arab neighbours during the Qatar crisis and analyses the discursive manifestation of their competition. In doing so, it studies the different ways in which the Iranian and Turkish political elites use their Islamic identity to appeal to their neighbours and carves out the similarities in their approaches rather than the differences. The study adopts an interpretivist-constructivist perspective where ideas and beliefs are constitutive and condition actors' behaviour, but which can simultaneously be mobilized as instruments of power in the pursuit of strategic interests. The article contributes to larger debates on the strategic use of religious traits in foreign policy as well as to comparative studies of Iranian and Turkish foreign policy.

**Keywords:** Iran, Turkey, Foreign Policy, Identity, Islamic Values, Discursive Hegemony



## 1.6 MAIN ARGUMENT

The thesis highlights the importance of ideas and beliefs in the social and political dynamics of the Middle East and Persian Gulf region and demonstrates that symbolic politics play a pivotal role in the exercise of political power. The thesis focuses on the symbolic aspects of authoritarian rule in the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Turkey at the intersection of domestic and foreign policy and argues that

*political power is not exercised and projected merely through material or coercive means, but also through a wide repertoire of symbolic discursive strategies.*

Each of the three articles and the book chapter contribute to illuminating the ways in which the Iranian and Turkish political elites seek to reach out to their domestic and international audiences and therefore how they seek to establish a long-lasting impact on the international stage in their favours as well as to establish an enduring place in the hearts and minds of their highly polarized societies. However, the thesis does not suggest that the Islamic Republic of Iran or the Republic of Turkey are exceptional in their approach or that the symbolic discursive practices that the contributions to the thesis study are unique to the two countries analysed. They elucidate the ways in which political elites interact with their audiences, domestically and internationally, i.e., supporters and opponents in authoritarian settings by taking Iran and Turkey as examples, which can be extrapolated to other countries in- and outside of the Middle East region.

Individually, the articles and the book chapter of the thesis contribute to the main argument in the following ways:

Publication I (Turkey's July 15<sup>th</sup> Coup Attempt) demonstrates that Turkish politics is very much a contest over the symbolic world, over power and the management and appropriation of meaning. The article discusses three specific symbolic and discursive strategies, namely legitimation, narrativization and ritualization, employed by the Turkish government with the aim to normalize the exceptional and transformative measures the government employed in the aftermath of the 2016 coup attempt, but also to maintain its image and to bolster its waning popularity. The article argues that these strategies of seeking and building public consent and support through acts of discursive persuasion, contribute, alongside more coercive and repressive ones, to the deepening of the AKP's authoritarian regime formation. It further explores how the government has used these symbolic strategies in the aftermath

of the coup and how they have become part of people's lives in the form of frames, narratives, and rituals.

Publication II (Ideology & Narrative) departs from the vantage point of ideology as an instrument of symbolic power. It argues that the Islamic Republic's ideology continues to remain not only relevant but in fact important in contemporary Iranian domestic politics and foreign policy. It shows that the appropriation of and control over symbols and meaning occupies a pivotal role in the exercise of political power. The article demonstrates how ideological narratives contextualize foreign policy issues and how they provide the Islamic Republic with meaning and continuity and a discursive *raison d'être*. It shows *how* and *why* the Islamic Republic's ideology continues to be important through the analysis of five dominant narratives and the political and social functions that those fulfil. The narratives connect to and express long-standing tenets of the ideological foundation of the Islamic Republic. They comprise different themes and stories that are familiar to the Iranian audience and which resonate with them. They are a means to furnish complex content, such as current events and circumstances, in an easy to remember, absorbable, digestible, and intelligible way. In other words, the narratives provide a discursive lens through which social or political issues, such as the nuclear issue, are supposed to be viewed and understood. They are frames for interpretation that are supposed to tell the audience how and what to think about the actions of their own government as well as foreign actors.

Publication III (The Deal of Discontent) examines the Islamic Republic of Iran's and Saudi Arabia's symbolic exchange on the international stage and demonstrates how both actors aim at dominating the public perception of the Islamic Republic. Accordingly, the chapter examines how Saudi Arabia and Iran are engaging in the purposeful and strategic construction of frames and narratives to evaluate, qualify, and categorize the character and actions of the Islamic Republic in accordance with their respective positions towards the implementation of the JCPOA. Saudi Arabia does so by employing frames and narratives that contribute to delegitimizing and negatively representing Iran, its actions and relations, while the Islamic Republic aims at positive self-representation and the legitimation of itself and its actions. To this end, their deployment of symbolic power in foreign policy discourse includes the mobilization or demobilization, for that matter, of sectarian identities. The chapter thus illuminates the Islamic Republic's and Saudi Arabia's competition of words over representation and perception and their discursive struggle over influence and legitimacy to ultimately secure their own regimes' survival.

Publication IV (Iran's & Turkey's Foreign Policy) demonstrates how the Iranian and Turkish political elites use Islamic values, references and symbols that resonate with their intended audiences to compete for discursive hegemony and influence on the regional and domestic stage. The article focuses on state-to-

state relations and contributes a comparative study of Iran's and Turkey's foreign policy approach towards their Arab neighbours during the Qatar crises and analyses the discursive manifestation of the Iranian and Turkish elites' competition. The article thus contributes to larger debates on the strategic use of religious traits in foreign policy as well as to comparative studies of Iranian and Turkish foreign policy.

## 1.7 RESEARCH QUESTIONS, HYPOTHESES & OBJECTIVES

In order to understand the exercise and projection of political power through symbolic discursive strategies, the thesis is guided by the following overarching research questions, which are complemented by a set of sub questions in each of the articles and the book chapter:

- *How do the political elites of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Turkey use symbolic politics in their domestic and foreign policies to create, sustain, and change political arrangements?*
  
- *How do the political elites of the Islamic of Iran and the Republic of Turkey use symbolic politics to solicit and mobilize political support at the domestic and international level?*

In consequence, the thesis has the following hypotheses and pursues the following research objectives listed under each hypothesis:

- Our first hypothesis departs from the position that symbolic politics have a fundamental function in the political elites' competition for the differential accumulation of power at the domestic and foreign policy level.
  
- *Our first objective is therefore to identify and analyse the symbolic discursive strategies employed by the political elite at the intersection of domestic politics and foreign policy.*

- Our second hypothesis departs from the position that symbolic discursive strategies are instrumental for the political elites in processes of legitimation at the domestic and foreign policy level.
  - *Our second objective is therefore to demonstrate how the symbolic discursive strategies are used by the political elite in their domestic and foreign policies.*
  
- Our third hypothesis departs from the position that symbolic politics play a particularly important role in times of crises when elites' interests are at stake and when the competition with other elites is particularly intense. Thus, the use of symbolic politics is most pronounced at the moments when its effectiveness is most decisive for the outcome of the competition.
  - *Our third objective is therefore to identify and analyse the domestic and foreign policy context in which these symbolic discursive strategies are used by the political elite.*

## 1.8 CONTRIBUTION & CLAIMS TO ORIGINALITY

As a collection, the thesis adds new empirical knowledge on the topic of the making and construction of domestic and foreign policy from a discursive perspective and contributes new insights to scholarly debates within the International Relations discipline and studies of the Middle East and the Persian Gulf. The thesis contributes to scholarship on symbolic politics in general and in the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Turkey in particular. From a theoretical perspective, the thesis takes the theory of the sociology of power beyond the domestic context it has so far primarily been applied to and explores its utility at the intersection of domestic and foreign policy. Also, the thesis adds further knowledge to the theory and the use of different power resources from a hitherto underexplored symbolic politics perspective. Amongst others, the four publications of the thesis are in conversation with literature on Iranian and Turkish domestic and foreign policy from an empirical perspective and with theories of symbolic politics, elites, ideology, identity, frames, narratives, and rituals from a theoretical perspective.

Overall, the collection of publications is particularly interested in contributing to a better and more nuanced understanding of the Middle East and Persian Gulf region and which encourages a 'de-exceptionalised' perspective. Taking this approach, the thesis further aims at contributing to our knowledge and understanding of the making and construction of domestic and foreign policies from a symbolic politics perspective and the role of symbolic discursive strategies in endeavours of reconfiguring the domestic, regional, and international order in general as well as to our knowledge and understanding of the former when it comes to the Iranian and Turkish case in particular. With its location at the intersection of domestic politics and foreign policy, emphasizing the inherent connection between both spheres and their reciprocal influence on each other, the thesis furthermore contributes to important and vibrant debates between the disciplines of IR and Middle East Studies and to fostering the exchange of knowledge and methods. In order to do so, the thesis crosses several other disciplines apart from IR and Middle East Studies and employs theories and methods originating, amongst others, from Media and Communication Studies, Linguistics, and Sociology.

The audience that the thesis' publications address certainly comprises scholars and students of IR and Middle East Studies, however, also extends beyond academia and intends to be of interest to and a resource for both a research- and a policy-interested audience by enabling future outlooks on the region's actors and dynamics as well as its international relations.

With their symbolic politics approach, the publications comprising the thesis make several original theoretical and empirical contributions to existing scholarship in International Relations and Middle East Studies, which are specified per publication hereafter.

### 1.8.1 THEORETICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

Understanding the Turkish government's normalization of the exceptional and transformative measures through symbolic strategies in the aftermath of the failed coup attempt as a process, the first publication (Turkey's July 15<sup>th</sup> Coup Attempt) contributes a new conceptual framework to analyse this process of normalization through three symbolic and discursive strategies: legitimation, narrativization and ritualization. This is combined with the theory of the sociology of power which conceptualizes the Turkish political elite as actors that use different power resources - in the case of this article, these are the media and the state - in order to compete for power with other elites. The framework therefore emphasizes not only the single strategies, but also how they are part of a larger process of normalization

against the background of elite competition. Carrying out the analysis through this lens, the framework contributes to our understanding of how symbolic politics are used to change domestic political arrangements and how these changes are integrated into daily life for the *longue durée* as well as to how symbolic politics are used to solicit and mobilize support.

The second publication (Ideology & Narrative) contributes a narrative perspective on the Islamic Republic's engagement with its ideology to show its continued relevance in domestic and foreign politics. Combining the concept of ideology with the genre of narrative, the article contributes to our understanding of how ideology – conceptualized as the fundamental beliefs of a group and its members – is deployed in narrative format in order to solicit and mobilize support both domestically and internationally.

The fourth publication (Iran's & Turkey's Foreign Policy) in particular contributes to taking the application of the sociology of power from its theoretical application in domestic environments where it thus far has mostly been used, to an application in foreign policy, which remains largely un- and underexplored and thereby simultaneously underlines the connection between domestic politics and foreign policy. Furthermore, publication IV contributes to understanding the discursive realm that political elites operate in. While ideology, and therefore an actor's own beliefs are considered constitutive in a way that they shape actors' behaviours, they are nonetheless also shaped by the beliefs of others within their socio-cultural community.

### 1.8.2 EMPIRICAL CONTRIBUTIONS

The first publication (Turkey's July 15<sup>th</sup> Coup Attempt) contributes an extensive study of the AKP's discursive strategies through an analysis of primary sources in English and Turkish addressed to a domestic as well as an international audience. This includes interviews, speeches, official statements, and deliberations by the Turkish government as well as newspaper articles. The AKP's authoritarian turn has generated extensive research and can count with a large body of literature. What is missing, however, is an in-depth treatment of the implications of the failed coup attempt and its aftermath and particularly the Turkish government's utilization of symbolic strategies to normalize its increasing authoritarianism aimed at strengthening and securing its position of power. This is provided by the first article which thereby adds to our understanding of Turkish politics in general, and the AKP's symbolic strategies in particular. It thus furthers our understanding of the AKP's authoritarian regime formation

through means of symbolic politics. The article contributes to the growing body of work on the AKP's authoritarian politics and offers a unique perspective on post-coup symbolic politics in Turkey by conceptualizing the symbolic strategies employed by the government as a process. In doing so, the article shows not only how the AKP's strategies are employed, but also how they are part of a larger process that is aimed at normalizing the AKP government's measures while at the same time, mobilizing support for them.

The second publication (Ideology & Narrative) contributes a comprehensive study of the current Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic Ayatollah Ali Khamenei's speeches surrounding the nuclear deal during the presidencies of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad and Hassan Rouhani from 2005 to 2021. The article demonstrates *how* and *why* the Islamic Republic's revolutionary ideology continues to be important in the Islamic Republic's domestic and foreign policy. The paper focuses on the Islamic Republic's ideological discourse and identifies five dominant and recurrent narratives contained therein: the revolution; resistance, anti-imperialism, and independence; nationalism; the Iran-Iraq War; and the Islamic Republic's interpretation of Islam. The article offers a unique perspective on contemporary Iranian politics by conceptualizing the narratives that connect with the Islamic Republic's official ideology as important instruments of symbolic power. The article further demonstrates how the employed discursive strategies are part of a larger process of safeguarding the system's identity and *raison d'être* and in consequence, the continuity of the system itself. Interrogating the creation of meaning for political ends, the article investigates the relationship between domestic circumstances and ideological discourse and their effects on foreign policy action. To this end, the article examines how the named narratives contextualize foreign policy issues and how they provide the Islamic Republic with meaning and a discursive *raison d'être*. The article thereby adds to larger debates on symbolic politics and the role of ideology in contemporary Iranian domestic and foreign policy.

The third publication (The Deal of Discontent) contributes a new discursive perspective on the relationship between Iran and Saudi Arabia through narratives to carve out the symbolic dimension of their competition. Interrogating the creation of meaning for political ends, the book chapter contributes to the literature on the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the instrumental mobilization of sectarian identities and to further add to the understanding of the complicated relationship between the two countries. Concretely, the book chapter contributes to our understanding of the context-dependent mobilization of salient ideas and beliefs for political purposes through symbolic discursive strategies. It thus furthers our understanding of how changes or potential changes in regional arrangements and order result in symbolic countermeasures, such as the discursive mobilization of sectarian identities. Through the book chapter we gain insights into how the purposeful construction

and strategic framing of the self and the other which aim at improving their own regional and international position and worsening the position of the other respectively, fulfil not only immediate strategic aims, but how these discursive strategies are also simultaneously instrumental in solidifying politically mobilized ideas and beliefs. In the case of the Islamic Republic of Iran and Saudi Arabia, this results in a deepening of sectarian divisions.

The fourth publication (Iran's & Turkey's foreign policy) contributes as study of the symbolic discursive dimension of foreign policy making and the role of identity in it. In other words, it explores the interplay between structurally embedded ideas and beliefs, discourse as well as foreign policy. It is particularly interested in the instrumentality, i.e., the strategic use of identity in foreign policy discourse that aims at influencing regional order and competing for discursive hegemony. This is exemplified by the cases of the Islamic Republic of Iran and The Republic of Turkey. In doing so, the fourth article therefore contributes a comparative study of the Iranian and Turkish political elites' foreign policy approach towards their Arab neighbours during the Qatar crisis and how both countries' elites employ Islamic values, references, and symbols in order to appeal to their audiences in a competition over discursive hegemony as well as regional and domestic influence to impact the regional order in their favour. This publication thus provides an in-depth analysis of the different ways in which the two countries' elites use their Islamic identity in their foreign policies in order to mobilize and solicit support on a regional level.

## 1.9 JUSTIFICATION FOR THE CASE CHOICE

Shahram Akbarzadeh and James Berry made the apt observation that the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Turkey are "not quite enemies, but less than friends" (Akbarzadeh and Barry, 2016, p. 980). Nonetheless, they share a number of commonalities and similarities which enable interesting comparative analyses. These go beyond occupying a similar position as non-Arab Muslim states in a region with primarily Arab neighbouring states and a shared historical and cultural ground. From a political point of view, while there are significant differences in their current respective political structures, they have experienced similar trajectories of change and reform and today, both are considered to have authoritarian governments. Furthermore, throughout the past and present, the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Turkey have pursued similar domestic policies and strategies.



Approaching the research through two different case studies, it is possible to make a structured, focused comparison. The selected cases, the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Turkey currently represent two of the most influential actors in the Middle East and the Persian Gulf region. They consist of two different countries that are furthermore home to two different currents of Islam as well as several different ethnicities. The reason for choosing several cases lies in the advantage that multiple case studies offer as opposed to traditional, single case studies. Single case studies run the risk that the research questions may be shaped by idiosyncratic features or the specific interest of the investigator. As a result, single case studies that lack “scientific consciousness” do not accumulate (George and Bennett, 2005).

## 2 THEORETICAL & ANALYTICAL FRAMEWORK

The theoretical framework of the three articles and the book chapter provides the lens for the analysis and the interpretation of the empirical findings. According to Klotz and Lynch (2007, p. 21), a theoretical framework, whether simplified or more sophisticated, is necessary for any sort of analysis. As a minimum, certain key concepts are necessary for the process of interpretation and will also be instrumental in the selection of relevant data and information. Theory and evidence mutually inform each other due to the fact that the “concepts result from researchers trying to understand, and act within, their socially constructed world” (Klotz and Lynch, 2007, p. 21). Furthermore, Cox (1983, p. 163) has asserted that a concept in the social sciences “is loose and elastic and attains precision only when brought into contact with a particular situation which it helps to explain – a contact which also develops the meaning of the concept.” In other words, the context in which particular concepts are used is of pivotal importance for their meaning.

The articles and the book chapter of the thesis share and apply elements of a common framework that consists theoretically of ideas derived from the sociology of power and the approach of critical discourse analysis which implies a particular perspective on discourse and relations of power. Analytically, it particularly draws on frame and narrative analysis. The following paragraphs present the most important elements of the theoretical and analytical framework as well as the definitions that the different articles and the book chapter utilize.

### 2.1 SOCIOLOGY OF POWER

The articles and the book chapter of the thesis examine the discursive practices of the Iranian and Turkish political elites. Both countries’ political landscapes constitute a highly competitive environment and are subject to ardent struggles for political power. Issues of social, economic, political, and religious nature are highly contested and debated among the political contenders in both countries. The theory

of the sociology of power according to Izquierdo Brichs (Izquierdo Brichs and Etherington, 2017; Izquierdo Brichs and Lampridi-Kemou, 2013; Lampridi-Kemou, 2011) is a useful lens for deciphering the competition at a domestic and international level among and between the Iranian and Turkish political elites and therefore provides the theoretical disposition for understanding how the political elite of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Turkey use several different resources in order to create, sustain, and change political arrangements. The sociology of power departs from the premise of competition, i.e., that the political elite is engaged in a continuous competition for power with other elites.

According to the theory's understanding of elite, they are defined as "those individuals who occupy a superior hierarchical position in social institutions and whose ability to retain this position depends on their capacity to compete for the differential accumulation of power with other elites and their control over important power resources" (Izquierdo Brichs and Etherington, 2017, p. 51). In other words, the elites' main aim is to differentially accumulate more power than their competitors in order to improve their position in the political system (Nitzan and Bichler, 2002, pp. 36-38). According to Nitzan and Bichler (2002, p. 38), "to differentially accumulate is to increase your share of total profit and capitalisation. And to increase your distributive share of these magnitudes is to increase your relative power to shape the process of social change. The source of such power is the ability of owners to strategically limit, or 'sabotage' the process of social reproduction." For the differential accumulation of power, the political elite will seek control over so-called power resources of material and immaterial nature, and which may be of political, economic, coercive, informative, or ideological nature. The articles and the book chapter treat three of the most important of those resources, i.e., ideology, the media, and the state.

The articles and the book chapter are specifically interested in the political elite, who are, according to Best and Higley (2010, p. 6), composed of "persons who are able, by virtue of their strategic positions in powerful organizations and movements, to affect political outcomes and the workings of political institutions regularly and seriously" and therefore it is those persons "who wield political influence and power in that they make strategic decisions or participate in decisionmaking on a national level, contribute to defining political norms and values (including the definition of 'national interests'), and directly influence political discourse on strategic issues" (Perthes, 2004, p. 5). Concretely, the articles and the book chapter centre on the political elites that are in government in both the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Turkey during the specified timeframe of analysis.

Amongst others, the sociology of power differs from traditional International Relations' theories, such as Realism for example, regarding its main unit of analysis and its understanding of actors. It is a frequent practice in such approaches to centre on the state as the main unit of analysis and which is commonly conceptualized as actor. According to the sociology of power, however, the state as well as capital, coercion, ideology, or information are considered resources which constitute important instruments in the elite's competition for political power. In turn, the sociology of power conceptualizes elites – may they be the political, religious, economic, etc. elite - as actors and consequently as one of its main units of analyses.

Changing the focus from a highly abstract concept such as the state to a more tangible and researchable unit such as the political elite has the advantage that it allows for a differentiated analysis. Furthermore, the sociology of power stipulates that “both the formation of the national interest as well as states' foreign policies and the character of their domestic policies, can be explained much easier as a product of conflicts and also alliances in the competition for the differential accumulation of power” (Izquierdo Brichs and Etherington, 2017, pp. 144-145). In this sense, “the competition does not only generate conflicts, but also alliances between different actors due to the control over and use of resources” (Izquierdo Brichs and Etherington, 2017, p. 145). The sociology of power consequently also enables us to gain a better understanding of how and why conflicts may arise or how and why alliances are being formed. At the same time, the sociology of power enables us to study processes and dynamics of continuity and change at both the domestic as well as the regional and international level.

The following subsections briefly introduce the three power resources that the thesis is particularly interested in, i.e., ideology, information as well as the state, and detail how they are conceptualized in accordance with the sociology of power and inform about which of these power resources is treated in which one of the publications and to what end.

### 2.1.1 IDEOLOGY & IDENTITY

The sociology of power understands ideology as a “system of beliefs that are accepted as such without evidence” (Izquierdo Brichs and Etherington, 2017, p. 205). The sociology of power's understanding of ideology goes hand in hand with van Dijk's definition of ideology as the fundamental beliefs of a group and its members as detailed in section 2.5 as well as the approach of critical discourse analysis detailed in section 2.2 which is interested in the critical study of relations of power and domination and their

discursive enactment. Thompson (1984, p. 35) has remarked in this context that the study of ideology “is fundamentally concerned with language, for it is largely within language that meaning is mobilized in the defence of domination.” The basic function of ideology as described by the sociology of power is to influence the population’s pursuance of its own interests (Izquierdo Brichs and Etherington, 2017, p. 205). In total, the theory distinguishes three different levels of influence when analysing ideology as a resource. The first two levels form part of the structure of the system, whereas the third level represents the type of resource that elites may utilize in their competition for power (Izquierdo Brichs and Etherington, 2017, p. 205).

The first level relates to Foucault’s idea of the “regime of truth” and extends throughout all social relations and beyond mere personal beliefs. In accordance with what is considered acceptable or unacceptable in a socio-cultural community, it is the level of unconscious mechanisms where ideas, values and discourses are accepted or rejected (Izquierdo Brichs and Etherington, 2017, p. 205). According to Foucault (1999, p. 53), each society has its own regime of truth which “defines the types of discourse that it accepts and makes function as true; the mechanisms and instances that make it possible to distinguish between true and false statements, the way to sanction one or the other; the techniques and procedures that are valued in order to obtain the truth, the status of those who are in charge of saying what functions as true.” The second level relates to Gramsci’s (1971) idea of “cultural hegemony” where “a class or social group succeeds in having its group interests assumed as the general interest” (Izquierdo Brichs and Lampridi-Kemou, 2013, p. 21).

The third level, however, which constitutes the level which the articles and book chapter primarily research, represents the level that is more observable and tangible, concrete and immediate and where political and religious belief systems are instrumentalized by the elites to influence their intended audiences (Izquierdo Brichs and Etherington (2017, p. 206). It is at this level that we can observe rival political and religious ideologies or contests over the control of such ideologies. The competition takes place against the background of the structure established by both, the “regime of truth” as well as “cultural hegemony.” However, Izquierdo Brichs and Lampridi-Kemou (2013, p. 21) also point out that the competition does not only take place both among and between different ideologies, may they be political ideologies, religious ideologies, etc. This can be attributed to them fulfilling the same basic function in the elites’ competition, which is to support the elites who control in the accumulation of power.

Izquierdo Brichs and Etherington (2017, p. 208) further indicate that “[i]deologies built on structural ideational factors such as identity” which are understood according to the sociology of power as “a

social construction at a particular historical moment” (Izquierdo Brichs and Etherington, 2017, p. 212). This means that it is “a construction that responds to the relationship of power within society in the historical context being analysed” (Izquierdo Brichs and Etherington, 2017, p. 212). The concept of identity encompasses a juxtaposition of perceptions of the self and of others. The sociology of power identifies two different levels of identity. Firstly, there is a deep structural level which is based on fundamental features such as language, religion, territory, history, etc. and which can only be modified with a defined and targeted strategy in the *longue durée*, but not in the short term (Izquierdo Brichs and Etherington, 2017, p. 212). Secondly, there is a more superficial ideological level constructed upon deep seated structurally embedded beliefs about the self and others. The dominant elites – in our case the Iranian and Turkish political elites – are equally creators and users of this level of identity in line with their interests in pursuit of accumulating more power than their competitors.

What makes them an important factor to analyse – and which is particularly pertinent for the purposes of the presented study – is when political elites resort to ideational factors such as identity as a resource in their competition for and accumulation of power (Izquierdo Brichs and Etherington, 2017, p. 208). Because identity is a part of the deep fundamental beliefs that people have about themselves and others, they constitute an important and effectful power resource for the political elite if their discourses resonate with the beliefs of their audience.

The theory of the sociology of power relies on Alexander Wendt’s (1994, p. 385) definition of identity, where

*“[s]ocial identities are sets of meanings that an actor attributes to itself while taking the perspective of others, that is, as a social object. In contrast to the singular quality of corporate identity, actors normally have multiple social identities that vary in salience. Also in contrast, social identities have both individual and social structural properties, being at once cognitive schemas that enable an actor to determine “who I am/we are” in a situation and positions in a social role structure of shared understandings and expectations. In this respect, they are a key link in the mutual constitution of agent and structure, embodying the terms of individuality through which agents relate to each other. These terms lead actors to see situations as calling for taking certain actions and thus for defining their interests in certain ways.”*

Thus, ideologies, values or identities influence the system and are either part of the resources or the structure of the system. They are not, however, according to the sociology of power’s understanding, part of the actor's interests. Ideas and beliefs run like a red thread through the entire thesis and

conceptualizations of ideology as well as identity are treated by each of the articles as well as the book chapter. We can observe the idea of a competition resorting to structural ideational factors particularly well in the first, third and fourth publication (Turkey's July 15<sup>th</sup> Coup Attempt; The Deal of Discontent; Iran's & Turkey's Foreign Policy). The first publication exposes the ardent competition between the ruling AKP and the Gülen movement, the second publication analyzes the competition over symbolic representation between the Islamic Republic and Saudi Arabia and the fourth publication focuses on the Iranian and Turkish political elites' use of their Islamic identity in foreign policy discourse to further their regional and international interests.

### 2.1.2 INFORMATION

When it comes to information as a resource in elite competition, the sociology of power distinguishes two types of information, the information that is disseminated *to* the population for example through media and education and the information that is collected *about* the population for example through intelligence services (Izquierdo Brichs and Lampridi-Kemou, 2013, p. 21). The thesis is particularly interested in the first type, i.e., the information that is disseminated to the population and concentrates its analysis specifically on the organs of dissemination, i.e., the media and their role as an important and valuable power resource.

The media are a place of symbolic production and exercising control over the media has two important functions. On the one hand, the elites that control the media are able to control the messages that reach the public and on the other hand, they are able to balance potential counter messages. In this sense, they take part in setting the agenda and are able to regulate which content is published and disseminated to the public and which is not. This means that those elites that are able to consolidate power over the media, are effectively able to control public discourse or parts of it and therefore have the possibility to influence public opinion and decisions. In this sense, the media will reflect the interests of those elites in the distributed content as well as the debates that dominate them (Izquierdo Brichs and Etherington, 2017, p. 197). This makes the media a very valuable instrument and therefore an important resource. For this reason, competitors for power make great efforts to dominate it.

These ideas are further explored in the first article which stipulates that “[w]ords matter, and so does the control over the organs to disseminate these words. Having control over the media means having the capacity to make decisions concerning the content of the information diffused, in all its related

aspects” (Glombitza, 2021, p. 257). The article demonstrates that the media are an important resource in the elites’ competition for power on the one hand, but also in the subsequent consolidation and monopolization of power by the AKP on the other hand (Glombitza, 2021, p. 257). Through targeted changes in decree laws by the AKP government, the Turkish media landscape experienced a series of changes that resulted in the government controlling as well as being able to instrumentalize and manipulate mediated content and output which simultaneously opened up avenues for the transformation of state society relations.

While the appropriation and manipulation of the media and lastly the dominance of the Turkish media on part of the AKP government signifies having side-lined their competitor, the Gülen Movement, the article has also pointed to the fallouts from the competition such as decreased media independence and diversity, the erosion of freedom of expression, and the monopolization of opinion.

### 2.1.3 THE STATE

As mentioned earlier, the role of the state in the system according to the sociology of power differs from traditional International Relations theories insofar that it conceptualizes the entity of the state as an actor or as if it *were* an actor (Izquierdo Brichs and Etherington, 2017, p. 139). Also, and importantly, the sociology of power distinguishes between state, government, and regime which are each defined as follows:

*“The state is an institution encompassing other institutions, in which legitimacy of the ultimate exertion of power and legitimacy of violence converge. The state is a power resource, but it is also an organizational structure of social and economic relations, and, above all, a system channelling the concentration and distribution of resources. Government is the action of using the ‘state’ resource; it is also the concept we use to refer to actors who have the capacity to carry out that action at a specific moment. Regime, however, is more than government – it is the structure modelled by power relations in their control of the ‘state’ resource. We also use this term to define elites who have the capacity to shape that structure. The form of state, government and regime will vary according to each society’s historical circumstances” (Izquierdo Brichs and Lampridi-Kemou, 2013, pp. 23-24).*



Another interesting aspect, which is an often-treated theme in research on the Middle East, is the survival of the state. Through its particular focus, the sociology of power makes clear that the survival of the state is not a goal of the state itself, but rather, of those elites that are able to gain control over it and to use it in their competition for power. Furthermore, the most valuable trait for the elites that control the state lies in the state affording them legitimacy to exercise power and to use violence (Izquierdo Brichs and Etherington, 2017, p. 23). This idea connects back to Weber's (1985, p. 19) definition of the state as "a human community that (successfully) claims the monopoly of the legitimate use of physical force within a given territory." It is unsurprising, therefore, that the state, as Izquierdo Brichs and Etherington (2017, pp. 144-145) point out, is the one power resource that provokes the most participation and competition among the actors due to its capacities, dimensions, and affected areas.

Indeed, those actors that are unable to gain control over the state, however, will in fact work towards either weakening, undermining, preventing it from forming or even eliminating it (Izquierdo Brichs and Etherington, 2017, p. 135). These ideas are amply demonstrated by the analysis of the 2016 coup attempt which is carried out in the first publication (Turkey's July 15<sup>th</sup> Coup Attempt). Together with the media, the Turkish state has experienced a similar appropriation and manipulation by the AKP government, which resulted in increased powers for the government and especially for its President Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (see the first article, Glombitza, 2021, p. 257).

## 2.2 CRITICAL DISCOURSE ANALYSIS

The three articles and the book chapter are embedded within the approach of critical discourse analysis which provides the lens through which the analyses are carried out. In their analyses, they primarily focus on an examination of narratives, frames, and ideology, as detailed in the following sections. They provide a concise overview of these topics, and which are also presented in the articles and book chapter themselves.

Approaching the research through the lens of critical discourse analysis means employing a critical perspective. According to van Dijk (2001, p. 466), it is a type of discourse analytical research that "primarily studies the way social power abuse, dominance, and inequality are enacted, reproduced and resisted by text and talk in the social and political context." Critical discourse analysis (CDA) therefore

is not a method that is solely concerned with the study of discourse structures, but rather, a multidisciplinary approach with a distinct view and focus on social problems and political issues which takes their contexts into account (2015, p. 466). Concretely, van Dijk (2015, p. 467), details the following properties of critical research on discourse:

- *It focuses primarily on social problems and political issues rather than the mere study of discourse structures outside their social and political contexts.*
- *This critical analysis of social problems is usually multidisciplinary.*
- *Rather than merely describe discourse structures, it tries to explain them in terms of properties of social interaction and especially social structure.*
- *More specifically, CDA focuses on the ways discourse structures enact, confirm, legitimate, reproduce, or challenge relations of power abuse (dominance) in society.*

Bringing together now all the different aspects of critical discourse analysis, Fairclough & Wodak (1997) list its main principles in line with van Dijk (2015, p. 467) as follows: apart from addressing social problems, CDA regards power relations as discursive; “discourse constitutes society and culture; discourse does ideological work; discourse is historical; the link between text and society is mediated; discourse analysis is interpretative and explanatory and finally, discourse is a form of social action.” As Wodak (2009, p. 17) points out, CDA enjoys increased popularity “because it provides researchers with the requisite ontological and methodological traction to look at how personal social power develops into the ‘habitualizations’ and ‘typifications’ written about *inter alia* by Berger and Luckmann (2002) in *The Social Construction of Reality* – that is, the processes that render semiotic devices ‘objective’, and therefore provide the basis for logics to be mobilized, (re)contextualized, and made manifest through hierarchy, values, symbols, strategies, and discursive as well as social practices within organizations.”

The methodology section further specifies the approaches taken in the articles and the book chapter and the specific academic works and scholars that the thesis borrows from.

### 2.2.1 NARRATIVES

Narratives are at the heart of the analytical focus of three of the thesis’ publications, i.e., concretely, the first publication (Turkey’s July 15<sup>th</sup> Coup Attempt), the second publication (Ideology & Narrative) as

well as the third publication (*The Deal of Discontent*). They are analysed in the thesis as important tools in the processes of legitimation – and delegitimation for that matter - that the Iranian and Turkish political elites seek to carry out. Narratives constitute a powerful means to interpret and make sense of the world around us. Through narratives it is possible to connect with and to transmit political views to an audience in a more direct way than through the mere use of rational arguments. They help to simplify complex situations into chains of events that are easily intelligible (Shenhav, 2006, p. 246) and absorbable. It is an inherently human tendency to rely on narratives to understand our environment and our place in it.

It is therefore not surprising that political discourses draw heavily on narrative patterns. In consequence, narratives constitute an important and powerful means not only to understand the social world, but also the political world (Bottici, 2010, p. 920). In other words, narratives can also be regarded as frames through which social and political issues can be interpreted (De Fina, 2018, p. 236). Presented in narrative format, political messages can easily be absorbed, digested, and remembered by their audience. As narratives are a non-argumentative, common sense and immediate way of engaging with the public, they are a suitable format for communicating political views (De Fina, 2018, p. 239). However, because of their characteristics, narratives may also be used for the ideological construction of events and the manipulation of public opinion (De Fina, 2018, p. 233).

This indicates the strategic dimension of narratives. In other words, when narratives are used purposefully to achieve specific goals, they become strategic. One of these goals, as just mentioned, may be to direct one's audience to act or think in ways they otherwise might not have done (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle, 2013, p. 34). Concretely, "[s]trategic narratives are [...] a communicative tool through which political actors, usually elites- attempt to give determined meaning to past, present, and future in order to achieve political objectives" (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle 2013, p. 7). By constructing a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of political circumstances through strategic narratives, political actors can shape the behaviour of other actors domestically and internationally (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle 2013, p. 3). In consequence, strategic narratives become "a tool for political actors to extend their influence, manage expectations, and change the discursive environment in which they operate" (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle 2013: 3).

In this sense, through the ability to dominate and influence the narratives that surround us and the ways in which they are told as well as the targeted discursive production and reproduction of narratives to steer sense- and meaning making, the narrator or creator is afforded a great amount of symbolic power (Bottici, 2010, p. 919). This means that such purposeful use implies a narrator or creator who

chronologically or causally connects different stories and whose point of view they reflect (De Fina, 2018, p. 234). In the case of this thesis, these narrators or creators are members of the Iranian and Turkish political elites.

Furthermore, stories embedded in speeches, documentaries, histories, novels, films, etc. “serve to justify the exercise of power by those who possess it” and “may establish and sustain relations of power” through their portrayal of social relations and by describing the consequences of actions (Thompson, 1990, p. 62). They are powerful instruments for politicians and social movements to position themselves regarding socio-political issues, to construct, negotiate and circulate politically expedient identities that “are strategically important to win political battles” (De Fina, 2018, p. 244). Especially when they are shared and circulated through the media, narratives are capable of shaping “public perception about politically relevant events, relations and people” (De Fina, 2018, p. 236). Particular dominant narratives that are widely shared, circulated, and repeated filter into people’s minds and become part of their habitus through a process of ‘accrual (De Fina, 2018, p. 237). As Ansari (2006, p. 5) has observed, “an opinion repeated often enough becomes fact. Consensus becomes common sense, and common sense structures our thoughts.”

The act of prompting people to accept certain narratives affords them a reason to prefer or consent to certain lines of action and policies rather than others (Fairclough and Fairclough, 2012, p. 4). This idea also connects to our observations in section 2.1.1 Ideology & Identity, and particularly the first level that ideologies operate at which is described as the level of unconscious mechanisms. To this end, being malleable and dynamic, narratives are subject to a continuous process of negotiation and re-negotiation. It is important to note, however, that while political actors make strategic use of narratives, their ability to construct them is not unlimited. In line with our observations in section 1.3 on Discourse, Ideas & Beliefs, narratives are also shaped by the interactions of political actors with their societies, i.e., the interaction between their own set of ideas and beliefs as well the one of their societies’. This interaction is further conditioned by the “domestic and international political contexts, the communication environment, and the goals of the political leadership” (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Roselle, 2013, pp. 6-7).

In sum, while actors have a certain amount of agency, they are also constrained by existing structures. Through the construction of narratives, actors define, enable but also constrain certain postures and actions, what can or cannot be said about oneself and about others. In consequence, narratives are understood here as both, as structuring the thoughts and behaviour of actors as well as instruments of symbolic power which are used by the Iranian and Turkish elite – amongst others - as tools of persuasion

(Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle, 2013, p. 20). Embedded in the political and social imaginary, resonating with their audiences, narratives unfold their influence, both in the domestic as well as the international arena as the first, second, and third publication (Turkey's July 15<sup>th</sup> Coup attempt; Ideology & Narrative; The Deal of Discontent) demonstrate.

### 2.2.2 FRAMES

Another important discursive strategy of the Iranian and Turkish political elites that this thesis analyses in the first publication (Turkey's July 15<sup>th</sup> Coup Attempt) and the third publication (The Deal of Discontent) is the strategy of framing. Frames are mental structures and conceptualized in line with Zald (1996, p. 262) as "specific metaphors, symbolic representations, and cognitive cues." Like narratives, they are a means to "render or cast behaviour and events in an evaluative mode" (Zald, 1996, p. 262) and therefore, take part in shaping our interpretation of the world. Frames constitute established, preconceived ideas that are activated in people's minds using specific language, i.e., certain terms. In order to refer to an existing frame and thus evoke certain ideas, terms are used that refer to this frame. Once a frame has been created and established through repetition, it can be retrieved at any time. Frames, as mental structures are invisible, but they nevertheless define our approach to our environment, how we perceive it and how we interpret it.

The process of framing consists of the filtering of certain elements of reality and the reassembly into a comprehensive narrative. In this regard, frames make an event politically meaningful and intelligible by situating it "within a particular story line in order to locate that event, organize the experience, and guide the action" (Barnett, 1998, pp. 40-41). Frames therefore do influence how we act, think, feel, form an opinion and take decisions. Consequently, through a dedicated and focused process of reframing public discourse, by using different language repeatedly, it is possible to influence and change an audience's view and interpretation of the social and political world. Such reframing becomes perceptible in the discursive shifts resulting from it. Therefore, purposeful and strategic framing constitutes a means for actors to advance their interests and thus, they compete over the representation of certain events, other actors or also themselves in order to shape people's view of them.

Put differently, as we have observed at the outset of the introduction, actors compete over the symbolic world and the management and appropriation of meaning (Wedeen, 2015, p. 30). Accordingly, political

elites “attempt to control and manipulate the symbolic world, just as they attempt to control material resources or to construct institutions of enforcement and punishment” (Wedeen, 2015, p. 30). Frames help to shape actor’s self- and other representation and serve to legitimize and delegitimize the actions of the other and the self and to enhance or diminish the image of the self and the other respectively, i.e., influence how the world interprets actors, their actions and behaviour and in consequence, to galvanize regional and international support for their positions. This refers to the elaborations on symbolic power as power of influence, observed in section 1.1. on Politics, Symbolic Power & Discourse as well as to the concept of ‘sabotage’ as described by Nitzan and Bichler (2002, p. 38) and conceptualized as differential practice that strategically limits others in their actions to the benefit of one’s own. Examining the use of symbolic power provides important information about how actors themselves *would like* to be perceived and how their competitors *should* be perceived. As in the case of narratives, by means of strategic framing actors similarly impede or facilitate discourses, actions, and behaviours.

### 2.2.3 IDEOLOGY

In addition to the priorly exposed perspective on ideology on the part of the sociology of power, the thesis furthermore incorporates van Dijk’s definition of ideology while incorporating further ideas to carve out its meaning for the purposes of the research more clearly. As stated before and in line with van Dijk, the thesis conceptualizes ideology as the fundamental beliefs of a group and its members, which means that social, political, or religious beliefs may be the base for a shared ideology of a social group or movement (see van Dijk, 2000, p. 7). These fundamental beliefs give important insights about how an ideological group may perceive itself as well as its relations with other groups and its resources.

This can also provide answers to questions about the group's identity, its goals, interests, norms, and values, and its material or symbolic resources (van Dijk, 2013, p. 178). Expressed otherwise, ideology can also be conceptualized as “interrelated ideas (such as norms, values, perceptions, and meanings) that create, recreate, and sustain a sociopolitical order, while being recreated and sustained by this order. Social practices, particularly but not exclusively through language, take a central role in this (re) production” (Warnaar, 2013, p. 36). Furthermore, ideologies may include a range of different elements such as shared rituals, prejudices, stories, and histories. All of them help to make the content of ideologies understandable and memorable by linking to cultural commonalities with which the group members are familiar (Freedon, 2003, pp. 12-13). In this context, however, it should be pointed out

that these beliefs are not necessarily shared by the whole sociocultural community and that such differences of opinion may result in their contestation by groups of different ideological convictions (van Dijk, 2013, p. 177). Domestic and international struggles over identity for example as examined in the fourth publication (Iran's & Turkey's Foreign Policy) are noteworthy cases in point.

Ideologies thus have several social and political functions which are explored in detail especially in the second publication (Ideology & Narrative) as well as the fourth publication (Iran's & Turkey's Foreign Policy). On the one hand, they are ordering and directing the social world and take part in legitimating or delegitimizing social and political practices (Freeden, 2003, p. 11). On the other hand, they also represent the goals and interests of certain groups (van Dijk, 2013, p. 178). Economic achievements or claims to democratic representation serve only limitedly for legitimizing purposes. In consequence, ideology becomes the Islamic Republic's ruling elites' most potent legitimizing factor for exercising and securing political power (Warnaar, 2013). They provide a meaningful framework for decision-making and are therefore instrumental in the exercise of political power (Freeden, 2003, p. 11). In addition, as described by Freeden (2003, p. 32), another function of ideologies in the political realm is to justify, contest or change the social and political arrangements and processes of a social or political community.

As the second and fourth publication (Ideology & Narrative; Iran's & Turkey's Foreign Policy) explore, ideologies are inherently discursive, and discourse is fundamental in the production, expression, and reproduction of ideologies (van Dijk, 2013, p. 175). Ideas that resonate with their audience, such as shared beliefs or concerns, including shared religious beliefs are popular themes of symbolic value (see Barnett, 1998). In consequence, they are used in the elites' discursive appeals to their audiences in their competition for political power. However, in addition to their capacity of creating, recreating, and sustaining socio-political orders, ideologies are equally recreated and sustained by these orders (Warnaar, 2013, pp. 35-36). In this sense, ideologies are social constructs and in flux, both changing and changeable and are largely constructed, used, and changed, but also acquired, expressed, and reproduced by social actors through social practices such as discourse (van Dijk, 2013, p. 177; van Dijk, 1998, p. 9). Ideology turns thus into a strategic construct in the hands of political actors (Ayatollahi Tabaar, 2018, p. 18). To understand the social and political functions of ideologies, it is therefore useful to examine ideologies from a discursive perspective (van Dijk, 2013, pp. 239-240).

### 3 METHODOLOGY

All four contributions comprising the thesis follow the same methodological approach, i.e., they underlie the same epistemological approach and ontological assumptions. In other words, they are all part of the same methodologically rigorous research agenda and constitute therefore a unified approach. Concretely, the thesis follows a reflexive, interpretivist approach and adheres to a constructivist perspective and consequently interrogates ideas, beliefs, and values in Iranian and Turkish politics. This means that the thesis stresses the endeavour of *understanding* particular elements of Iranian and Turkish politics rather than *explaining* them.

Departing from a constructivist perspective also means that structure and agency are afforded equal status and are seen as 'mutually constitutive' (Klotz and Lynch, 2007, p. 3). More specifically, according to Klotz and Lynch (2007, p. 3), it is a perspective that stresses that "both structural continuities and processes of change are based on agency. Agency, in turn, is influenced by social, spatial, and historical context." The articles and the book chapter are all based on this mutual constitution of structure and agency. In other words, what runs like a red thread through the four contributions is the idea that while actors possess a certain amount of agency, they are simultaneously influenced or constrained by certain existing structures. The thesis' contributions thus focus on the possibilities for, and the constraints upon action. Klotz and Lynch (2007, p. 15) confirm these ideas:

*"Refocusing on the ontology of mutual constitution leads us to rethink these issues in terms of structure and agency. Structural approaches, be they ideational or material, focus on the possibilities for, and constraints upon, action. The notion of conditional causality captures the effects of structure. Given a particular set of social, historical, and/or spatial conditions, people are likely to act in predictable ways (in positivist terminology) or reproduce dominant practices (in post-positivist terminology). Such analyses allow for context-dependent generalizations about behaviour and language. Answers to "how possible" questions describe the conditions that comprise these contexts, regardless of whether analysts label them variables. Any claims about the strength of these preconditions rely on correlational logic until researchers propose*



*mechanisms to explain why certain conditions lead to particular actions. Such attention to mechanisms emphasizes that processes shape the relationships between structures and agents.”*

The chosen perspective also inevitably connects to the positionality of the researcher, an important point for every research to consider. Klotz and Lynch (2007, p. 10) affirm that in accordance with a constructivist perspective, assessments of international politics “will be informed by the researcher’s own normative views, because analysts live in a particular spatial location and social setting within the contemporary liberal capitalist order” and therefore the “relationship between researcher and interpretation underscores the discursive rather than material conception of power that underpins the analysis of meaning within particular spatial, historical, and social contexts.” Based on these considerations, there is no distinction between the researcher and the phenomena studied, both are inherently connected.

Put otherwise, in the words of Klotz and Lynch (2007, p. 12), “the researcher and the research subject are mutually constituted through intersubjective understanding, and therefore the object of research does not have its own objective existence outside this mutually constituted relationship.” Any research will therefore “be informed by the researcher’s own normative views, because analysts live in a particular spatial location and social setting within the contemporary liberal capitalist order.” Klotz and Lynch (2007, p. 10) furthermore point out that “[t]his relationship between researcher and interpretation underscores the discursive rather than material conception of power that underpins the analysis of meaning within particular spatial, historical, and social contexts.”

The discursive enactment of power is what this thesis is particularly interested in. Language is central to symbolic construction and therefore to the construction of the world around us. Discourse analysis is consequently one of the primary ways for analysing the selected materials when conducting constructivism inspired research. Analytically, all articles are interested in the analysis of political language and therefore draw on qualitative discourse analysis and apply the approach of critical discourse analysis. This concretely entails frame and narrative analysis, and the thesis also borrows extensively from van Dijk’s as well as Reisigl and Wodak’s approaches.

Van Dijk’s concept of the ‘ideological square’ as well as Reisigl and Wodak’s discourse-historical approach (DHA) are particularly useful to study the semantics of ideological discourse to decipher discursive strategies such as positive self- and negative other-representation, nomination, predication, and argumentation, etc. According to Wodak (2009, p. 40), “[s]trategy generally refers to a (more or

less intentional) plan of practices, including discursive practices, adopted to achieve a particular social, political, psychological or linguistic goal.” Positive self-representation and negative other-representation in turn, “requires justification and legitimation strategies, as elements of ‘persuasive rhetoric’” (Wodak, 2009, p. 42).

The approach of critical discourse analysis (Fairclough, 2003; Fairclough and Wodak 1997; Wodak and Meyer, 2009; van Dijk, 2001) is particularly pertinent as it is a holistic approach that takes into consideration both the discourse itself as well as its context. What does this mean here? Nothing happens in isolation, and actors are conditioned by their context. With discourses having no inherent meaning by themselves, it is imperative for researchers to locate them historically and socially in order to understand their constructive effects (Hardy, Harley and Philips, 2004, p. 19). Hardy, Harley and Philips (2004, p. 20) affirm that “[t]he meanings of any discourse are “created, supported, and contested through the production, dissemination, and consumption of texts; and emanate from interactions between the social groups and the complex societal structures in which the discourse is embedded.” The discourses of the Iranian and Turkish political elites take shape within a particular domestic and foreign policy context which are an inherent part of the analysis. As Wodak (2009, p. 7) has pointed out, “without this contextual information the discursive behaviour of politicians would remain meaningless.”

In line with a constructivist research agenda, Klotz and Lynch (2007, p. 9) sustain that it is “[b]ecause intersubjective understandings vary across regions, over time, and within hierarchies, constructivists situate research questions within spatial, historical, and social contexts. To understand how shifts in meaning affect people living in particular regions and eras – and to gauge the potential for people to transform standard practices – researchers need to avoid reified, essentialized, or static notions of culture which preclude the possibility of change.” The thesis understands discourse to comprise language use, text, talk, verbal interaction, and communication (van Dijk, 2000, p. 9). In this sense, the analysis also takes into account the non-linguistic dimensions of discourse, where verbal, visual and cultural practices may equally form part of what the thesis defines as ‘discourse.’<sup>2</sup>

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<sup>2</sup> See section 1.3 Discourse, Ideas & Beliefs where the thesis’ understanding of the term discourse has been defined to include verbal, visual and cultural practices and covers, amongst others, speeches, texts, narratives, policies, political strategies, historical monuments or *lieux de mémoire* (see Gavriely-Nuri, 2012, p. 15; Wodak and Meyer, 2009, pp. 2-3).

Coming back to critical discourse analysis, it can henceforth be stated that “CDA conceptualizes language as a form of social practice, and attempts to make human beings aware of the reciprocal influences of language and social structure of which they are normally unaware” (Titscher, Meyer, Wodak and Vetter, 2000, p. 147). To be able to understand what it means when discourse is described as social practice, Fairclough and Wodak (1997, p. 55) explain that it refers to “a dialectical relationship between a particular discursive event and the situation(s), institution(s) and social structure(s) which frame it. A dialectical relationship is a two-way relationship: the discursive event is shaped by situations, institutions and social structures, but it also shapes them.”

There are two different levels to be considered when analysing discourses: a micro and a macro level. The micro-level of the social order is interested in the analysis of particular words which “convey the imprint of society and of value judgments in particular – they convey connoted as well as denoted meanings” (Richardson, 2007, p. 47) as well as language use, discourse, verbal interaction, and communication (Van Dijk, 2001, p. 3). The macro-level in turn, as can be inferred from the term itself, takes into consideration whole parts of discourses or entire discourses, and seeks a description on a more comprehensive, global level. Van Dijk (2001, p. 3) exemplifies that “power, dominance, and inequality between social groups are typically terms that belong to a macro-level of analysis.”

In sum, discourse analysis is a technique that deals with the interpretation of language (semantics) and which endeavours to capture “the creation of meanings and accompanying processes of communication” (Klotz and Lynch, 2007, p. 19). It is, furthermore, according to Hardy, Harley and Philips (2004, p. 19), “a methodology for analyzing social phenomena that is qualitative, interpretative, and constructionist. It explores how the socially produced ideas and objects that populate the world were created and are held in place. It not only embodies a set of techniques for conducting structured, qualitative investigations of texts, but also a set of assumptions concerning the constructive effects of language.” Accordingly, while being an analytical methodology, discourse analysis takes a particular perspective on the role of language in the social construction of the world around us, which is seen as constructed by intersubjective meanings and understandings.

For the purposes of analysis, the thesis resorts to the interrogation of a large set of different primary and secondary sources and as such analyses official statements, speeches, interviews, press reports, and promulgations as well as academic books, articles, and publications, journalistic articles, and policy reports. The thesis focuses on the Iranian and Turkish political elite and therefore, studies the discourses of individual members who are part of Iran’s and Turkey’s government during the timeframe of analysis.

## 4 PUBLICATION I

TITLE	The Aftermath of Turkey's July 15 <sup>th</sup> Coup Attempt: Normalizing the Exceptional through Legitimation, Narrativization and Ritualization
AUTHOR	Olivia Glombitza
AFFILIATION	Autonomous University of Barcelona
PUBLICATION TYPE	Peer-reviewed journal article
JOURNAL/ PUBLISHER	Turkish Studies
QUARTILE	Q1 (SJR 2020); Q2 (JCR 2020)
YEAR OF PUBLICATION	2021
STATUS	Published
DOI	<a href="https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2021.1873783">https://doi.org/10.1080/14683849.2021.1873783</a>

## 5 PUBLICATION II

TITLE	Islamic Revolutionary Ideology and Its Narratives: The Continued Relevance of the Islamic Republic's Ideology
AUTHOR	Olivia Glombitza
AFFILIATION	Autonomous University of Barcelona
PUBLICATION TYPE	Peer-reviewed journal article
JOURNAL/ PUBLISHER	Third World Quarterly
QUARTILE	Q1 (SJR 2020); Q2 (JCR 2020)
YEAR OF PUBLICATION	Expected 2022
STATUS	Conditionally accepted

## **ISLAMIC REVOLUTIONARY IDEOLGY AND ITS NARRATIVES: THE CONTINUED RELEVANCE OF THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC'S IDEOLOGY**

Is the Islamic Republic of Iran's revolutionary ideology still relevant more than forty years after the revolution? Is it still relevant in the Islamic Republic's foreign policy? While the Islamic Republic's ideology undoubtedly developed alongside its institutions over the course of forty years, this article argues that its revolutionary ideology continues to remain relevant and in fact important. Centring on the Islamic Republic's ideological discourse, it further argues that it contains several recurring narratives which have remained salient throughout the Islamic Republic's existence: narratives about the revolution; resistance, anti-imperialism, and independence; nationalism; the Iran-Iraq war; and narratives in reference to Islam. Those narratives are part of the Islamic Republic's ideological foundation and continue to play an important role in contemporary Iranian domestic and foreign policy. The article contributes a comprehensive study of how and why this is the case by enquiring into the strategic discursive employment of these narratives by analysing a major case of international interest: the nuclear issue.

**Keywords:** Islamic Republic of Iran, Ideology, Narrative, Domestic Politics, Foreign Policy, the Nuclear Issue

## INTRODUCTION

The relevance of the Islamic Republic's revolutionary ideology more than forty years after the revolution is a divisive topic. Opinions range from the extreme ends of highly relevant to irrelevant in both its domestic and foreign policy. However, while the Islamic Republic's ideology undoubtedly developed over the course of forty years alongside its institutions, this article argues that the Islamic Republic's ideology continues to remain relevant and in fact important. The article focuses on the Islamic Republic's ideological discourse and further argues that it contains several recurring narratives which have remained salient throughout the Islamic Republic's existence. These narratives draw on the ideological foundation of the Islamic Republic and show how ideology continues to play an important role in contemporary Iranian domestic and foreign policy. This article explores how and why this is the case by focusing the analysis on one of the most important cases of international interest in recent years: the nuclear issue.<sup>3</sup>

The article identifies five dominant and recurring narratives in the official revolutionary discourse that connect to the Islamic Republic's ideological pillars: the revolution; resistance, anti-imperialism, and independence; nationalism; the Iran-Iraq war; and the Islamic Republic's interpretation of Shi'a Islam. These narratives operate at the intersection of domestic and international politics and are directed at various audiences, both at home and abroad, including supporters as well as opponents. They are an expression of the Islamic Republic's self-understanding and its relations with others and an important means of symbolic power to convey political messages and to direct public opinion. Narratives help to simplify complex situations and to make them intelligible, absorbable, and memorable for their audience. They are instrumental when it comes to sense- and meaning-making. As the article will explore, narratives establish the discursive and temporal connection between structural ideological beliefs as well as past, present, and future events and therefore provide important context for their understanding and interpretation. New events and circumstances are placed within the context of well-known existing narratives that resonate with their audience, which helps political actors to argue for their policies and actions on the domestic and international stage. In this sense, they are an important source for legitimizing and building a coherent argument around political decisions, including

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<sup>3</sup> The Islamic Republic's nuclear program, inherited from the former Shah of Iran, is an ongoing issue of contention between the Islamic Republic and large parts of the international community ever since the Islamic Republic restarted the program in the 1980s. The contention reached a climax in 2002, when the existence of additional nuclear facilities was made public. The Islamic Republic's nuclear program has and continues to attract immense international attention and has been the subject of repetitive cycles of negotiations and sanctions."

those that otherwise seem to counter prior argumentation and where a certain discursive path dependency had been established. Such is the case for example when it comes engaging with Western nations for the nuclear deal. Through the prism of the Islamic Republic's ideological narratives, the public is further informed about how they ought to think about certain issues and how they ought to interpret them. Furthermore, they provide the Islamic Republic with continuity and a discursive *raison d'être*, in upholding the values of the revolution and discursively constructing the Islamic Republic. This way, ideology serves political actors to internally enable and at the same time disable certain foreign policy actions. Additionally, ideology is a useful tool for confidence building, to express resistance, and to delegitimize the Islamic Republic's adversaries. The five narratives the article explores are interconnected and the boundaries between them are therefore not clear cut but fluid.

Approached through narrative and critical discourse analysis, the article identifies and analyses the salient, dominant narratives in the Islamic Republic's ideological discourse during Ahmadinejad's and Rouhani's presidencies (2005-2021). The article examines how these narratives contextualize foreign policy issues and how they provide the Islamic Republic with meaning and a discursive *raison d'être*. To this end, the article focuses on Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the current Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic and his discourses surrounding the nuclear deal. This approach contributes to understanding the specific circumstances that shape ideological discourse and foreign policy at a certain point in time. Ayatollah Khamenei, as heir apparent to the previous Supreme Leader Imam Khomeini, is constitutionally the single most powerful individual in the Islamic Republic, the ultimate decision maker in foreign policy matters, and the most preeminent representative of the Islamic Republic. Also, Khamenei has not only taken over Khomeini's political position as the leader of the revolution, but also follows in his footsteps in leading the official ideological discourse of the Islamic Republic. His discourses are therefore an important focal point. However, the leader is part of a highly competitive domestic political environment which is marked by tensions and ardent struggles for political power, where social, political and economic issues are highly contested.<sup>4</sup> The Islamic Republic's political landscape is therefore not homogenous but greatly factionalized and opinions about the nuclear issue and how it should be dealt with are equally divided.<sup>5</sup> The narratives are shaped by this particular context and the ways in which the Islamic Republic's ideological narratives are employed regarding the nuclear issue

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<sup>4</sup> The works of E. P. Rakel (2009) and M. Ayatollahi Tabaar (2018) provide further details on the Islamic Republic's factionalized political elite and the competition among them.

<sup>5</sup> See Ayatollahi Tabaar's (2018) for a detailed account of the competition taking place among the political factions and its influence on the Islamic Republic's nuclear politics. For a more personal account of the Islamic Republic's internal dynamics in connection to the nuclear issue, see also Mousavian's (2012) memoirs.



reflect the external and internal ups- and downs through the lens of the Supreme Leader and indicate his shifting positions vis-a-vis the negotiations.

The following section situates the article within the corresponding literature and contextualizes the article's contribution. The section thereafter presents the theoretical framework guiding the study of the Islamic Republic's ideology and its narratives. The next section is dedicated to the analysis of Khamenei's discourses, the five different narratives and how they are used to contextualize the nuclear issue. The article concludes with a discussion of the findings.

## IDEOLOGY, THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC, AND FOREIGN POLICY

While the study of ideology in the Islamic Republic's domestic and foreign politics is not new, there is no comprehensive study of the different narratives of the official ideological discourse and how they contribute to sense and meaning making over time and the Islamic Republic's *raison d'être*, and how the ideological narratives themselves retain their relevance. The debate on whether the Islamic Republic's foreign policy is guided by pragmatism or ideology has been particularly persistent but remains unresolved. Ideology and pragmatism are often presented as binary opposites, particularly in conjunction with the Islamic Republic's behaviour, where ideology stands for 'irrationality' and pragmatism for 'rationality'. More refined, Ramazani (2013, p. 4) speaks of a "tension between ideology and pragmatism, and the aspiration of Iranian leaders to combine spiritual values and practical realities in foreign-policy decisions." He concludes that the Islamic Republic's foreign policy has become less ideological and more pragmatic since Khomeini's death in 1989. Similarly, Osiewicz (2021, p. 2) has argued that "[s]ince 1979 the Iranian decision makers have been balancing ideological determinants and pragmatic choices." Barzegar and Divsallar (2017) have contended that while ideology was a foreign policy driver in the past, nowadays, ideological policies are combined with more strategic and pragmatic goals. Glombitza and Zaccara (2021), however, have argued that the Islamic Republic's foreign policy is inherently pragmatic, while at the same time being inextricably linked to the Islamic Republic's ideological principles. In other words, understanding 'pragmatism' as an approach serving one's best interest at any given point in time, the article considers the Islamic Republic's ideology to be endogenously pragmatic. Perceptions of the Islamic Republic's approach, however, lie in the eye of the beholder and may result in interpretations of greater or lesser rationality or spirituality. As the article will show, independently of how its approach might be interpreted, the Islamic Republic does not

abandon its institutionalized discursive frame of its official revolutionary ideology. Already existing narratives are connected to the present context to make sense of it and to serve as explanation and even justification for the Islamic Republic's actions. In so doing, the political elite is able to uphold its spiritual values and circumvent potential inconsistencies when carrying out its policies.

Because of the inherent interconnectedness between the domestic and the international sphere, domestic processes have important implications for foreign policy and vice versa. Accordingly, several scholars have argued for the importance of adding a domestic level of analysis to understand the Islamic Republic's foreign policy (Warnaar, 2013; Ramazani, 2013; Ayatollahi Tabaar, 2018). This includes Warnaar's constructivist approach to the Islamic Republic's foreign policy during Ahmadinejad's time, which argues that ideology has both legitimating and constituting functions (Warnaar, 2013). Maloney (2002) also takes on a constructivist angle but focuses the analysis on the Islamic Republic's foreign policy's interplay with identity instead of ideology. Akbarzadeh and Barry (2016) also discard the concept of ideology in favour of identity, characterising it as too reductionist a concept that is inextricably linked to Islam, and instead try to decipher the impact of the country's various identities on its foreign policy. Religion, however, is the focus of Ayatollahi Tabaar (2018, p. 11) who uses a rationalist-constructivist framework to study the evolution of religious discourses in reaction to the politics of elites competing for power. This article, however, does not understand ideology to be exclusively linked to religion, it is rather, as further explained in the theory section, operationalized here as the shared beliefs of a group and its members. Religious beliefs may constitute one component, but they are by far not the only one.

Applying a constructivist lens in line with Warnaar's (2013) approach, the study seeks to contribute to this existing body of work and offers a unique perspective on contemporary Iranian politics by conceptualizing the narratives that connect with the Islamic Republic's official ideology as important instruments of symbolic power. The article further demonstrates how the employed discursive strategies are part of a larger process of safeguarding the system's identity and *raison d'être* and in consequence, the continuity of the system itself. Interrogating the creation of meaning for political ends, the article investigates the relationship between domestic circumstances and ideological discourse and their effects on foreign policy action. The article is based on the study of primary sources addressed to a domestic as well as an international audience and as such analyses official statements, speeches, and pronouncements of the most prominent representative of the Islamic Republic's political elite. The article thereby adds to larger debates on the role of ideology in contemporary Iranian domestic and foreign policy.

## CONTROL OVER SYMBOLS AND MEANING: IDEOLOGY & NARRATIVE

Ideologies are conceptualized as the fundamental beliefs of a group and its members, which means that social, political, or religious beliefs may be the base for a shared ideology of a social group or movement (van Dijk, 2000, p. 7).<sup>6</sup> These fundamental, structurally embedded beliefs give information about how an ideological group may perceive itself and others as well as its relations with other groups. This may further provide answers to questions regarding the group's identity, goals, interests, norms, and values as well as its material or symbolic resources (van Dijk, 2013, p. 178). Ideologies may include a range of different elements such as shared rituals, prejudices, stories, and histories (Freeden, 2003, p. 13). All of which, by tapping into structural beliefs and cultural communalities that group members are familiar with, contribute to making the content of ideologies intelligible and memorable.

Accordingly, ideologies have several social and political functions. Apart from ordering and directing the social world, they take part in legitimating or delegitimizing social and political practices (Freeden, 2003, p. 11), while at the same time representing the goals and interests of certain groups (van Dijk, 2013, p. 178). Indeed, economic achievements or claims to democratic representation serve only limitedly for legitimizing purposes. In consequence, ideology becomes the Islamic Republic's ruling elites' most potent legitimizing factor for exercising and securing political power (Warnaar, 2013). They provide a meaningful framework for decision-making and are therefore instrumental in the exercise of political power (Freeden, 2003, p. 11). Fredeen's definition of political ideologies further concretizes some of the functions of ideologies in political life, which are useful for this article. According to Freeden, ideologies are "a set of ideas, beliefs, opinions, and values, that 1) exhibit a recurring pattern, 2) are held by significant groups, 3) compete over providing and controlling plans for public policy, 4) do so with the aim of justifying, contesting or changing the social and political arrangements and processes of a political community" (Freeden, 2003, p. 32). However, in addition to their capacity of creating, recreating, and sustaining socio-political orders, ideologies are equally recreated and sustained by these orders (Warnaar, 2013, p. 36). In this sense, ideologies are social constructs and in

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<sup>6</sup> However, it should be noted, as van Dijk (2013, p. 177) points out that "[i]deologies, on the other hand, are belief systems that are only shared by specific (ideological) groups of people, and are typically not shared and taken for granted by the whole sociocultural community. In other words, they embody beliefs about which there are differences of opinion, and that hence are typically persuasively attacked and defended among members of different ideological groups. Thus, whereas ideologies may be beliefs that are taken for granted and presupposed within the own group, they are not so across groups and in society as a whole. (...) Hence the general consequence that ideological differences become manifest in ideological struggle."

flux, both changing and changeable in the long-term and are largely constructed, used, and changed, but also acquired, expressed, and reproduced by social actors through social practices such as discourse (van Dijk, 2013, p. 177; van Dijk, 1998, p. 9). In other words, ideology thus has both, a structural (beliefs) as well as an instrumental (discourse) dimension. However, while structural beliefs inform and constrain political actors' discourses and actions, including their domestic and foreign priorities, preferences, and policies, they nonetheless have scope to shape and reorient ideologies through discourse over time (Warnaar, 2013, p. 6). To understand the social and political functions of ideologies, it is therefore useful to examine ideologies from a discursive perspective (van Dijk, 2013, p. 194).

Examining political discourses, Shenhav (2006, p. 246) has argued that they resort extensively to narrative patterns. This is due to a human tendency to rely on narratives as a way of understanding and affording meaning to our environment and our place within it. Narratives are a means to simplify complex situations to make them easily intelligible (Shenhav, 2006, p. 246) and can therefore be regarded as a powerful way to make sense of both the social and the political world (Bottici, 2010, p. 920). Narratives act as frames through which social and political issues are interpreted (De Fina, 2018, p. 236). However, narratives are also a staple in the ideological construction of events as well as in the manipulation of public opinion (De Fina, 2018, p. 233). Because narratives represent non-argumentative, more common sense and immediate ways of connecting with the public, they are a convenient format for conveying political views (De Fina, 2018, p. 239). In narrative format, political messages can easily be absorbed, digested, and remembered by their audience. However, narratives do not emanate out of nowhere, and a narrative generally necessitates a narrator or creator who chronologically or causally connects different stories and whose point of view they reflect (De Fina, 2018, p. 234). This indicates the strategic dimension of narratives. When they are purposefully created and employed to reach a certain goal, they become strategic. Through the targeted discursive production and reproduction of narratives to steer sense- and meaning making, the narrator or creator is afforded a great amount of symbolic power. In his analysis of religious narratives, Ayatollahi Tabaar has shown that narratives "can change, change rapidly, change frequently, and change dramatically in accordance with elite's threat perceptions" (Ayatollahi Tabaar, 2018, p. 4).

In line with these considerations, the article employs a discourse analytical approach to study the discursive manifestations of ideology in political contexts and thus, to understand how and why the Islamic Republic's ideology remains relevant in its contemporary domestic and foreign policy. The following section introduces the official Islamic revolutionary ideology and provides an in-depth analysis of the five identified narratives.

## THE OFFICIAL ISLAMIC REVOLUTIONARY IDEOLOGY, ITS NARRATIVES & THE NUCLEAR ISSUE

“The Islamic Republic wants its independence and freedom.”<sup>7</sup>

The Islamic Republic’s revolutionary ideology is a modern creation, incorporating the ideas of various influential ideologues<sup>8</sup> that on the one hand derives legitimacy from the texts and concepts of Islam and on the other hand, incorporates modern elements from different theories and movements such as socialism and nationalism (see Abrahamian, 1993; Dabashi, 2008). Those ideas, with the added revolutionary twist were woven into the fabric of the Islamic Republic’s official ideology and are reflected in several predominant and recurring narratives about the revolution; resistance, anti-imperialism, and independence; nationalism; the Iran-Iraq war as well as narratives in reference to Islam. These narratives continue to play an important role in the Islamic Republic’s reasoning of its international and domestic agenda. The Islamic Republic’s ideology constitutes an important element of state identity and has been enshrined in the Constitution as a fundamental characteristic of the Islamic revolution (Islamic Consultative Assembly, 1989, p. 1).

Ramazani (2001, p. 217) has argued in this context that the Islamic Republic had increasingly sought reintegration into the international and economic system after Khomeini’s death; and due to this, Iranian foreign policy had become less ideological and more pragmatic instead. However, despite these assertions, the Islamic Republic continues to articulate substantial ideological principles such as “cultural and political independence, economic autarky, diplomatic and ideological mobilization against Zionism and resistance against US interference in regional and domestic affairs (...)” (Adib-Moghaddam, 2007, p. 32) in its discourses. And the Islamic Republic furthermore “continues to challenge the international system in general and the US state as its most dominant power in particular (...)” (Adib-Moghaddam, 2007, p. 32). At the heart and centre of Iran’s discursive attention, the United States is varyingly called a ‘domineering, arrogant, bullying or hegemonic power’ or famously as ‘the Great Satan.’ The negative discourse on the West in general, but even more so on the United States in particular remains largely unchanged since the inception of the Islamic Republic.<sup>9</sup> While such repetitive

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<sup>7</sup> Khamenei, 2009c

<sup>8</sup> For more information on the initial primary ideologues of the Islamic Revolution, see Dabashi (2008), “Theology of Discontent;” Arjomand (2009), “After Khomeini: Iran Under His Successors;” Zubaida (2009), “Islam, the People and the State.”

<sup>9</sup> At the same time, however, there have nevertheless been repeated attempts by various governments to initiate dialogue and improve the Islamic Republic’s foreign relations. This was the case, for example, with former

negative representation would seemingly create a certain discursive path dependency that cannot easily be deviated from, the Supreme Leader is nevertheless able to change course based on the same narratives without contradicting himself. Put otherwise, the Supreme Leader is therefore not able to justify changes in foreign policy despite the established narratives, but because of them. Hence, as explored in the following sections, the narratives expressing elemental ideas of the Islamic Republic's ideological fundament continue to be salient with new topics such as the nuclear issue.

## THE REVOLUTION

“The Revolution awakened the conscience of all our people.”<sup>10</sup>

Similar to other revolutionary regimes, the Islamic Republic's leaders use the narrative and principles of the revolution to justify, legitimize and even sanctify their rule (Wedeen, 1999, p. 8). The narrative of the revolution, its goals and ideals are an important means to this end and form important pillars of Khamenei's pronouncements, who calls himself, ‘the Leader of the Revolution,’ just like Khomeini before him. The narrative of the revolution is a story of survival and progress. Portrayed as the start of an awakening in the world of Islam, in contrast to traditional quietism, the revolution is represented as the enabler of progress and development which turned Iran from a dependent, incapable, and self-doubting country into a self-sufficient, competent, and confident one. Khamenei argues that through the revolution, Iran's people and youth had been empowered to make numerous significant advancements and achievements, despite many doubters inside and outside of the country, as Khamenei does not cease to repeat, not least in the field of nuclear science (Khamenei, 2008g). According to the narrative, the revolution helped people to believe in themselves and unleashed their talent and power. The revolution had created the necessary political capacities (Khamenei, 2012a) and stimulated people to discover their talents and capabilities and not least the ability to build nuclear power plants (Khamenei, 2011f). With the advent of the revolution, all that had been suppressed “under the domination of oppressive and dictatorial powers (...), who were immoral and inhumane” (Khamenei, 2013b) had been set free.

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President Hassan Rouhani's policy of “constructive engagement” or former President Mohammad Khatami's famous “dialogue among civilizations.”

<sup>10</sup> Khamenei, 2006c

The guiding slogan of the revolution had been Estiqlal, Azadi, Jomhuri-ye Eslami - Independence, Freedom, Islamic Republic; and this new Islamic Republic wanted to be 'neither East nor West.' Both ideas remain very much alive as major tenets and guiding principles. Khamenei repeatedly points out that Iran's people continue to be committed to the revolution and that its slogans remain relevant to its people even several decades later and further contends that the revolution encompasses and attracts also the younger generation that had been born after 1979 or the Iran-Iraq war (Khamenei, 2008e). Due to this portrayed unrelenting commitment, the Iranian people are said to be ready to defend the revolution – i.e., the system of the Islamic Republic – against outside intrusion and efforts of Iran's opponents to paint a negative image of the Islamic Republic and its intentions regarding the nuclear issue (Khamenei, 2008f).<sup>11</sup>

According to Khamenei, the message of the revolution is based on universal and human truths that are not only relevant to Iranians but transcend the country's borders: the 'confrontation with global arrogance.' Global arrogance is a system, according to him, which divides the world into the oppressed and the oppressors.<sup>12</sup> Important revolutionary values are justice, independence, and resistance, which also connect to other narratives of the Islamic Republic. From the perspective of Khamenei, the revolution had been a great success, and because of its appeal and potential as role model for regional nations, it is subjected to attacks by the Islamic Republic's adversaries and opponents to its nuclear program. According to Khamenei, the nuclear issue is merely an excuse to gloss over the real underlying motives, which consist of exerting pressure on the Islamic Republic, to bring its people to their knees and to topple the revolution (Khamenei, 2010f). Consequently, the defence of the revolution requires constant effort. Khamenei aims at instilling suspicion and fear to mobilize people's emotions, as the following excerpt shows:

*“Even when they say soft things, they hide a dagger behind their soft words, waiting for a moment of carelessness so that they can sink the dagger into the heart of their opponent. Therefore, it is necessary to be vigilant. We must be vigilant. We are already*

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<sup>11</sup> Khamenei's representation of people's commitment is not necessarily a complete reflection of reality. While there are many supporters, there are also many opponents. In connection to this, see Bajoghli's (2019) account of the Islamic Republic's cultural efforts to uphold its revolutionary values and its preoccupation with transmitting them to younger generations. Acting *as if*, Khamenei's words are therefore also an expression of this preoccupation.

<sup>12</sup> See Khamenei's official website for a detailed explanation of the meaning and use of the term 'arrogance' <https://english.khamenei.ir/news/8190/What-does-Arrogance-mean-in-Imam-Khamenei-s-statements>.

*vigilant, and I recommend and stress that this vigilance must be maintained” (Khamenei, 2011b).*

Highlighting the positive effects and achievements that came with the revolution while simultaneously stressing its endangerment are acts of mobilization and supposed to attract people to support the revolution. Furthermore, the narrative of the revolution is important not only when it comes to keeping the memory alive, but also when it comes to building confidence in the goals and values of the revolutionary movement as well as the elites that are leading this movement.

## RESISTANCE, ANTI-IMPERIALISM & INDEPENDENCE

“The era when the orders of American and British ambassadors were carried out by Mohammad-Reza Shah is over now.”<sup>13</sup>

The Islamic Republic’s unwavering strife for independence and resistance has its roots in Iran’s distant and contemporary history, where Iran has been subjected to a number of fateful invasions by different parties, such as the Greeks, Turks or Mongols (see Axworthy, 2008) as well as foreign interference by countries such as Russia, Great Britain and the United States (Milani, 2011).<sup>14</sup> Based on this history, there is an aggressive defence of domestic sovereignty, a demand for respect for the Islamic Republic’s inalienable rights and widespread resentment of foreign interference in its affairs and an outright rejection of great power hegemony and imperialism (Maloney, 2002). The time prior to the revolution under Mohammad-Reza Shah is portrayed as a time of dependency when foreign powers, primarily American and British officials were able to impose their demands on the Iranian nation. Thus, drawing on the past, Khamenei connects the present, where foreign powers are said to want to continue to exert influence on the country in accordance with their interest. Connecting past occurrences with today’s events, the foreign powers’ interests are thereby afforded a spin of continuity with their interests seemingly unchanged. However, while the demands are supposed to persist, what has changed according to Khamenei, is Iran’s ability to resist these demands and to “represent the will and desires of the Iranian nation” (Khamenei, 2006b). Because of the existing dependence on the US and

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<sup>13</sup> Khamenei, 2006b

<sup>14</sup> To name but one important historical event marked by foreign interference, and which left a long-lasting imprint, was the coup d’état of 1953 instigated by the United States and the United Kingdom which overthrew Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh. See Abrahamian (2013), “The Coup.”



other powers prior to the revolution, Iran had not been able to achieve what it rightfully deserved and is able to achieve now, after the revolution (Khamenei, 2005b).

Khamenei advances the idea that the Islamic Republic is prevented from using nuclear energy, because foreign powers wanted to keep the country dependent to keep the Iranian nation weak so that they could continue to impose their demands and further their own interests (Khamenei, 2005a). The leader's discursive strategies therefore aim, among others, at delegitimizing those countries and their measures that oppose the Islamic Republic's nuclear ambitions through negatively connoted argumentation and concepts, while at the same time legitimizing the Islamic Republic's nuclear activities and actions through positively connoted argumentation. The Supreme Leader presents the Islamic Republic as particularly determined in its nuclear pursuits at times when it seeks for example to exert pressure to gain a competitive advantage in the negotiations or when its demands are not being met by its interlocutors. In such instances, the Supreme Leader shows himself especially defiant and insists on not being flexible, as this would embolden 'the enemy.' In the same spirit, even negotiations on the nuclear issue are portrayed as efforts of reaching dominance over Iran, which in consequence, shall not be entered into (Khamenei, 2013a). To reason his unbending stance on the Islamic Republic's nuclear program, Khamenei frames the production and use of nuclear fuel and energy as the Iranian nation's indisputable and inalienable right, which they will not give up (Khamenei, 2010e):

*"It is quite clear that the Islamic Republic would not relinquish the Iranian nation's indisputable right to the peaceful use of nuclear technology. Nobody would be able to renounce the Iranian nation's right. This is something belonging to the Iranian people, and nobody would be able to deprive our nation of this legitimate right."<sup>15</sup>*

Public opinion is directed at making a moral choice between the Islamic Republic's rightful and peaceful production of nuclear technology for various vital uses for the benefit of Iran and its people, as Khamenei asserts (Khamenei, 2012c), and foreign powers' efforts to make the country dependent, while depriving them of their legitimate rights. Despite all these efforts, the Islamic Republic is portrayed as defiant in Khamenei's messages. Amongst others, this defiance is expressed when referring to the sanctions which had been imposed on the Islamic Republic because of its nuclear activities. Although sanctions are portrayed as economic warfare, they are simultaneously described as the enabler of progress in the development of nuclear technology. According to Khamenei, the

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<sup>15</sup> Khamenei, 2006a

sanctions did not weaken the country, nor did they slow down its progress, but to the contrary. The sanctions were “a blessing in disguise” (Khamenei, 2009a). The planned weakening of the Islamic Republic thus turns into an unplanned strengthening. The implication Khamenei seeks to convey with such statements is that ‘if you are unwilling to meet our demands, no measures will make us deviate from our chosen path, to the contrary, whatever you do to deter us, will strengthen us and enable us to gain greater independence’ (Khamenei, 2009a). This is an effort to dissimulate the effects of sanctions. Against the same background, Khamenei introduces the concept of the ‘economy of resistance’ to guarantee Iran’s economic independence (Khamenei, 2015a), and which are nurtured by the idea of resistance to outside domination and independence.<sup>16</sup>

In addition, the narrative is afforded a taste of glory where the Islamic Republic made remarkable achievements under sanctions and pressure to encourage the Iranian public to continue their resistance despite potential hardships. To further reassure his domestic supporters, Khamenei tells stories of triumph, of Iran’s already decade long successful resistance as well of Iran’s successes in favourably influencing public opinion about its nuclear program and in convincing people and governments to raise up against US domination (Khamenei, 2010c).

Another important pillar of resistance according to Khamenei is knowledge. Especially the knowledge in matters of science and technology are portrayed as a source of self-confidence for Iran and which has contributed substantially to Iran’s independence.<sup>17</sup> Khamenei also relates dignity, honour, and power to knowledge. Knowledge, he asserts, is what helps a country to achieve power (Khamenei, 2007b) and immunity (Khamenei, 2009b). It is the base for Iran’s independence and produces feelings of dignity and honour, determination, and willpower (Khamenei, 2011d). Today, one of the ultimate expressions of the Islamic Republic’s resistance is epitomized in the commemoration of the takeover of the US embassy in 1979. Every year, Iran makes a point of celebrating this day as the National Day of Fighting against Global Arrogance & Unity.

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<sup>16</sup> On the concept of the ‘economy of resistance’ and further context, see Lob and Habibi (2019).

<sup>17</sup> Indeed, the knowledge and expertise around nuclear technology that the Islamic Republic has been able to acquire over the years is complicating the negotiations that started in 2021 to revive the nuclear deal.

## NATIONALISM

“The work on nuclear energy is for the sake of the nation, the country and the future.”<sup>18</sup>

Iranian nationalism includes the perception that Iran is a wealthy and powerful country and should be one of the leading powers in its wider region if not the international community. It is a narrative of past and present grandeur, power, and strength. Consequently, the Islamic Republic is presented overly positive and in the light of these characteristics. During a meeting with government officials in 2012, the Supreme Leader is praising the Islamic Republic’s attributes:

*“We are a wealthy and powerful country. In terms of natural resources, we are one of the top countries in the world. In terms of certain natural resources, we rank first in the world. In terms of combined oil and gas resources, we rank first in the world” (Khamenei, 2012b).*

The Iranian nation and the Iranian people are framed as deserving of this status and in the same way, by means of implication, as having the right to nuclear energy. Iranian politicians have time and again emphasized that they want to be treated with respect, on an equal footing with other nations, and such treatment would include granting the Islamic Republic its inalienable right to unobstructed technological development and nuclear energy, which are equated with core national interests.

Calling on Iranian nationalism is a means to mobilize national sentiments and rally the Iranian people behind the Islamic Republic’s cause and actions. Iranian nationalism also serves the purpose of reaching out to all those Iranians that are not in favour of the current political system, but nevertheless harbour feelings of belonging to their country. The use of nationalism therefore is also an attempt to unify people of divergent political and ideological convictions. Apart from rallying the Iranian people behind himself and the system, it serves Khamenei to display strength, power, and determination in front of all opponents and supporters. The battle cry of Khamenei’s narrations around nationalism is an appeal to the country’s youth: “The future belongs to you” (Khamenei, 2010d). The Iranian nation is portrayed as a young, dynamic, and powerful people that is high-achieving and full of hope and aspirations (Khamenei 2005b). Young Iranians from all walks of life are supposed to be able to identify with such

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<sup>18</sup> Khamenei, 2012a

positive and universal descriptions, whatever their political attitudes and religious beliefs.<sup>19</sup> The Iranian nation is also portrayed as a proud and self-confident nation, full of dignity and honour (Khamenei, 2011d). Achieving nuclear technology is inextricably tied to these characteristics of the Iranian nation, its pride and honour, but also to advancement and progress which are essential to securing the Islamic Republic's future.

Khamenei suggests that nuclear energy is a national requirement and of national importance for the nation's progress and future. He explains the reasons for the Islamic Republic's undeterrable course on nuclear energy:

*“The reason the government officials persist on continuing our nuclear activities is that it is a necessity. As I explained the day before yesterday in a meeting with the youth and students of Yazd province, nuclear energy is a national requirement, and if we do not start today, the nation will suffer the consequences 10 or 15 years later. If we start today, we will reap the results of our national endeavours, but if we do not, we will fall behind”* (Khamenei, 2008a).

The Islamic Republic projects itself here as the protector of the country's national interest and therefore as the protector of the future of the Iranian people. The inability of achieving nuclear technology is portrayed as a betrayal of the nation (Khamenei, 2007a), which in turn is supposed to reason the Islamic Republic's steadfastness and willingness to bear the costs of sanctions for its activities. The Islamic Republic's positive self-representation as the protector of the nation and its future is contrasted with the negative representation of the West as 'arrogant powers' that are said to be after humiliating the Iranian nation (Khamenei, 2013b) and have targeted the people's power and future (Khamenei, 2009b) with their machinations and propaganda techniques and unlawful actions to deprive the Iranian people of their indisputable rights (Khamenei, 2009d). It is a classical juxtaposition of the binaries of good and evil, which runs like a red thread through all of Khamenei's discourses.

Khamenei continues to praise the Iranian nation throughout his discourses and claims that the Iranian nation was a valorous nation (Khamenei, 2008c) that was successful in all its endeavours:

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<sup>19</sup> Beyond the surface, statements along these lines also mirror another of the Islamic Republic's concerns, i.e., the incessant annual emigration of citizens from all segments of Iranian society, including highly educated and skilled parts of the population. For details, see for example the Migration Data Portal (2020): [https://www.migrationdataportal.org/data?cm49=364&focus=profile&i=stock\\_abs\\_&t=2020](https://www.migrationdataportal.org/data?cm49=364&focus=profile&i=stock_abs_&t=2020)

*“Today the Iranian nation is successful in its domestic policies. It is successful in its foreign policies. It is successful in terms of its influence in the region. It is successful in terms of its influence on important global issues. These are a set of realities” (Khamenei, 2011a).*

For evidence, Khamenei draws on Iran’s past which had seen many world-famous and esteemed scholars in a wide range of sciences and fields of knowledge (Khamenei, 2005b). Drawing comparisons with Iranians of the past, the Supreme Leader affords today’s Iranians a touch of the bygone splendour. The idea advanced here is that Iran has been immensely successful in the past and will be equally successful in the future, no matter how high the obstacles in the form of sanctions, demands and propaganda that are placed in its way. In other words, and by implication, continued and increased pressure will not bring the Islamic Republic to make concessions to its demands at the negotiating table.

Nevertheless, despite the continuous negative representation of Western nations, Khamenei is also able to signal openness to negotiations on the nuclear issue while staying within the set discursive parameters of his narratives. When Khamenei was prepared to show openness towards Europe, for example, this opening is portrayed as being possible because the Europeans were meeting some of the Islamic Republic’s fundamental demands, which are respect for the Iranian nation and its rights as well as the observance of ‘red lines’ (Khamenei, 2008c).

## THE IRAN-IRAQ WAR

“The Sacred Defence was a glorious war from head to toe.”<sup>20</sup>

On the one hand, the narrative of the Iran-Iraq war in connection to the nuclear deal is a narrative of victimhood and abandonment, where the so-called great powers had left the Islamic Republic and its people alone and exposed it to the atrocities of an eight year-long war, full of human rights violations. It is a narrative to rally support and to portray the Islamic Republic as a victim of aggression contrary to the image that the Islamic Republic’s adversaries want to paint of Iran as an aggressor. The Iran-Iraq war is frequently used in the context of the nuclear issue to underline that the Islamic Republic by no

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<sup>20</sup> Khamenei, 2006d

means poses a threat, but rather, that it has itself been a victim of chemical weapons, which most importantly, had been supplied to Iraq's ruler of the time, Saddam Hussein, by the West.

On the other hand, the time of the Iran-Iraq war, prominently referred to as 'the Sacred Defence Era' (Khamenei, 2010a) is also a story of self-defence, resilience, and resistance, where the Islamic Republic, despite being unsupported by the world community, was able to persevere and counter Saddam Hussein's aggression. During the Iran-Iraq war, the country had suffered from chemical warfare, a circumstance that is time and again repeated and connected to the nuclear issue to assert that because of its own close experience with harmful weapons which still reverberate to this day (Khamenei, 2013d), the Islamic Republic is categorically opposed to the production, stockpiling and use of these types of weapons (Khamenei, 2010b). With these affirmations, the Islamic Republic's opposition to weapons of mass destruction is therefore footed on both, ideological reasoning – in accordance with state religion – and a first-hand practical experience, which serves as a sort of eye-witness account. It is largely presupposed that those are truthful and trustable.

Because it had been Iraq attacking the Islamic Republic, the Iran-Iraq war narrative is used to convey the Islamic Republic's peaceful intentions by telling the story of a war that had been imposed on the Islamic Republic, not a war that the Islamic Republic had begun. The devastating war that ended in a ceasefire is portrayed as a great victory and achievement for the Islamic Republic which according to Khamenei, had caught the world by surprise.<sup>21</sup> Iraq's 'defeat' is described as a simultaneous defeat for those countries that had supported Saddam Hussein during the war, namely the "evil powers of the world and the Great Satan – America" (Khamenei, 2011e). The fact that the Islamic Republic was able to emerge undefeated, contrary to everyone's expectation is set on par with the Islamic Republic's scientific progress in the field of nuclear energy to present it as equally impressive (Khamenei, 2007c). The narrative of the Islamic Republic's perseverance, which in the end will lead to victory despite painful losses, is a metaphor for the Islamic Republic's trajectory to develop nuclear energy. By means of inference, this means while there may be setbacks, potentially significant ones, the benefits for the country will outweigh the incurred losses. As the Islamic Republic prevailed in a war throughout which it allegedly received no support, by implication, they will prevail in their nuclear endeavours. Framing it as an 'they had everything, we had nothing' equation, Khamenei tells how the Iranian people continue to be as determined as they have been during a war that the Islamic Republic was seemingly unable to

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<sup>21</sup> It is worth noting that contrary to Khamenei's assertions of a great victory, Khomeini had initially described the acceptance of the ceasefire as drinking a "poisoned chalice" (see Abrahamian, 2018, p. 186).

win because they had no support or adequate weapons and military equipment (Khamenei, 2010g) and how they are now equally determined when it comes to scientific progress and the country's nuclear pursuits (Khamenei, 2013c).

## THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC'S INTERPRETATION OF SHI'A ISLAM

*"When a nation decides to stand firm, when a nation believes in divine assistance and its domestic power and capacities, nothing can stand in its way."*<sup>22</sup>

No matter where they take place, Khamenei's discourses are generally interspersed with references to Islam, the Holy Quran and important personalities associated with the Islamic faith and customarily begin and end with greetings and acknowledgements to Allah. Khamenei regards the Holy Quran as a unifying factor, a source of unity for all Muslims, and a "source of divine and Islamic dignity and power" (Khamenei, 2011c). That Khamenei is linking his pronouncements with references to the Quran is not only attributable to his role as a high-ranking Shi'a cleric, but also to his endeavour to connect to a broad range of adherents to the Islamic faith, not only Shia Muslims. He draws connections through different stories, to illustrate his points. This makes them easily intelligible for his audience. While the majority of the Islamic Republic's population adheres to Shi'a Islam, Khamenei's narratives are equally graspable for adherents to other branches of Islam, which enlarges his audience beyond the country's borders. In this sense, narratives associated with Islam indeed serve as a connector with other Muslim countries and believers. Particularly from the Islamic Republic's position in partial isolation, it is no wonder that Khamenei places great importance on the unity among Muslim nations, which he seeks to strengthen at home and abroad (Khamenei, 2008b). What is endangering the sought unity among Shia and non-Shia Muslims according to him, however, are the alleged efforts by foreign powers to divide Muslim denominations through the spread of negative propaganda and untruths about the Islamic Republic and not least, about the nuclear issue (Khamenei, 2009d).

The Islamic references figuring in Khamenei's discourses are rooted in a specific interpretation of Shi'ism based on the thinking of Ayatollah Khomeini which views the world as a struggle between the oppressors and the oppressed and where the Islamic Republic is supposed to support this "rightful struggle of the oppressed people against their oppressors anywhere in the world." It is an integral part

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<sup>22</sup> Khamenei, 2012a

of the official ideology and enshrined in the Constitution in Article 154. Other themes that particularly stand out, are the stories surrounding the brothers Imam Hussein and Imam Hassan and the topic of justice related to the mentioned struggle between the oppressors and the oppressed. Regarding the nuclear issue, religious terminology comes into play to underline the argument that the Islamic Republic's nuclear activities were completely transparent and for peaceful purposes only to counter accusations of military pursuits by parts of the international community. Khamenei thus talks about "peaceful nuclear energy", "peaceful nuclear technology", or the "peaceful use of nuclear energy" (Khamenei, 2012c). Connecting the adjective of 'peace' to the Islamic Republic's nuclear endeavours is supposed to build trust in its activities among its domestic and foreign doubters and supporters. In addition, nuclear energy is represented as a divine blessing and a treasure (Khamenei, 2008d).

Furthermore, the leader draws on the Islamic Republic's religious and humanitarian principles, which are supposed to prohibit nuclear weapons to spread confidence in the Islamic Republic's intentions with its nuclear program. In line with this, and again, to tacitly demonstrate openness, the Supreme Leader had declared during Ahmadinejad's presidency that "the Iranian nation is similarly opposed to such weapons from an Islamic, ideological, and logical standpoint" (Khamenei, 2008b) and that the "Islamic Republic considers the use of nuclear, chemical or similar weapons as a great and unforgivable sin" (Khamenei, 2012c). He further asserts that "[w]e consider the use of such weapons as haraam and believe that it is everyone's duty to make efforts to secure humanity against this great disaster" (Khamenei, 2010b).

The implication that is supposed to be transmitted is that since the Islamic Republic is a very pious and religious state, its Supreme Leader's words can be taken for granted and his fatwa can be trusted. All the while, however, in a demonstration of strength, Khamenei asserts that if it was not for its own convictions and opposition to nuclear weapons, no one could deter the Islamic Republic from building them (Khamenei, 2013a). Depending on his assessment of internal and external dynamics, the Supreme Leader shows himself at times rather unyielding, insisting on no flexibility with the enemy, and at times, he is making concessions on his posture by portraying flexibility as an important asset in connection to the nuclear issue. During Rouhani's presidency, for example, this is evidenced by the Supreme Leader drawing on the concept of so-called 'heroic flexibility', exemplifying Imam Hassan, the brother of Imam Hussein who is said to have shown such flexibility and thus signed a peace treaty with his opponent. In Khamenei's own words, 'heroic flexibility' is "an artful manoeuvre for reaching one's goal. It means that the followers of God's path – any divine path – should utilize different methods, in any way possible, in order to reach their goal (...)" (Khamenei, 2013d). The narratives surrounding the brothers Hassan and Hussein, representing the 2<sup>nd</sup> and 3<sup>rd</sup> Imam according to Shia belief, tell stories of peace, reconciliation,



and negotiations in connection to Imam Hassan and stories of confrontation and martyrdom in connection to Imam Hussein. These stories are invoked at different occasions for the purposes of justifying a range of policies and to align policy decisions with the objectives and interests proclaimed by the Islamic Republic - particularly if contradictory to the officially perpetuated discourse. In this sense, calling on the 'honourable peace' reached by Imam Hassan through heroic flexibility, allowed the Islamic Republic to make a compromise with the 'Great Satan' and other 'arrogant powers' regarding the nuclear issue, while staying within the established discursive framework of the Islamic Republic and consequently, guarding face. The Iranian public – including believers and non-believers - is familiar with the stories surrounding Imam Hassan and Imam Hussein. Through the Supreme Leader's connection of the nuclear issue to these stories, Iranians are afforded a way to interpret and understand the current situation through the prism of narratives they are already acquainted with.

## CONCLUSION

The article has argued that the Islamic Republic's ideology continues to remain not only relevant but in fact important in contemporary Iranian domestic and foreign policy and has shown how and why this is the case through five dominant, recurring narratives and the political and social functions that they fulfil. The narratives have remained salient over the course of the Islamic Republic's existence and express long-standing tenets of its ideological foundation. They comprise different themes and stories that are familiar to the Iranian audience and are a means to furnish complex content, such as current events and circumstances, in an easy to remember, absorbable, digestible, and intelligible way. In other words, the narratives provide a discursive lens through which social or political issues, such as the nuclear issue, are supposed to be viewed and understood. They are frames for interpretation that are supposed to tell the audience how and what to think about the actions of their own political officials as well as those of other countries. While the article does not claim that the targeted audiences necessarily buy into all the different narratives, it has pointed to the ways they are employed and the different purposes they may fulfil.<sup>23</sup>

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<sup>23</sup> The contestation of policies and decisions or even the entire system of the Islamic Republic on parts of the population are an inherent part of the Islamic Republic ever since its inception. These include the recent demonstrations protesting socio-economic conditions as well as other well-known examples such as the student protests of 1999, the Green Movement, or the Girls of Enghelab Street. See for example Blumberg and Farhi (2016) "Power and Change in Iran: Politics of Contention and Conciliation."

Furthermore, the article has shown that the appropriation of and control over symbols and meaning takes an important part in the exercise of political power. The article has demonstrated that ideological narratives constitute important instruments of symbolic power and has shown how they contextualize foreign policy issues and how they provide the Islamic Republic with meaning and continuity and a discursive *raison d'être* in upholding the narratives and values of the revolution, and discursively constructing the Islamic Republic. The article has also shown how the employed discursive strategies are part of a larger process and that maintaining consistency in the Islamic Republic's narratives, and therefore its identity and *raison d'être* are vital for guarding against domestic fissures and in consequence, challenges to the continuity of the system.

The analysis focused on Ayatollah Ali Khamenei and has shown that it is not only his position in the constitutional power structure that makes him the Islamic Republic's most powerful individual, but also his central position in leading the official ideological discourse. With the ideological narratives, Khamenei endeavours to influence, direct, and at times reorient public opinion. As we have seen, in Khamenei's overall discursive strategy, the narratives are used to express resistance, to delegitimize the Islamic Republic's adversaries and their actions, while at the same time rendering legitimacy for the Islamic Republic and its pursuits, to strengthen the system of the Islamic Republic and to build a coherent argument around political decisions, such as the engagement with Western nations for the nuclear deal. The analysis has shown that it is imperative for the Supreme Leader not to compromise on the principles of the Islamic Republic in his discourses and to stay true to the ideals and goals of the revolution. The narratives are also useful when it comes to confidence building and to evoke trust. While this does not necessarily change the course or behaviour of the Islamic Republic's adversaries, the unyieldingness of the 'great powers' is in fact advantageous to further justify and legitimize the Islamic Republic's actions and politics of resistance, in front of its domestic and international audience alike. In line with its discourse of resistance and independence, we have observed that the Islamic Republic is to a certain extent very willing to rather sustain the damaging effects of sanctions than to give in to the so-called great powers when its demands are not fulfilled. Positive self-representation provides legitimacy, amongst others, whereas negative other-representation serves in an effort to unite and rally not only the population but also the political factions behind a common enemy: the Islamic Republic's opponents.

The analysis has demonstrated that despite a seemingly established path dependency due to prior argumentation, the Supreme Leader is able to create the conditions for his desired course of action - for example the permission or prohibition of negotiations – through the strategic use of the different narratives, for example the narrative in reference to Islam and the concept of 'heroic flexibility'. In this

sense, by only tacitly creating certain openings - or closures for that matter – Khamenei did not abandon his proclaimed position of resentment and distrust towards Western nations, which had only been validated by the US' unilateral withdrawal from the nuclear deal in 2018, the following reimposition of sanctions and the start of its maximum pressure campaign. In fact, by allowing or preventing the governments to negotiate, while keeping his stance without openly deviating from his path, enabled the Supreme Leader to take a position of superiority when the US unilaterally abandoned the deal.

In sum, the Islamic Republic's ideology continues to be of relevance and plays an important role in domestic and foreign policy endeavours. The ideological narratives that the Supreme Leader tells and the ways in which he uses them to frame and contextualize contemporary events provide him with great flexibility to circumvent potential inconsistencies by accommodating his at times shifting attitudes towards political issues and furthermore, offer him the possibility to save face, protect his position and simultaneously safeguard the Islamic Republic's ideological principles and thus, the continuity of the revolutionary system itself.

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## 6 PUBLICATION III

<b>TITLE</b>	<b>The Deal of Discontent: Iran, Saudi Arabia and the Nuclear Deal</b>
<b>AUTHOR</b>	Olivia Glombitza
<b>AFFILIATION</b>	Autonomous University of Barcelona
<b>PUBLICATION TYPE</b>	Peer-reviewed book chapter
<b>BOOK TITLE</b>	Sectarianism, De-Sectarianization and Regional Politics in the Middle East: Protests and Proxies across States and Borders
<b>JOURNAL/ PUBLISHER</b>	IB Tauris/ Bloomsbury Academic
<b>YEAR OF PUBLICATION</b>	Spring 2022
<b>STATUS</b>	Accepted for publication, forthcoming
<b>ISBN</b>	9780755639205

## THE DEAL OF DISCONTENT: IRAN, SAUDI ARABIA, AND THE NUCLEAR DEAL

Preceded by more than ten years of negotiations, the final agreement on the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), widely known as the Iran nuclear deal, prompted high expectations and was hailed as a historical deal that would further peace, security, and stability by restraining Iran's nuclear program. However, with alliances seemingly shifting in favour of Iran, tipping the balance of power in the region, the deal became a source of discontent for Saudi Arabia. Departing from the two countries' contrasting positions, with Saudi Arabia being critical of the 2015 nuclear deal and with Iran being in favour of it, the chapter argues that the competition between Iran and Saudi Arabia has a symbolic dimension, where both parties aim at shaping the image of the Islamic Republic in connection to the nuclear deal and in accordance with their positions by exercising symbolic power and discursively mobilizing sectarian identities, feeding into the sectarian divide. It further contends that both countries' foreign policy discourses are interdependent and are shaped by such symbolic discursive exchange on the international stage. The chapter examines Saudi Arabia's and Iran's purposeful construction and strategic framing of the other and the self respectively and the mobilization of sectarian identities, and how their discursive interaction and deployment of symbolic power in foreign policy discourse is on the one hand conducive to obstructing and on the other hand conducive to facilitating endeavours of peace, security, and stability.

Interrogating the creation of meaning for political ends through frame and narrative analysis, the paper seeks to contribute to the literature on the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the instrumental mobilization of sectarian identities and further add to the understanding of the complicated relationship between the two countries.

**Keywords:** Iran, Saudi Arabia, Nuclear Deal, Symbolic Power, Foreign Policy

## INTRODUCTION

The Iran nuclear deal, also known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action or JCPOA was preceded by more than ten years of intense negotiations until the final agreement was eventually signed in 2015 by the Islamic Republic of Iran and the five permanent members of the UN Security Council, i.e., the United States, the United Kingdom, France, Russia, China as well as Germany. The deal prompted high expectations and was hailed as historical deal that would further peace, stability, and security by restraining Iran's nuclear program. However, with alliances seemingly shifting in favour of Iran, tipping the balance of power in the region, the deal became a source of discontent for Saudi Arabia. Departing from the two countries' contrasting positions, with Saudi Arabia being critical of the nuclear deal and with Iran being in favour of it, the chapter argues that the competition between the two countries has a symbolic dimension, where both parties aim at shaping the image of the Islamic Republic in accordance with their positions towards the nuclear deal. To this end, they are exercising symbolic power, which includes amongst others, the discursive employment of sectarian identities that have the potential to tap and feed into existing sectarian narratives. It further contends that both countries' foreign policy discourses are interdependent and are shaped by the symbolic discursive exchange on the international stage.

The chapter examines Saudi Arabia's and Iran's purposeful construction and strategic framing of the other and the self respectively, and how their discursive interaction and deployment of symbolic power in foreign policy discourse is on the one hand conducive to obstructing and on the other hand conducive to facilitating endeavours of peace, security, and stability. The timeframe examined ranges from the signing of the deal in 2015 until the United States' unilateral abandonment of it in 2018. Interrogating the creation of meaning for political ends, the chapter seeks to contribute to the literature on the rivalry between Iran and Saudi Arabia, the instrumental mobilization of sectarian identities and to further add to the understanding of the complicated relationship between the two countries.

Since the establishment of the Kingdom of Saudi Arabia in 1932, their relationship had been fluctuating regularly between moments of careful rapprochement and moments of ardent contestation. Iran and Saudi Arabia are ambitious. And while both of them are continuously reiterating that they are interested in peace, stability and security in the region, however, at the same time, both of them also wish to emerge as leading regional actor. In this vein, each of them seeks to influence the regional order and both try to exert substantial influence on their neighbouring states. Saudi Arabia sees itself as being at "the core of the Arab and Islamic worlds" representing "the heart of Islam" (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia,

2017) and contends that “geographic, cultural, social, demographic and economic advantages” and riches had enabled it “to take a leading position in the world” (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia, 2017). Iran similarly understands itself as a “solid regional power” with “significant potential for a prominent regional and global role” (Zarif, 2014, p. 52). Potential conflicts of interest seem inevitable. However, Saudi Arabia and Iran depart from very different vantage points.

The Islamic Revolution of 1979 signified a fundamental and abrupt turning point for Iran and its regional and international relations. It meant the rupture of old alliances and brought about a drastic reorientation and reordering of relations in line with Iran’s ideological disposition as an Islamic Republic on the one hand and the perception of Iran’s ambitions on the other hand. One of the casualties of that time was Iran’s alliance with the United States. No more was Iran a regional anchor of American foreign policy or an ‘island of stability.’<sup>24</sup> Saudi Arabia came forward to solely occupy the role as the United States’ preferred partner in the region, whereas Iran, now fallen from grace, was increasingly isolated and subsequently placed under long lasting and intense sanctions. Not least due to its reignited and heavily scrutinized nuclear program. With the advent of the nuclear deal, seemingly contributing to the normalization of relations with Iran, the status quo of regional arrangements appeared to be at stake. Iran now seemed to be able to substantially better its position and international standing and to be able to emerge from the sanctions regime and to re-enter the international community and economic system. For some, the nuclear agreement was significant, because it meant increased security and stability by restraining Iran’s nuclear program, for others, it meant the opposite, or so it is represented, a threat to security and stability and therefore to peace. In any case, a change in the balance of power was looming on the horizon, leading to increased discontent on part of Saudi Arabia, which was increasingly and strongly verbalized.

Nevertheless, the nuclear deal is certainly not the only issue or event that impacted or impacts on Saudi-Iranian relations. There is a whole host of other factors and issues, such as the wars in Yemen and Syria, for example, and for years their relationship has been oscillating between more and less favourable times. Sometimes relations were better, sometimes worse, but generally they were restrained and not really amicable. However, it remains to point out that their differences are not a result of - as often mediatized - a centuries-old conflict between religious denominations, i.e., a conflict based on sect-based difference between a Saudi Arabia whose population mostly adheres to Sunni Islam and an

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<sup>24</sup> During a brief stopover in Iran on New Year’s Eve 1977, Jimmy Carter had called Iran an ‘island of stability,’ only a little more than a year before the Shah left Iran and the Islamic Revolution. See Gil Guerrero (2016, p. 57).

Islamic Republic whose population mostly adheres to Shia Islam. While religion does play an important role in the political and social life of both countries, “s[ectarianism is not an inherent historical quality” (Al-Rasheed, 2017, p. 158), in neither Saudi Arabia nor Iran. Amongst others, religious or sectarian identities are however, as this chapter will show, employed in political discourse in order to mobilize support regionally and internationally (Mabon, 2019, p. 26), by discursively legitimizing oneself and one’s actions or by delegitimizing other actors and their actions. Sectarianism is therefore rather “a modern political phenomenon that is nourished by persistent actors whose rule depends on invoking religious identities that become lethally politicized” (Al-Rasheed, 2017, p. 158).

The discursive act of positive self- and negative other representation and for this purpose, the discursive mobilization of salient identities occurs within a frame that the political elite is on the one hand able to influence, but which on the other hand, equally constrains them. As Warnaar (2013, p. 5) has pointed out, foreign policy discourse is a historical, ever evolving and changing construct, which makes reference to other, previous discourses. While conditioned by a certain discursive frame, political elites take part in renegotiating, reshaping, and reorienting this discursive frame (Warnaar, 2013, p. 5). In the context of this chapter, this may be a conscious process, where the political elite refers to frames and narratives that are meaningful to their audience in order to mobilize support for political ideas and actions. As there is a deep connection between the domestic realm and the international, pronouncements on the international stage are never unidirectional, but reciprocally addressed to a domestic as well as an international audience. Topics that resonate with the domestic audience, such as shared beliefs or concerns are therefore popular themes of symbolic value, and this includes shared religious beliefs (see Barnett, 1998).

The chapter focuses on the discourses surrounding the JCPOA as well as the discourses of those members of the Saudi and Iranian political elite that constitute their country’s most important representatives in foreign policy related issues on the international stage. In what follows, the chapter will first provide useful context on the nuclear deal before drawing a brief sketch of the Saudi-Iranian relationship and their foreign policy priorities. The chapter then explores the theoretical background in order to understand how the Saudi and Iranian political elites use frames and narratives, i.e., the deployment of symbolic power in their discourses to influence the perception of the Islamic Republic.

## THE NUCLEAR DEAL: SOURCE OF DISCONTENT

Hassan Rouhani's election as president of the Islamic Republic of Iran on June 15, 2013, marked a significant change after eight years of the neo-conservative government of his predecessor Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (see Ehteshami and Zweiri, 2007). Since the beginning of its mandate, Rouhani's government had placed great importance on the pursuance of negotiations for a nuclear agreement, and it had also been one of Rouhani's most important campaign promises leading up to the elections. Under Ahmadinejad, Iran had spiralled far away from potentially coming to an arrangement regarding Iran's nuclear activities. With Rouhani, however, such agreement had come again within close reach. Midway through Rouhani's first term, negotiations had made significant advances and eventually culminated in the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), signed on July 14, 2015, in Vienna. The deal had taken more than ten years to be negotiated and finalized. The signing of the deal led to Iran experiencing a brief upsurge in its position in the international community and its relations with the world seemed to take a positive turn and improve after many years of negative press and containment.

Iran, just like its image, now seemed to rise like phoenix from the ashes. Media coverage on Iran also took a positive turn and for a while, Iran was represented in much more favourable terms than before the agreement. Apart from positive news coverage, a series of favourable reports and documentaries emerged, increasingly advertising Iran as an appealing tourist destination highlighting its ancient history and cultural sites and assets. But not only Iran's image benefitted from the outcome of negotiations, also the outlook regarding economics and finances took an optimistic turn. With the signing of the JCPOA, Iran's economy started to draw a long-denied breath and the growth rate increased significantly, while the inflation rate decreased to single digits. With a considerably large and young population, Iran constitutes a very attractive market for foreign investors. While Rouhani himself ventured out on a 'shopping trip,' amongst others, to acquire much needed new airplanes for Iran's aging fleet, other countries were quick to send diplomatic and economic delegations to Iran to be at the forefront of unearthing new business and investment possibilities. The prospects for the future were promising and initially, the signatories seemed satisfied with the deal.

A year later, the enthusiasm that had gripped Iran's government could be felt in President Rouhani's speech at the UN General Assembly on September 22, 2016. Full of optimism, Rouhani affirms that the nuclear deal "confirmed the peaceful nature of Iran's nuclear program through devising confidence-building mechanisms, closing the so-called 'possible military dimension' file and reinstating Iran's right to develop a peaceful nuclear program. This deal also put an end to unfounded concerns and led to the

removal of the brutal sanctions against Iran” (Rouhani, 2016). Nevertheless, a possible pull-out on part of the US had already been looming on the horizon at that time. With the election of a new president, the United States had soon changed its stance on the nuclear deal and started to voice dissatisfaction with the overall framework. Before long, the euphoria initially surrounding the signing of the deal and the beginning normalization of Iran’s foreign relations, the positive aspirations quickly turned sour. Less than three years after its inception, the United States unilaterally withdrew from the JCPOA, reinstated sanctions and subsequently began a campaign of maximum pressure on Iran. Both moves have been and are supported by Saudi Arabia (Al-Jubeir, 2019), who considered the JCPOA to be a weak deal (CFR, 2019). Until the US’ withdrawal, however, Saudi Arabia had started to grow increasingly uneasy in regard to the possibilities opening up for Iran and therefore the potential consequences that were arising from the JCPOA for the regional balance of power and consequently itself. As a result, Saudi-Iranian relations reached a new low point.

## SAUDI-IRANIAN RELATIONSHIP

Describing the Saudi-Iranian relationship, while remaining tacitly optimistic about future developments, Al-Badhi has remarked that “[g]eography has made the two countries neighbours, but history has not made them friends, economics has not made them partners, and necessity has not made them allies” (Al-Badi, 2017, 189). Saudi Arabia and Iran aspire to occupy equally powerful and dominant positions in the region and positions of influence in the international system, leading to regular disputes and conflicts. While the relation between Saudi Arabia and Iran is marked by periodical changes in amicability, ranging from tacit rapprochement to the hostile breakdown of diplomatic relations, both states’ interaction with one another is overall conditioned by a drive for regional influence and competition over the oil market. In this sense, the nature of their relation is therefore marked by geopolitics rather than religion and their at times complicated relationship is consequently a product of conflicting interests rather than sect-based difference (Matthiesen, 2013, p. 20). With foreign policy serving to balance domestic politics, the struggle of Saudi Arabia and Iran at foreign policy level also reveals the battles that both countries fight at the domestic level to secure the continuity of existing structures of power (Mabon, 2018, p. xiii).

The Iranian Revolution represents a major turning point in Iran’s contemporary history. From the perspective of Iran, in the words of its foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif (2014, p. 51), “[t]he



repercussions were drastic, and the revolution deeply affected the country's foreign relations, not only in its immediate neighbourhood but also throughout the greater Middle East and the rest of the world." A major consequence for revolutionary Iran was its increasing isolation by regional and international actors. Since the revolution, the Saudis were the sole occupants of a position that Iran could not challenge anymore from its place in isolation. Before the revolution, both countries had been allied with the United States, which subsequently turned its back on Iran after the rupture of relations and elevated Saudi Arabia as its main anchor and energy provider in the region. A mutually beneficial relationship, where in exchange, the US provided Saudi Arabia with the desired feeling of security. Recent developments have given rise to much speculation about the possibility of a direct military confrontation between Saudi Arabia and Iran. While to date, they are not engaging in a direct war with one another, they do, however, assume militarily active or passive supporting roles for opposing sides in a number of regional conflicts, such as the wars in Yemen and Syria (see Phillips, 2016) or in other hotly contested arenas such as Lebanon, Iraq, the Gulf states or even Afghanistan.

In addition, there are a number of other issues of contention, leading repeatedly to disputes. One of them is the Hajj, the annual pilgrimage to Mecca, which represents an important and indispensable pillar in the exercise of the Islamic faith.<sup>25</sup> Though following different currents of Islam, the annual Hajj and the holy cities of Mecca and Medina are equally important to Muslims of both countries. Although there are numerous other popular holy cities open to pilgrimages, and particularly the sites in Kerbala and Najaf in Iraq have increasingly been promoted by Iran and hence, gained in importance, they are no substitute to Mecca. Consequently, every year, Saudi Arabia is the recipient of a large flow of pilgrims and will therefore always occupy a special role when it comes to the annual ritual of pilgrimage. Nonetheless, not every year is peaceful and various incidents during the Hajj itself have further contributed to the souring of relations on a regular basis (Graham-Harrison, Kamali Dehgan and Mohammed Salih, 2015). The Hajj has been highly politicized for decades and depending on the state of relations between Saudi and Iran, Saudi Arabia might decide not to open its doors, or Iran might ask its citizens to refrain from travelling there (Reuters, 2016; Bozorgmehr and Kerr, 2016). The last time Iran 'boycotted' the Hajj was after the breakdown of diplomatic relations in 2016, following an attack on the Saudi embassy in Tehran in January of the same year that succeeded the execution of Shia cleric Sheikh Nimr al-Nimr in Riyadh.

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<sup>25</sup> Essentially, there are two different types of pilgrimage. The Hajj, carried out once a year during certain specified periods and the Umrah, which is shorter than the Hajj and subject to less stringent requirements and can be carried out any time during the year.

## SAUDI & IRANIAN FOREIGN POLICY PRIORITIES

### SAUDI ARABIA

Foreign policy is an important means of engagement for Saudi Arabia and Iran on a regional and international scale. However, it is also an important tool when it comes to supporting domestic politics and accomplishing domestic priorities and safeguarding their national interests. They share these objectives as well as a desire for peace, security, and stability in the region. In consequence, both name the region as their foremost foreign policy priority.

It is the kingdom's vision to lead "Saudi diplomacy to achieve and safeguard national interests, and promote the Kingdom's contribution to security, stability and prosperity in the region and in the world" (Kingdom of Saudi Arabia Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2016). On the domestic front, Saudi Arabia seeks to modernize the country, to foster a large number of changes and to explore new avenues of income in preparation for the post-oil era. With its Vision 2030, Saudi Arabia sets forth an ambitious national project, driven by the Saudi leadership in order to effect changes that will lead to the diversification of its economy and the development and strengthening of a number of different public service sectors such as health, education, infrastructure, recreation and tourism, but also sectors such as mining, minerals as well as innovation and technology. By opening up new areas of investment, Saudi Arabia seeks to attract not only domestic but also new foreign investors (Al-Jubeir, 2019). While becoming less oil dependent in the coming years, the overall aim is to sustain and develop other parts of its economy.

At the same time, Saudi Arabia faces a growing, young population that demands change, but not less comfort and security than previous generations. It becomes a balancing act to sustain the traditional Saudi social contract amidst a shifting regional power structure and to satisfy the aspirations of a growing, majorly young population. The empowerment of Saudi Arabia's youth is therefore one of its main domestic policy priorities, along with the empowerment of women, the opening up of public spaces, and the encouragement of a culture of innovation and technology (Al-Jubeir, 2019). Promoted and projected in positive terms both at home as well as abroad, these changes are not only important Saudi domestic policy priorities but in fact essential pillars for the realization of Crown Prince Mohammad Bin Salman's Vision 2030. And furthermore, providing people with opportunity, with hope and with jobs, according to Al-Jubeir (2019), is ultimately also a way to secure domestic stability and peace.

What is it that Saudi Arabia is looking for in the region? With domestic politics being its utmost priority and in order to be able to pursue overriding domestic goals such as the preservation of domestic stability and domestic relations of power, Saudi Arabia is looking for a stable region to be able to concentrate on its internal affairs (Al-Jubeir, 2019). In that spirit, Saudi Arabia's foreign policy priorities focus on the neighbours that surround it, across the Persian Gulf and the Red Sea. In line with their aims, this includes particular focal points and sources of tension with Iran such as Syria, Yemen, but also Iraq, Lebanon, the Gulf States – particularly Bahrain and Qatar – and Afghanistan.

In Syria, a conflict where Iran and Saudi Arabia have taken up opposing positions, with Iran supporting the regime of Bashar Al-Assad and Saudi Arabia supporting several opposition groups, Saudi Arabia – though militarily involved – is looking for a political settlement. However, this settlement shall result in “a stable, unified Syria with no Iranian influence” (Al-Jubeir, 2019). Similarly, in Yemen, a strategically important country for Saudi Arabia, Saudi Arabia and Iran find themselves on opposing sides. Iran, however, is much less militarily involved than often portrayed. And here too, Saudi Arabia is looking for a political process that will lead to “a unified Yemen, and the objective is a Yemen in which Iran has no role” (CFR, 2019). In Iraq, Saudi Arabia would like to foster trade relations and investment in an overall stable Iraq, which from the Saudi perspective would equally necessitate a retreat on the part of Iran. Lebanon represents another arena where both actors seek to exert influence.

Saudi Arabia's endeavours became apparent in 2017, when Lebanese Prime Minister Saad Hariri resigned publicly on live television and failed to return to Lebanon as planned, when on official invitation in Saudi Arabia. However, shortly after arriving back in Lebanon, he resumed his post. Lebanon is also home to Hezbollah, a politically and militarily active, Shia Islamist movement, often portrayed as a ‘puppet of Iran’ or ‘Iranian proxy’ because of its alliance of interdependence with its religio-political patron, the Islamic Republic of Iran (Saouli, 2019). In the eyes of the Saudis, Hezbollah is simply a ‘terrorist group’ (CFR, 2019). Saudi Arabia is also the main instigator of an ongoing diplomatic crisis and blockade of the neighbouring state of Qatar, which started in 2017, according to Al-Jubeir “[b]ecause Qatar continues to fund extremists and terrorists and continues to involve itself in our internal affairs” (CFR, 2019). The blockade hasn't been lifted since. In Afghanistan, Saudi Arabia seeks to exert influence on the balance of power by mediating between the government and the Taliban (Al-Jubeir, 2019). Across the Red Sea, Saudi Arabia actively engages with countries such as Ethiopia, Eritrea and Djibouti, which have endured a long-lasting severance of relations with one another.

Nonetheless, Saudi Arabia's greatest concern remains its most important competitor for regional influence, the Islamic Republic of Iran. Iran is seen as threatening to Saudi Arabia achieving the goals it

has set for itself, and therefore works on supplanting Iran by diminishing “Iranian influence” (Al-Jubeir, 2019) across the region.

## THE ISLAMIC REPUBLIC OF IRAN

Similar to Saudi Arabia, Iran’s foreign policy priorities are closely connected to its domestic priorities. As mentioned earlier, Iran’s economy had been badly affected by the years of sanctions and isolation prior to the nuclear deal. As a consequence, Iran experienced growing economic hardship, including difficulty to trade oil, its most important asset and primary source of foreign currency. Also tensions with countries within and outside of the region had risen perceptibly. As a result, the new government is under heavy pressure and therefore, improving the economic situation and stabilizing the internal state of affairs was therefore a primary objective for Rouhani and his government. The path to this went through the improvement of international relations in order to emerge from the ongoing and decades long isolation, to re-enter the international financial system and regain legitimacy on the international stage. Rouhani and his government build on a more pragmatic approach on the international stage and reengage in dialogue in order to seek relief from the sanctions and to enable Iran to re-enter the international community. The nuclear deal forms part of a series of efforts by subsequent Iranian governments to normalize relations on a regional and international level. The nuclear deal was an opportunity to gain trust, better its relations, and therefore its economic and financial situation.

In line with the constitution, but in contrast to the preceding government of Ahmadinejad, Rouhani placed his fortunes on fostering the normalization of relations with countries in the region and beyond. In commitment to its identity as an Islamic Republic, among the obligations of the government set forth in the Iranian constitution,<sup>26</sup> the government is supposed to “develop foreign policy based on Islamic standards, brotherly obligations vis-à-vis all Muslims and unqualified support for all the oppressed nations of the world” (Islamic Consultative Assembly, 1989, article 3, p. 11). In an article published in 2014 in Foreign Affairs, the foreign minister, Mohammad Javad Zarif, lays out further principles of post-revolutionary Iranian foreign policy, which include “the preservation of Iran’s independence, territorial integrity, and national security and the achievement of long-term, sustainable national development. Beyond its borders, Iran seeks to enhance its regional and global stature; to promote its ideals, including

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<sup>26</sup> See the Islamic Consultative Assembly (1989), particularly article 3 and articles 152-155.

Islamic democracy; to expand its bilateral and multilateral relations, particularly with neighbouring Muslim-majority countries and nonaligned states; to reduce tensions and manage disagreements with other states; to foster peace and security at both the regional and the international levels through positive engagement; and to promote international understanding through dialogue and cultural interaction” (Zarif, 2014, p. 49). In addition, the constitution underlines that while supporting “the rightful struggle of the oppressed people against their oppressors anywhere in the world,” the Islamic Republic would completely refrain “from any interference in the internal matters of other nations” (Islamic Consultative Assembly, 1989, article 154, p. 43). Interference in the internal affairs of others is in fact a major point of criticism towards Iran from the Saudi side, which will be discussed later in the chapter.

Similar to Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy priorities, apart from a focus on domestic politics, its region and its neighbours are Iran’s main concern (Zarif, 2013) and a peaceful, stable and secure region is cited as desirable aim (Araghchi, 2018). Not unlike Saudi Arabia, Iran advocates for political settlements for ongoing conflicts rather than military solutions (Araghchi, 2018). These include the previously mentioned wars in Syria and Yemen in the preceding section on Saudi Arabia’s foreign policy priorities. Regional focal points overlap with those of Saudi Arabia and those are, apart from Syria and Yemen, Iraq, Lebanon, the Gulf States, and Afghanistan. Promoting dialogue, Iran is looking to first improve its relations in the Persian Gulf region through initiating a regional dialogue forum, with the potential to extending to the neighbouring area (Araghchi, 2018).

Therefore, regionally, Iran’s first priority is its neighbours in the Persian Gulf and this, because Iran believes that its own domestic security and stability is intertwined with the stability and security of other countries in the region (Zarif, 2013). Consequently, while pursuing its aims regarding the normalization of relations with Western countries, the normalization of relations with regional states is equally important to Iran. In the foreign minister’s own words, “[i]n our interconnected world, the fate of one nation is tied to the destinies of its neighbours” (Zarif, 2013). All in the spirit of dialogue, exercising what the foreign minister calls “constructive interaction,” he directs attention to common interests, common threats and common challenges, but also common opportunities and a common destiny that Saudi Arabia and Iran share with the rest of neighbouring countries (Zarif, 2013). Zarif (2013) cites a number of so-called imperatives for common security and development. Among those are the prevention of tension in the region, curbing extremism and terrorism, the promotion of harmony between various Islamic sects, the preservation of Iran’s territorial integrity, the assurance of Iran’s political independence, ensuring of the free flow of oil and the protection of a shared environment.

## FRAMES, NARRATIVES & THE PROJECTION OF SYMBOLIC POWER

In their interactions with one another as well as with third parties Saudi Arabia and Iran are engaging regularly and repeatedly in strategic framing and the creation of narratives about themselves, current and past affairs and importantly, about others. As the chapter argues, the competition that Saudi Arabia and Iran engage in has a symbolic dimension and both of them equally endeavour to shape the image of the Islamic Republic in accordance with their convictions. In so doing, they are capitalizing, amongst others, on the symbolic power of discursive phenomena such as narratives and frames to legitimize themselves or delegitimize the other and their actions. The discourses are interdependent, and each narrative produces a reply or counter-narrative. To understand Saudi Arabia's and Iran's purposeful representation of the other and the self respectively through narratives and frames, the following section discusses what narratives and frames actually are and the potentials ascribed to them.

Narratives are a powerful means to interpret and make sense of the world around us and through narratives it is possible to connect with and to transmit political views to an audience in a more direct way than through the mere use of rational arguments. Because of their more immediate quality, prospective recipients more easily internalize messages that are conveyed through narratives (De Fina, 2018, p. 239). When narratives are employed purposefully to reach certain goals, they become strategic. The goal being here to direct one's audience to act or think in a way they otherwise might not have done (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle, 2013, p. 34). Concretely, "[s]trategic narratives are representations of a sequence of events and identities, a communicative tool through which political actors, usually elites- attempt to give determined meaning to past, present, and future in order to achieve political objectives. Critically, strategic narratives integrate interests and goals- they articulate end states and suggest how to get there" (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle, 2013, p. 7). In this sense, actors' strategic goals include, amongst others, the legitimation and delegitimation through positive and negative self- and other representation and "may be designed with short-term and/ or long-term goals in mind" (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle, 2013, p. 11). By constructing a shared meaning of the past, present, and future of political circumstances through strategic narratives, political actors are able to shape the behaviour of other actors domestically and internationally (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle, 2013, p. 3). In consequence, strategic narratives become "a tool for political actors to extend their influence, manage expectations, and change the discursive environment in which they operate" (Miskimmon, O'Loughlin and Roselle, 2013, p. 3). In this sense, the one who is able to dominate or influence certain narratives, and the ways in which they are told, consequently occupies a powerful position (Bottici, 2010, p. 919). And especially when narratives are widely shared and

circulated through the media and especially social media, narratives are capable of shaping “public perception about politically relevant events, relations and people” (De Fina, 2018, p. 236). Furthermore, they filter into people’s minds and become part of their habitus through a process of ‘accrual’ (De Fina, 2018, p. 237). In this context, Ali Ansari (2006, p. 5) has observed, “an opinion repeated often enough becomes fact. Consensus becomes common sense, and common sense structures our thoughts.”

However, it is important to point out that while political actors engage in the strategic use of narratives, their ability to construct them is not limitless. Strategic narratives are malleable and dynamic and subject to a continuous process of negotiation and re-negotiation. And they are also shaped by political actors’ interactions with their societies, their own and their societies’ belief system and by the “domestic and international political contexts, the communication environment, and the goals of the political leadership” (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Roselle, 2013, pp. 6-7). In other words, the “parameters of a state’s strategic narratives are bounded by prevailing domestic and international understandings and expectations of that state, readings of its history, and evaluations of its reputation” (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Roselle, 2013, p. 11). In this sense, narratives are understood here as both, as structuring the thoughts and actions of actors as well as tools of persuasion (Miskimmon, O’Loughlin and Roselle, 2013, p. 20). In order to work, the narratives need to be embedded in the political or social imaginary and resonate in a certain context with a certain audience, at home and abroad. In other words, while actors have a certain amount of agency, they are also constrained by certain existing structures.

Frames make narratives more tangible, by adding an evaluative, categorizable interpretation. Frames make an event politically meaningful and intelligible by situating it “within a particular story line in order to locate that event, organize the experience, and guide the action” (Barnett, 1998, pp. 40-41). Frames are “specific metaphors, symbolic representations, and cognitive cues used to render or cast behavior and events in an evaluative mode” (Zald, 1996, p. 262) and therefore take part in shaping our interpretation of the world. They are established and preconceived ideas that are activated in people’s minds through the use of certain language, i.e. certain terms. In order to make reference to an existent frame and hence to conjure up certain ideas, terms that connect to that frame will be used. Once a frame is created and established through repetition, it can be called upon any time. Frames, as mental structures are invisible, but nonetheless are defining our approach to our environment, how we perceive it and how we interpret it. In other words, framing consists of the filtering of certain elements of reality and the reassembly into a comprehensive narrative. Frames therefore do influence how we act, think, feel, form an opinion and take decisions. Consequently, through a dedicated and focused process of reframing public discourse, by using different language repeatedly, it is possible to change

how the public sees the world. Therefore, careful and strategic framing constitutes a means for actors to advance their interests and thus, they compete over the representation of certain events, other actors or also themselves in order to shape people's view of them.

Put differently, in Lisa Wedeen's (2015, p. 30) words, "politics is not merely about material interests but also about contests over the symbolic world, over the management and appropriation of meanings." Frames shape actor's self- and other representation and serve to legitimize and delegitimize the actions of the other and the self and to enhance or diminish the image of the self and the other, i.e., influence how the world interprets actors, their actions and behaviour and in consequence, to galvanize regional and international support for their positions. This power of influence is referred to here as symbolic power. Studying the deployment of symbolic power tells us a lot about how the two actors themselves would like to be perceived and how the other should be perceived. Through strategic framing and the construction of strategic narratives, actors define and enable certain postures, actions, what can or cannot be said about oneself and others. In this sense, the purposeful employment of sectarian identities is not necessarily the expression of the feeling of a threat, but rather deployed for strategic aims because of a fear of losing power or influence, at home and abroad.

## STRATEGIC FRAMING OF THE SELF AND THE OTHER & THE FORMATION OF NARRATIVES

The advent of the nuclear deal tapped into Saudi Arabia's fears of a change in the regional balance of power and that Iran would be empowered to significantly expand its influence and cross-border relations, with Saudi Arabia falling far behind. This is reflected in the way Saudi Arabia represents Iran, where it can be observed that Saudi Arabia is generally portraying Iran as a threat and in order to do so, frames Iran in explicitly negative terms, which are supposed to evoke suspicion, insecurity, distrust and fear. With this, Saudi Arabia is offering an interpretation of the character, behaviour and actions of the Islamic Republic, aimed at delegitimizing Iran and therefore affect change in the way other states view and deal with the Islamic Republic. For every narrative Saudi Arabia produces about Iran, Iran delivers a counter-narrative about itself. Consequently, while engaging in the construction of narrative and counter-narrative, Saudi Arabia and Iran mutually shape their discourses through this exchange. While their discourses are pronounced on the international stage, in what can be considered foreign policy discourse, they are never unidirectional. They are reciprocally directed at an international as well



as a domestic audience. Saudi Arabia and Iran equally try to appeal to the international and regional community, their relations and allies, their contenders, as well as their own population and the population of the other.

In principle, Saudi Arabia is continuously and repeatedly resorting to the same narratives and frames, and they permeate Saudi's official communication on Iran. Narratives formed by Saudi representatives that are especially prominent include: "Iran talks pretty, but its actions show otherwise;" "Iran intends to export the revolution;" "Iran commits and supports acts of terrorism;" "Iran interferes in other countries' affairs." An opinion piece published in the New York Times in early January 2016, written by then Saudi foreign minister Adel Bin Ahmed Al-Jubeir (2016) where he asks, "Can Iran Change?" serves to exemplarily exhibit some of these narratives:

*"The world is watching Iran for signs of change, hoping it will evolve from a rogue revolutionary state into a respectable member of the international community. But Iran, rather than confronting the isolation it has created for itself, opts to obscure its dangerous sectarian and expansionist policies (...) The Iranian government's behaviour has been consistent since the 1979 revolution. The constitution that Iran adopted states the objective of exporting the revolution. As a consequence, Iran has supported violent extremist groups, including Hezbollah in Lebanon, the Houthis in Yemen and sectarian militias in Iraq."*

Al-Jubeir uses negatively connoted, classificatory adjectives to frame Iran, its actions and relations. While Iran should be a respectable member of the international community, in fact, it is a rogue revolutionary state that acts in obscure, dangerous, sectarian and expansionist ways and all the while supports violent extremist groups and sectarian militias. The excerpt bears the implicit question, 'knowing all of this, how can you trust Iran?' The reference to expansionary policies and the export of the revolution along with references to its activities in Lebanon and Yemen are supposed to display Iran's interference in other countries' affairs and its disregard for their sovereignty. In this context, an intention of restoring the Persian Empire and to take over the region is alluded to alongside the supposed call for the destruction of Saudi Arabia in accordance with Khomeini's will (CFR, 2019). The use of qualitatively negative nouns and adjectives to construct frames of crime, violence, and terror play on feelings of fear and insecurity and bring Iran in close association with illegality, dishonesty, and illegitimacy. Sectarianism here has a clear negative connotation and is used to underline divisionary practices on part of Iran. While conceding that relations with Iran have not always been poor, and there is hope for a betterment of current relations in the future, nevertheless,

*“... after the revolution of 1979, Iran embarked on a policy of sectarianism. Iran began a policy of expanding its revolution, of interfering with the affairs of its neighbours, a policy of assassinating diplomats and of attacking embassies. Iran is responsible for a number of terrorist attacks in the Kingdom, it is responsible for smuggling explosives and drugs into Saudi Arabia. And Iran is responsible for setting up sectarian militias in Iraq, Pakistan, Afghanistan and Yemen, whose objective is to destabilize those countries” (Shafy and Zand, 2016).*

Iran is largely portrayed as responsible for acts of crime and terror in Saudi Arabia and the immediate and further region. The negative framing contributes to shaping the perception of Iran and therefore to delegitimize Iran and its actions and to offset Iran’s narratives about itself. The terms assassination, attack, terror, smuggle, drugs and militias equate Iran to a criminal and illegitimate actor instead of a legitimate self-interested acting state in the region. In response, and in connection to the sectarian allegations, Iran puts forward the following during the UN General Assembly in 2016, where President Rouhani declares:

*“Iran opposes any kind of sectarianism and any attempt to promote religious gaps. The Muslim people, be they Shi’as or Sunnis have and continue to live together for centuries in harmony and mutual respect. Attempts to turn religious dissimilarities into tense confrontations is rooted in vested interests of certain countries, which try to hide their quest for power covered in religious slogans” (Rouhani, 2016).*

President Rouhani portrays Iran as actively rejecting the mobilization of sectarian identities for political ends, while at the same time promoting the unity of Muslims. In line with this statement, Iran overall tries to strike a rather conciliatory tone regarding its foreign relations, and particularly when it comes to its neighbours. Iran seeks to portray itself as benevolent, cooperative, and trustworthy, possessing a good portion of ‘team spirit’. To this end, emphasis is generally placed on togetherness, common goals and guiding principles such as mutual respect and non-interference that should inform relations in order to achieve a better outcome for all countries of the region (Zarif, 2013, p. 2). At the inception of his assignment, Iran’s foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif stresses therefore for example common bonds of religion, history and culture and assures Iran’s neighbours that they had a reliable partner in Iran that extended its hand in friendship and Islamic solidarity to them (Zarif, 2013, p. 2). Thus, as outlined previously, Iran’s primary foreign policy priority is Iran’s region and its neighbours (Zarif, 2013, p. 1). And in fact, in the opinion of the foreign minister, good neighbourly relations in the immediate

and further neighbourhood and the mutual consideration of interests are pivotal for Iran's own national security.

Zarif has written in this context that “[p]rosperity cannot be pursued at the expense of others’ poverty, and security cannot be achieved at the expense of the security of others. We will either win together or lose together. We are capable of working together, trusting one another, combining our potential, and building a more secure and prosperous region” (Zarif, 2013, p. 1). In this continuous competition to influence and shape the perception of itself, the counter-narratives that the Islamic Republic produces in response to the Saudi narratives, include, “our nuclear program is for peaceful purposes only;” “nuclear energy is our right;” “we do not interfere in the affairs of others, we respect the sovereignty of other countries;” “our neighbours are our priority, and we extend our hand in friendship.”

Furthermore, apart from recounting the present, Saudi Arabia regularly and frequently resorts to narrating a number of specific past events to show that Iran's behaviour has a recurring pattern and that it is not a phenomenon exclusive to the present. Reaching into the past, Al-Jubeir, therefore seeks to evoke a projection and extrapolation of Iran's expected future conduct. The revolution of 1979 is used to mark a decisive moment and turning point in Iran's behaviour. According to Saudi Arabia, “[t]he Iranians are on a rampage and have been on a rampage since 1979” (Al-Jubeir, 2019) and “[s]ince the Iranian revolution forty years ago, all we've seen from Iran is death and destruction” (CFR, 2019). The ‘nefarious’ actions that Iran has committed since the revolution as claimed by Saudi Arabia, include attacks on embassies in Beirut and Tehran, the kidnapping and assassination of Saudi diplomats as well as diplomats of other nationalities, an attack on the Hajj, the blow up of Khobar Towers in Saudi Arabia and a synagogue in Argentina (Al-Jubeir, 2019). The stated past events and actions, showing “a consistent record of evil” (CFR, 2019) that Saudi Arabia finds condemnable, are brought up time and again. They are cited with regular frequency and purposefully connect Iran to frames of crime, terror, and unlawfulness. The intended message to be understood by the audience, that even if Iran talks pretty today, it cannot be trusted, as since 1979, there has not been a positive change in its ‘murderous’ and ‘aggressive’ behaviour and all they have engaged in were criminal activities (CFR, 2019). The continuous repetition of these negative statements about Iran has the potential to permanently influence the image of Iran in a derogatory way and to gradually turn into facts.

The nuclear deal is placed in this context of a criminally acting Iran, that would receive now even more money to further its previously described and negatively portrayed activities in the region: “The Iranians took money from the nuclear deal, and they used it to double down in Syria, and Yemen, and Iraq, and

they increased the budgets for the Revolutionary Guards and the Quds Forces” (CFR, 2019). In addition, while using “the income from the JCPOA in order to fund its mischievous activities,” Iran “didn’t use that income to improve the living standard of its people” (Al-Jubeir, 2019). Al-Jubeir lends himself as witness to underline the argument by giving it the strength of a personal testimony: “I personally have not read about any infrastructure project that Iran did since the nuclear deal. I haven’t heard of them building a university or hospital” (CFR, 2019). In this sense, Iran is not only carrying out reprehensible activities, but also does so to the disadvantage of its people. The Saudi foreign minister is building on the presupposition that if actions are carried out to the detriment of one’s own people, they cannot be justified by any means. Because of Iran’s incorrigible nature, Saudi Arabia “would like to see actions rather than words” (Al-Jubeir 2019) and this means “no nukes for Iran under any scenario whatsoever, no missiles, and no terrorism and interference in the affairs of other countries” (CFR, 2019).

Iran counters the allegations by referring to a fatwa by Khamenei that it had “never had the intention of producing a nuclear weapon” (Rouhani, 2015) and that its program was for peaceful purposes only (Munich Security Conference, 2015). Quite contrary to Saudi Arabia’s perspective, Iran does of course not portray itself as prime instigator of regional discord, instability, and insecurity, but quite to the contrary, a catalyst for peace, security and stability:

*“Any objective analysis of Iran’s unique attributes within the larger context of its tumultuous region would reveal the country’s significant potential for a prominent regional and global role. The Islamic Republic can actively contribute to the restoration of regional peace, security, and stability and play a catalytic role during this current transitional state in international relations” (Zarif, 2014, p. 52).*

By implication, anyone rationally assessing the Islamic Republic should be inclined to agree with Iran’s foreign minister. However, this, by further implication excludes Saudi Arabia. Still, Iran promotes regional engagement and cooperation with all actors and the nuclear deal is portrayed as enabling these activities that will bring the region together in reciprocally beneficial ways:

*“After the JCPOA, Iran will stand ready to show that the practical path to security and stability is through the development that comes with economic engagement. (...) Iran is also eager to show that we can all choose a lasting peace based on development and shared interests that will lead to a sustainable security rather than a volatile peace based on threats. We hope to engage with our neighbours in a wide range of social and economic cooperation, which will enable the achievement of political understanding and*

*even foster structural security cooperation. In the international system today, mutual economic ties are deemed the foremost factors in facilitating political cooperation and reducing security-related challenges” (Rouhani, 2015).*

With the intention to build trust and regional legitimacy and to enhance the image and perception of the Islamic Republic, Iranian officials are bringing Iran in close association with positively connoted terms such as contribution, development, shared interests, engagement, cooperation as well as achievement and links itself with regional desirabilities such as peace, security and stability. Just as Saudi officials repeat its narratives about Iran, Iran is repeating its own positively framed narratives about itself throughout its official communication attempting to dominate public perception, and therefore the ways in which Iran and its actions are interpreted and dealt with. For Saudi Arabia, the way forward, however, before any cooperation can happen is summed up in a statement by Al-Jubeir:

*“So change your policy. Become a good neighbour. Stop this nonsense of terrorism, implanting terrorist cells, assassinations, providing ballistic missiles to militias. Stop that, respect the sovereignty of nations, (...), and international law, and we’d love to be your best friend” (CFR, 2019).*

## CONCLUSION

The quest for international, regional, but also domestic legitimacy permeates the discourses of both countries’ officials and their symbolic exchange on the international stage is simultaneously directed at an international and a domestic audience. The nuclear deal signified a major incision in the regional balance of power, going beyond, but also amplifying the effects that any other current issue or conflict might have on the regional status quo. The chapter has examined how Saudi Arabia and Iran are engaging in the purposeful and strategic construction of frames and narratives to evaluate, qualify, and categorize the character and actions of the Islamic Republic in accordance with their respective positions towards the implementation of the JCPOA. Saudi Arabia had grown ever more uneasy about the upheaval in the regional equilibrium and started to increasingly proliferate the portrayal of Iran as a threat to the region and beyond.

Through their discursive interaction, conditioned by the signing of the nuclear deal, both actors aim therefore at dominating the public perception of Iran. Saudi Arabia does so by employing frames and narratives that contribute to delegitimizing and negatively representing Iran, its actions and relations, while the Islamic Republic aims at positive self-representation and the legitimation of itself and its actions. To this end, their deployment of symbolic power in foreign policy discourse includes the mobilization or demobilization, for that matter, of sectarian identities. The competition of words over representation and perception will continue until both states settle comfortably in their positions and will feel their priorities and interests fulfilled. Until then, and because words matter, their discursive struggle over influence and legitimacy to ultimately secure their own regimes' survival will continue to make its mark on possibilities for regional peace, stability and security. However, with the United States, unilaterally abandoning the nuclear deal in 2018, the Saudi narrative seemed to have gained vindication and therefore the upper hand in the contest over shaping the perception of the Islamic Republic. With the US being a critical factor in the Saudi-Iran relationship, the US presidential elections of November 2019 might yet again alter the situation by influencing Iran's position in the international system and the balance of power anew. However, this will not solely depend on the next president of the United States and his administration, but also, and potentially even more so, on the outcome of the Iranian presidential elections in June 2021.

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## 7 PUBLICATION IV

TITLE	A Question of Discursive Hegemony: Iran's and Turkey's Foreign Policy Approach Towards Their Arab Neighbours
AUTHOR	Olivia Glombitza
AFFILIATION	Autonomous University of Barcelona
PUBLICATION TYPE	Peer-reviewed journal article
JOURNAL/ PUBLISHER	International Affairs
QUARTILE	Q1 (SJR 2020); Q1 (JCR 2020)
STATUS	Submitted

## A QUESTION OF DISCURSIVE HEGEMONY: IRAN'S AND TURKEY'S FOREIGN POLICY APPROACH TOWARDS THEIR ARAB NEIGHBOURS

Iran and Turkey constitute two important actors whose politics and foreign relations significantly impact on their region and pertaining states. Both are non-Arab Muslim states, but while Turkey exhibits a secular political system and an overall Sunni majority population, Iran builds on an Islam inspired political system with an overall Shi'a majority. The article argues that despite contextual differences, Iran and Turkey employ a similar discursive approach towards the Arab world, which is marked by similar ideological undercurrents, but which does not particularly play on sectarian identities. Islam, however, nonetheless plays a pivotal role in the projection of their state identities and both countries use Islamic values, references, and symbols to compete for discursive hegemony and influence on the regional and domestic stage.

This article focuses on state-to-state relations and contributes a comparative study of Iran's and Turkey's foreign policy approach towards their Arab neighbours during the Qatar crisis and analyses the discursive manifestation of their competition. In doing so, it studies the ways in which the two actors use their Islamic identity to appeal to their neighbours and carves out the similarities in their approaches rather than the differences. The study adopts an interpretivist-constructivist perspective where ideas and beliefs are constitutive and condition actors' behaviour, but which can simultaneously be mobilized as instruments of power in the pursuit of strategic interests. The article contributes to larger debates on the instrumentality of ideas and beliefs in foreign policy as well as to comparative studies of Iranian and Turkish foreign policy.

**Keywords:** Iran, Turkey, Foreign Policy, Identity, Islamic Values, Discursive Hegemony

## INTRODUCTION

Iran and Turkey constitute two important actors whose politics and foreign relations have significant impact on their politically and economically agitated region and pertaining states. While there are important differences in their characteristics and regional politics there are also several significant commonalities. Both are non-Arab Muslim states in a predominantly Arab region, but whereas Turkey exhibits a secular political system and an overall Sunni majority population, Iran builds on an Islam inspired political system with an overall Shi'a majority. They share various concerns and grievances, such as the stability and security of their region and strained relations with the international community, but they have also positioned themselves on opposing sides regarding a number of regional issues, including the wars in Syria and Yemen.

While comparative studies of Iran's and Turkey's foreign policies generally focus on material action and emphasize the differences in their regional approaches (Elik, 2012; McGillivray, 2020; Keyman and Sazak, 2015; Charountaki, 2018), this article takes an alternative perspective to these positions and focuses on symbolic action and carves out the similarities in their discursive approaches towards their neighbours, rather than the differences. The article therefore argues that despite contextual differences, Iran and Turkey employ a similar discursive approach towards the Arab world, which is marked by similar ideological undercurrents, but which does not particularly play on sectarian identities. Where instrumental in competing for regional order and discursive hegemony (see Laclau and Mouffe, 1985, their discursive projection refers to shared Islamic values, references and symbolism that resonate with their target audiences. The article understands those values, references, or symbols as Islamic that are derived from or connected to the Qur'an and the hadith, the collected written accounts of the traditions of Prophet Muhammad. In other words, they are understood as Islamic in the sense that they 'relate to a widely shared, although not doctrinally defined, tradition of ideas and practice' (Eickelman and Piscatori, 1996, p. 4). Discursive hegemony in turn, is understood here to mean the dominance of one actor's discursive proposal over another one's.

Against the background of the conception of a two-level competition as formulated by Hintz (2018),<sup>27</sup> the article focuses on state-to-state relations and studies the discursive manifestation of their competition, i.e., how the two countries are seeking to appeal to their neighbours by using shared Islamic references, values, and symbolism in their foreign policy discourses. To do so, the article centres

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<sup>27</sup> See also Putnam's (1988) idea of two-level games.

on the binaries of justice – injustice as well as the oppressors – the oppressed, and the issue of Palestine to exemplarily demonstrate this. This article thus provides an in-depth qualitative study of the different ways in which the two actors use their Islamic identity in a contest over discursive hegemony to influence regional order. However, while pointing to the competition as a two-way street, the article focuses on the competitions between the Iranian and Turkish political elites, and specifically the governments of Hassan Rouhani and Recep Tayyip Erdoğan. Drawing on Persian and Turkish primary sources, the article examines Iran’s and Turkey’s foreign policies towards their Arab neighbours during the Qatar crisis from a comparative perspective. As such it analyses interviews, speeches, official statements, and promulgations by the Iranian and Turkish political elite as well as newspaper articles. The study adopts an interpretivist-constructivist perspective where ideas and beliefs are constitutive and condition actors’ behaviour, but where actors are also able to discursively mobilize ideas and beliefs as instruments of power in the pursuit of strategic interests. State identity finds expression in and meaning through discourse and accordingly, in foreign relations through foreign policy discourse. The theoretical underpinnings of the study are elite theories as well as theories of ideology and identity politics. The article contributes to larger debates on the strategic use of religious traits in foreign policy for political ends as well as to comparative studies of Iranian and Turkish foreign policy.

However, it is important to point out that while Islam is an essential component, it does not solely define state identity neither in Iran nor in Turkey, as state identities are in fact fluid, multifaceted and intersect with one another (Akbarzadeh and Barry, 2016, pp. 1-2). Religion, however, and Islam for that matter, regarded as part of Iran’s and Turkey’s strategic depth and major component of their state identities and ideologies, plays an important role in the politics and social fabric of both countries. In Iran, the Islamic Revolution of 1979 marked the end of monarchical rule and the inception of an Islamic Republic. In Turkey, Recep Tayyip Erdoğan’s Justice and Development Party’s (*Adalet ve Kalkınma Partisi*, AKP) ascension to power in 2002, infused Turkish politics with an increased Islamic perspective, contrary to the one of the previous Kemalist and secular oriented regime. In this sense, while not the only or most decisive part of their identity, Islamic values occupy an important role from a domestic and foreign policy perspective and are used to appeal to their own populations as well as to the populations of their neighbours. As such, these appeals are also a manifestation of the elite competition that is taking place at both the international and domestic level.

The next section situates the article in the literature and carves out the article’s contribution in comparison to existing works. The following sections contribute an analysis of the context that shapes Iran’s and Turkey’s elites’ foreign policy discourses and begin with an assessment of the Iranian-Turkish relationship, how both countries have positioned themselves vis-à-vis a number of regional issues,

highlighting grievances and issues of content as well as discontent between the two parties. The section thereafter provides the theoretical background to understand the Iranian and Turkish political elites' discursive employment of identity in foreign policy. This is followed by a discussion of Iran's and Turkey's proclaimed foreign policy aims and the discursive expression of similarities and differences based on Islamic values on part of the Iranian and Turkish political elite. This is followed by a conclusion.

## IDENTITY, IDEOLOGY & THE COMPETITION BETWEEN IRAN & TURKEY

Comparative works on Iran's and Turkey's foreign policies generally focus on bilateral relations and highlight the competitive element in their relationship (Elik 2012; McGillivray 2020; Keyman and Sazak 2015; Charountaki 2018). For Elik (2012, p. 27), Iranian-Turkish relations can be understood through a three-fold paradigm consisting of friendship, rivalry, and *détente*. According to him, their competition is based on geopolitical, ideological, and client or negative balance strategic considerations (Elik, 2012, p. 28). Studying Iran's and Turkey's competition over regional power projection in the case of Syria, McGillivray (2020) similarly argues that their relations are marked by competition, co-operation and confrontation. However, while acknowledging the competition, opinions differ about the characteristics of their approach and how they carry out their policies. Keyman and Sazak (2015) for example contend that while Iran is using a hegemonic and interest-based approach to the region, Turkey is using a humanitarian aid-based approach. Charountaki (2018, p. 13) argues that Iran was looking for a change in regional arrangements, whereas Turkey sought to primarily preserve the existing order. According to her view '[t]he ultimate goal of both states is the maximisation of their influence and power, yet they differ widely in the means and rhetoric they pursue to achieve that goal' (Charountaki, 2018, p. 15).

Akbarzadeh and Barry (2016, p. 613) point out that various elements of popular Iranian identity have been used regularly by different leaders of the Islamic Republic in order to 'build or burn bridges, as well as to define or justify priorities.' According to Maloney (2002, p. 91), '[t]he case of post-revolutionary Iran demonstrates the powerful, but paradoxical, instrumentality of identity in foreign affairs.' Consequently, the same is true when it comes to its Islamic identity, constituting a pivotal part of Iran's strategic depth (*umq-i rahburdi*) (Akbarzadeh and Barry, 2016, p. 614), and which, according to its foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif (2014, p. 54), is a means for Iran 'to promote its mission and message throughout the entire Islamic world.' Iran endeavours to do so particularly when dealing

with other Muslim nations from the Middle East, where their shared Islamic identity is presented as a common fundament for their relations, downplaying ethnic or sectarian differences (Akbarzadeh and Barry, 2016, p. 622). Yavuz (2003, p. 5) has argued accordingly that 'Islamic idioms and practices constitute a set of social, moral, and political cognitive maps for the Muslim imagination.' In this sense, state identities are generally a mix of various elements that speak to domestic and regional audiences and the discourses of the Iranian and Turkish political leaders seek to appeal to and mobilize different currents that are already existent, i.e., instituted in their respective societies and resonate with them. In other words, state identities and national identities are not divorced from one another.<sup>28</sup> In both countries, Islam is an important component of their state but also their national identities. Furthermore, according to Hintz (2018), identity is an important factor for understanding foreign policy. However, conversely, foreign policy is also constitutive for identity and Hintz regards foreign policy as an 'alternative arena to domestic politics in which these contests over identity take place' (Hintz, 2018, p. 4). Identity based foreign politics is therefore not only instrumental in competing with international counterparts, but also in competing with domestic opponents (Hintz, 2018, p. 4). In other words, foreign policy simultaneously serves to solidify elites' political projects at home and abroad (Saraçoğlu and Demirkol, 2015, p. 302). In line with this perspective, the competition goes both ways and Iranian and Turkish foreign policy is therefore a means for their political elites to compete with one another between states and at the same time, it is a means to compete with other elites within the same state.

Contrasting the outlined approaches focusing on material factors and the differences in Iran's and Turkey's foreign policies, this article takes an alternative perspective and highlights the similarities in their approaches by focusing on one of the symbolic aspects of their politics, i.e., the instrumentality of their Islamic identity in their foreign policy discourses towards their Arab neighbours in competing for discursive hegemony and influence over regional order. In doing so, the article contributes an in-depth qualitative study of the discursive, symbolic dimension of the making and construction of foreign policy as well as to larger debates on the strategic use of identity in general and religious traits in particular in foreign policy as well as to comparative studies on Iran's and Turkey's foreign policies.

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<sup>28</sup> According to Telhami and Barnett (2002, p. 8), "[s]tate identity can be understood as the corporate and officially demarcated identity linked to the state apparatus; national identity can be defined as a group of people who aspire to or have a historical homeland, share a common myth and historical memories, have legal rights or duties for all members, and have markers to distinguish themselves from others."

## STRATEGIC POSITIONING & ENGAGEMENT WITH THEIR ARAB NEIGHBOURHOOD

The Iranian and Turkish political elite's discourses are shaped and conditioned by a particular context of domestic and regional relations of power. During the time of the Qatar crisis, there are numerous events and instances of conflict that make up the context of the discourses. While Iran and Turkey pursue a number of conflicting regional ambitions and have therefore taken up opposing positions on several issues, there are also shared concerns that draw them closer together as well as issues where they support each other. This section examines their relationship and strategic positioning vis-à-vis pivotal regional issues of the time, such as the blockade of Qatar, the wars in Syria and Yemen, as well as the conflict in the Kurdish region of Northern Iraq. Important to mention here as part of the regional context is also the United States' perceived continuous retreat from the region, which simultaneously feeds into the perception of a certain power vacuum that both Iran and Turkey seek to fill.<sup>29</sup> This makes successful regional engagement even more imperative for both actors to reach their goals.

June 5, 2017 marks the beginning of a diplomatic crisis between Qatar and several fellow Muslim nations which lasted until January 5, 2021. While the Maldives, Mauritania, Senegal, Djibouti, the Comoros, Jordan, and the representatives of the Libyan and Yemeni governments downgraded diplomatic ties with Qatar, Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, and Egypt completely suspended them. Among the countries of the Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC)<sup>30</sup>, only Kuwait and Oman refrained from cutting ties with Qatar. This signalled a deep rupture among members of the GCC, which until then had been regarded as one of the most stable organizations of the region (Bianco & Stansfield, 2018). The State of Qatar constitutes an important anchor in the Arab Gulf states for both, Iran and Turkey. Qatar's position was therefore readily supported, ideologically, even more so, economically, by Iran and Turkey, who acted as first responders to the crisis. This did not benefit the easing of tensions, but only deepened the rift between the contending parties. In other words, while Iran on the one hand

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<sup>29</sup> For a discussion of the shift in perception of the United States' power/ weakness and how this resulted in a shift in regional actors' actions in behaviour, see POMPES (2019) Studies 34 on Shifting Global Politics and the Middle East.

<sup>30</sup> The Gulf Cooperation Council (GCC) has six members: Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates, Bahrain, Qatar, Oman, and Kuwait.



was able to improve<sup>31</sup> and Turkey on the other hand to strengthen relations with Qatar, Iran's and Turkey's overt support for Qatar further strained their relations with the blockading countries.<sup>32</sup>

Another issue of contention is Iran's and Turkey's involvement in one of the major conflicts in the region, the Syrian civil war. In this case, however, they work towards divergent goals. While Iran is an important ally for Syria's President Bashar Al-Assad, and has supported him not only ideologically, but also militarily, Turkey would like to see a regime change. The Iranian-Syrian alliance goes back many years, and Iran has had a supporter in Syria during the Iran-Iraq war; a strategic alliance that Iran has decided to still firmly hold on to after the outbreak of domestic unrest in Syria in 2011. Together with Russia, Iran has been instrumental in preventing an overthrow of President Al-Assad. At the inception of the conflict, alliance choices were initially marked by ambiguity. In the following years to come, however, the different actors settled into and continued to hold on their positions (Phillips, 2016, p. 59). Turkey and Qatar for example had initially been close to Assad, and Erdoğan had tried to use his influence to persuade him to stand down, however, to no avail and the Turkish-Syrian relationship eventually collapsed (see Robins, 2014). Consequently, after a change of heart, Turkey just like Qatar shifted their stance to oppose the Assad regime (Phillips, 2016, p. 59). And with Turkey as well as Iran providing opposing sides in the conflict with material support, they are essentially indirectly fighting one another (Akbarzadeh and Barry, 2017, p. 985).

The war in Yemen, like the war in Syria, had started as a domestic conflict and subsequently drew in other actors, whereas the focus lies often primarily on representing the conflict as a proxy war and the result of the competition for regional influence between Saudi Arabia and Iran (see Salisbury, 2015). Yemen constitutes a strategically important country, especially for Saudi Arabia and Turkey has chosen to support the Saudi position, while Iran engages in supporting the opposition. As in the Syrian conflict, positions are deeply entrenched, however, Iran and Turkey are much less militarily involved.

A case where their interests relatively converge is the Kurdish issue. Each possessing a sizeable Kurdish minority themselves, both states share the concern of a possible emergence of an independent Kurdistan in northern Iraq, which might give rise to increasing separatist motivations on part of their

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<sup>31</sup> Qatar had called back its ambassador to Iran in 2016. Iran's sustained support during the crisis eased the tensions and Qatar restored full diplomatic relations with Iran in August 2017.

<sup>32</sup> For a detailed account of the crisis, see for example Coates Ulrichsen (2020) *Qatar and the Gulf Crisis*. New York: Oxford University Press.

own Kurdish populations (Sinkaya, 2018). However, while it is a shared concern, it is not a cooperative matter and both parties are separately competing for influence in Iraq and focus their attention on different actors within the Kurdish political spectrum (see Akbarzadeh and Barry, 2017, p. 982).

Nonetheless, it remains to be pointed out that Iran and Turkey do not occupy the same position in the region in the eyes of their neighbours and their points of departure in their competition over discursive hegemony and the re-arrangement of regional order in their respective favours, therefore differ significantly. Turkey has considerable advantage over Iran when it comes to how its foreign policies are perceived in the region. While both countries proclaim the same interest in peace, stability, and security in the region (see for example Erdoğan, 2018), Iran's regional foreign policies are largely perceived as negative by the Arab world. Turkey's policies in turn, are largely perceived as positive (ACRPS, 2020). A trend already observable before the blockade of Qatar.

The preceding section has pointed out the differences and similarities in Iran's and Turkey's strategic positioning but also their different points of departure when it comes to engaging with their Arab neighbours. Building on this context, the next section outlines Iran's and Turkey's proclaimed foreign policy objectives and examines their discursive strategies.

## THE IRANIAN & TURKISH ELITES, IDEATIONAL FACTORS AND FOREIGN POLICY DISCOURSE

Interstate relations are complex and conditioned by a variety of material and ideational factors. The foreign policy discourses of the Iranian and Turkish political elites are a means to project these ideas and consequently, analysing the discourses of Iranian and Turkish representatives and the discursive strategies they employ is a means to decipher Iranian-Turkish engagement with their Arab neighbours. To unravel the competition at a domestic and international level among and between the Iranian and Turkish elites and the resources that they use, the article draws on Izquierdo Brichs' theory of the sociology of power (Izquierdo Brichs and Lampridi-Kemou, 2013; Izquierdo Brichs and Etherington, 2017; Lampridi-Kemou, 2011) and Hintz' inside-out theory of identity contestation (Hintz, 2018). The theory of the sociology of power broadly defines elites as those individuals that occupy a superior hierarchical position in social institutions and whose ability to retain this position depends on their capacity to compete for the differential accumulation of power with other elites and their control over

important power resources (Izquierdo Brichs and Etherington, 2017, pp. 50-51). Concretely, the political elite are, according to Best and Higley (2010, p. 6), composed of ‘persons who are able, by virtue of their strategic positions in powerful organizations and movements, to affect political outcomes and the workings of political institutions regularly and seriously’ and therefore it is those persons ‘who wield political influence and power in that they make strategic decisions or participate in decision-making on a national level, contribute to defining political norms and values (including the definition of “national interests”), and directly influence political discourse on strategic issues’ (Perthes, 2004, p. 5).

The article centres on the political elites in government in both Iran and Turkey during the time of the Qatar crisis and more concretely focuses on the presidents and foreign ministers of both countries. They are considered the most preeminent representatives of their governments on the international stage. As opposed to traditional International Relation’s theories such as realism, the sociology of power regards elites as actors whereas the state as well as capital, coercion, information, or ideology, are regarded as resources, which are vital instruments in the elites’ competition for power, including political power. While the theory suggests several different material and immaterial resources,<sup>33</sup> which may be used in the elite’s competition for power, this article concentrates on the resource of ideology, which is understood here according to van Dijk as a system of beliefs that is shared by a specific group of people (van Dijk, 2013, p. 177).

These beliefs may include ideas about a group’s identity, its activities, goals, norms and values, and its relations with other groups (van Dijk, 2013, p. 178). However, while overlaps exist, not all beliefs are necessarily shared by the whole sociocultural community. Differences of opinion may result in their contestation by groups of different ideological convictions (van Dijk, 2013, p. 177). Domestic and international struggles over identity, where actors seek to promote their respective ideas and beliefs are cases in point. Actors move within the social structure of their own group’s ideas and beliefs as well as those of other groups. In the Turkish case, for example, the idea of secularism, while not actively pursued by the AKP government, is a concept enshrined in the Turkish Constitution and which it cannot ignore domestically if it wanted to reach a constituency beyond its own followers. Therefore, while an actor’s own group’s specific ideas and beliefs influence actors’ actions, they are also influenced by the structurally embedded ideas and beliefs of other groups in the wider socio-cultural community. As the circumstances demand, actors will therefore seek to invoke different ideas and beliefs in their discourses that resonate with and are meaningful to their audience that they seek to address in order

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<sup>33</sup> Resources include for example the state, coercion, capital, information, and ideology.

to mobilize support for political ideas and actions. In addition, actors are further constrained by the institutionalized frame of prior discourses.<sup>34</sup> In contrast to structural ideas and beliefs which can only be influenced in the very long term and which necessitate targeted long term strategies such as changes to school curricula for example, actors, are however, able to renegotiate, reshape and reorient the discursive frame of prior discourses (Warnaar, 2013, p. 5). This is for example the case when it comes to Iran seeking to influence discourses that portray the country as a threat. These constraints explain why actors' discourses are interspersed with different ideas and do not only and exclusively reflect their own convictions and beliefs when promoting their interests.

The inside-out theory of identity contestation connects the domestic struggles for power with identity contestation through foreign policy on the international stage. Foreign policy therefore becomes an alternative arena for domestic struggles over identity (Hintz, 2018, p. 4). While the article concentrates particularly on state-to-state competition at a regional level, it highlights the reciprocal connection to domestic politics as a conditioning factor for actors' behaviour.

The article focuses on the Iranian and Turkish elites' foreign policy discourses, however, as there is a deep connection between the domestic realm and the international, pronouncements on the international stage are reciprocally addressed to a domestic audience. In the following, the article examines on the one hand, the endeavours of the Iranian and Turkish political elite to influence regional perceptions and to have their respective discursive proposals emerge as the dominant ones. On the other hand, it examines how the political elite uses popular themes of symbolic value such as Islamic references, values and symbolism that resonate with their audience's shared beliefs and particularly their shared religious beliefs to appeal to their audiences in competing for political power and to this end, for discursive hegemony and a re-arrangement in regional order.

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<sup>34</sup> Discourses are specified here as system of "interrelated statements", including concepts, classifications, and analogies that make the world meaningful or in a way construct the world' (Moshirzadeh, 2007, p. 522). Foreign policy-related discourse therefore gives 'meaning to the outside world and the positions, interests, and interactions of the self and the other in the international system' (Moshirzadeh, 2007, p. 522).

## IRAN'S & TURKEY'S FOREIGN POLICY DISCOURSE

Religious aspects play an important role not only in the social fabric, but also in the political life of Iran and Turkey. Though comprising a multitude of ethnicities and denominations, both are Muslim majority countries, however pertaining to different branches of Islam. Iran's population predominantly adheres to the Twelver branch of Shia Islam, which also constitutes the official state religion, enshrined in article 12 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic (see Constitution, 1989). The majority of Turkey's population follows the Hanafi school of Sunni Islam, but lives, however, in a state that contrary to Iran, has been set-up according to secular principles. While most of their neighbours are also Muslim majority countries, Iran and Turkey are non-Arab states in a predominantly Arab region. Iran and Turkey seek to foster ties with their neighbouring Arab states, but at the same time, they endeavour to exert substantial influence on them. It is from this perspective and position that they approach their Arab neighbours. To this end, Islam, as a common denominator, becomes an important connector which Iran and Turkey mobilize discursively. The ways in which they formulate their foreign policy aims and the discursive strategies they use, and which are supposed to support their regional political aims, are discussed in the following.

## IRAN'S & TURKEY'S PROCLAIMED FOREIGN POLICY OBJECTIVES

Iran and Turkey are ambitious. Their self-perception is one of great nations and both portray themselves as powerful regional actors. Iran understands itself as a 'solid regional power' with 'significant potential for a prominent regional and global role' (Zarif, 2014, p. 52). This point of view in combination with perceived expansionary ambitions has contributed to fears of interference in domestic affairs and has therefore been eyed with suspicion inside and outside of the region and further led to contentious relations between Iran and its neighbours (Shahandeh and Warnaar, 2016). The beginnings of which date back to the Islamic Revolution, which signified a fundamental and abrupt turning point for Iran's domestic and international policies. It meant the rupture of old alliances and brought about a drastic reorientation and reordering of relations in line with Iran's ideological disposition. However, over the course of its existence, the Islamic Republic has sought to strike a more conciliatory tone regarding its foreign relations, and particularly its neighbours at different points in time. With the election of President Rouhani's government in 2013, the Islamic Republic declared their region and their neighbours to be explicit foreign policy priorities (Zarif, 2013, p. 1) and stressed a politics of constructive

engagement (Glombitza and Zaccara, 2021). To build rapport with its neighbours, however, Iran needs to diffuse concerns about its hegemonic ambitions in the region. This is attempted by emphasizing togetherness, common goals and guiding principles such as mutual respect and non-interference (Zarif, 2013, p. 2). At the inception of his assignment, Foreign Minister Zarif for example stresses common bonds of religion, history and culture and portrays Iran as a reliable partner for its neighbours that extended its hand in friendship and Islamic solidarity to them (Zarif, 2013, p. 2).

Iran is bordering two important bodies of water, the Caspian Sea and the Persian Gulf and shares access to them with 11 different countries, while sharing land borders with a total of seven countries. Good neighbourly relations in the immediate and further neighbourhood and the mutual consideration of interests are pivotal for Iran's own national security. This idea is reflected in the government's discourse and Zarif writes in this context that '[p]rosperity cannot be pursued at the expense of others' poverty, and security cannot be achieved at the expense of the security of others. We will either win together or lose together. We are capable of working together, trusting one another, combining our potential, and building a more secure and prosperous region' (Zarif, 2013, p. 1). Moreover, as Ehteshami (2014, p. 262) points out, Iran's already weak and vulnerable economic and social structures have come under considerable strain through the imposition of decades long sanctions, magnifying particularly Iran's economic problems. Constructive engagement and co-operation with its neighbours are therefore a necessity and an important means for sustaining the Islamic Republic (Glombitza and Zaccara, 2021). Accordingly, President Rouhani (2016) calls for 'constructive partnership with our neighbours with a view to establishing an enduring order based on shared security and efforts aimed at enhancing the development of the countries in the region and mutually beneficial economic cooperation.' Zarif has outlined Iran's post-revolutionary foreign policy objectives where

*Iran seeks to enhance its regional and global stature; to promote its ideals, including Islamic democracy; to expand its bilateral and multilateral relations, particularly with neighbouring Muslim-majority countries and nonaligned states; to reduce tensions and manage disagreements with other states; to foster peace and security at both the regional and the international levels through positive engagement; and to promote international understanding through dialogue and cultural interaction (Zarif, 2014, p. 49).*

Confidence building as well as engagement in bilateral, regional, and multilateral co-operation are important means in Iran's regional strategy (Zarif, 2014, p. 58).

With the AKP's rise to power in 2002, Erdoğan's government has become increasingly assertive in its foreign policies. While pursuing its ambitious goal of a 'great and powerful Turkey,' (Erdoğan, 2019) the Turkish government portrays Turkey, however, as 'a compassionate power' (Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2011b) that is entertaining an 'enterprising and humanitarian approach' (Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2011c). As pointed out previously, its foreign policies towards the Arab world are viewed favourably by most Arab countries. Nonetheless, while Turkey departs from a much more favourable position than Iran, its activities described beforehand are still a potential liability and source of discontent for its neighbours. Turkey's aim is therefore to strengthen its position and not to lose ground to Iran.

Turkey's government presents its foreign policy objectives in very similar ways to Iran's. Just as the Iranian government, the Turkish government portrays Turkey as inextricably linked to its Arab neighbours and therefore underlines the direct connection between its own wellbeing, stability, and security and those of the Middle East region and particularly its Arab neighbours (Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2011d). Turkey also shares land and maritime borders with several of its neighbouring Arab states. Also, relations with the EU and the US remain contentious during the timeframe of analysis. Consequently, to be able to improve its own conditions, it is in the Turkish government's interest to proclaim that it endeavours to 'increase its political, economic, social and cultural co-operation and engagement with Arab countries, to the extent possible' and to 'develop social, economic and cultural interaction, within a politically and security-wise stable environment, and on the basis of the win-win principle. With this vision, Turkey wishes and seeks to increase the prosperity and well-being of not only the Turkish people, but also the peoples of the countries of the region' (Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, 2011d). Ahmet Davutoğlu, who had occupied various important positions in the AKP government as Turkey's former Minister of Foreign Affairs, leader of the party, and Prime Minister also made important contributions to Turkey's foreign policy outlook through his 'strategic depth' doctrine (see Davutoğlu, 2011) as well as his 'zero problems with neighbours' policy (Davutoğlu, 2010),<sup>35</sup> which was instrumental in improving Turkey's relations with Middle Eastern and Muslim majority countries.

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<sup>35</sup> See also the Republic of Turkey's Ministry of Foreign Affairs (2011a).

## IDENTITY IN FOREIGN POLICY DISCOURSE: ISLAMIC VALUES, REFERENCES & SYMBOLS

Further similarities in the Iranian and Turkish governments' foreign policy approach are largely found in the way they project their state identities, which incorporate several Islamic values, references and symbols that they share with their neighbours. Representatives of both states regularly draw on these Islamic values, references and symbols and purposefully advance them in their discourses. This section focuses on the binaries of justice – injustice as well as the oppressors – the oppressed, concepts derived from the Qur'an to exemplarily demonstrate this. The Iranian and Turkish political elites discursively resort to these binaries to frame important issues and relations, to mobilize, to categorize and to evaluate themselves as well as others. Information thus categorized can easily be internalized by their respective audiences.

In Iran it was Khomeini who, through increased usage of the terms 'the oppressed' (*mostazafeen*) and 'the oppressors' (*mustakbareen*) converted them into revolutionary slogans (Abrahamian, 2018, p. 151). The support for the 'rightful struggle of the oppressed people against their oppressors anywhere in the world,' was later included in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic (see Constitution, 1989, Article 154). According to Khomeini, the so-called 'oppressors' may mean 'the rich, the exploiters, the powerful, the feudalists, the capitalists, the palace dwellers, the corrupt, the high and mighty, the opulent, the enjoyers of luxury, the gluttonous, the lazy timeservers, and the wealthy elite,' whereas the so-called 'oppressed' may be 'the exploited, the powerless, the slum dwellers, the barefooted, the street folk, the hardworking poor, the hungry, the unemployed, the disinherited masses, and those deprived of education, work, housing, and medical facilities' (Abrahamian, 1993, p. 47). The Islamic Republic's revolutionary ideology of resistance along with Islamic values was thus institutionalized and shapes Iran's attitudes towards regional and international issues.

In Turkey in turn, the constitution reserves no place for a religious identity. To the contrary, the constitution describes the Republic of Turkey as 'a democratic, secular' (Grand National Assembly of Turkey, 2019, Article 2) state where even the Presidency of Religious Affairs is constitutionally ordered to perform its activities 'in accordance with the principles of secularism' (Grand National Assembly of Turkey, 2019, Article 136). However, since the AKP's ascension to power in 2002, the government is increasingly advancing a more Islam infused agenda in Turkish politics, in contrast to the formerly secular principles of the modern Republic of Turkey created by the Young Turks (Zürcher, 2017). However, with the AKP in power, the boundaries of state identity have become blurred under a government that uses Islam as a tool to consolidate its power (Yavuz and Öztürk, 2019). In consequence, under Erdoğan, the same binaries in reference to Islam have found their way into the political



vocabulary and the president presents himself as the ultimate defender of the oppressed (Taş, 2020, p. 9).

A pivotal and central issue in this context is the issue of Palestine. Considered a concern for all Arab nations by a third of the Arab population (ACRPS, 2020), Iran and Turkey seek to win favours with their neighbours by supporting the Palestinian cause. The issue is portrayed by both Iran and Turkey as a matter of utmost injustice and one of the drivers of a decades-long instability in the region (Erdoğan, 2018) whose negative repercussions impact well-being and development and reverberate throughout the entire Middle East (Zarif, 2014). Recurring to emotive terms, President Erdoğan had called the Palestinian issue 'the gaping wound of the world' (Erdoğan, 2017). Similarly, President Rouhani claimed that the Palestinians 'are still afflicted by a web of apartheid policies and atrocities set by the usurping Zionist regime' (Rouhani, 2016). Both statements are illustrative of the way this question is supposed to be interpreted and perceived. The plight of the Palestinian people is a frequently recurring theme and Iranian and Turkish officials frame the Palestinians as an oppressed people. The grievance of the Palestinians has reached a point, where it has become an almost unquestionable presupposition that is supposed to resonate with fellow Iranians and Turks as well as across the 'Arab Street.' Uttering support for the Palestinians is used as an entry point to Arab, Iranian and Turkish as well as international hearts and minds, which is an indirect, yet readily understood means to express critique and take a clear and decisive stance against Israel and its policies. While the Palestinian people are framed as 'the oppressed', Israel is portrayed as 'the oppressor.' In other words, from the perspective of Iran and Turkey, the oppressed can be seen as 'those who we support', and 'those who support us;' whereas the oppressors are 'those who we struggle against' and 'those who do not support us.'

The support for Palestine and the struggle against Israel has already been part of the ideological discourse of Khomeini's revolutionary movement in opposition to monarchical rule and the Shah's pro-Israeli policies before the revolution (Alavi, 2019). The Islamic Republic has pursued this mindset ever since and only a few months after the revolution, at the behest of Khomeini, the Islamic Republic instituted an annual day of protest, the Quds Day, on the last Friday of the holy month of Ramadan. The annual event has since then transcended Iran's borders and protest rallies in support of the Palestinian cause are held on this day in several countries all over the world, including Turkey. To this day, according to the Islamic Republic, '[t]he issue of Palestine continues to be the most important and active issue for the Islamic Ummah collectively' (Khamenei, 2021). At various different occasions, Iranian and Turkish officials regularly appeal to the international community and its obligation to stand in solidarity with

the Palestinians (Davutoğlu, 2015) and to support a two state solution.<sup>36</sup> According to Turkey's President, 'the establishment of an independent sovereign and geographically contiguous Palestinian state among the 1967 lines, with East Jerusalem as its capital, is the only way for the establishment to have long lasting peace and stability in the region' (Erdoğan, 2018), which is a clear foreign policy objective for the Iranian and the Turkish government alike. In consequence, President Erdoğan reiterates 'Turkey's commitment to providing the necessary political and economic support for the Palestinians to lead a dignified life will continue' (Davutoğlu, 2015). Whereas President Rouhani (2016) shares his conviction that 'despite all hardships, I deeply believe that moderation will prevail over extremism, peace will triumph over violence, enlightenment will overcome ignorance, and finally justice will rise above injustice. What is important is that belief, hope and efforts are towards realizing peace and justice and there is no doubt that the Almighty will assist all those who endeavour towards peace, justice and moderation.'

However, support for the oppressed is not only provided ideologically, but also materially. On the one hand, plights and grievances such as hunger, epidemics, poverty, illiteracy, (Erdoğan, 2016) etc. are regularly and repeatedly evoked, appealing to universal humanitarian values; on the other hand, this is followed by a discourse about the engagement in the provision of humanitarian and development assistance. The provision of humanitarian aid is a means to equally exert influence, while at the same time expressing Islamic principles, and evoking sympathy in their own populations, but also the populations of their Arab neighbours. Turkey has become an important donor country, only superseded by the US. Turkey proudly portrays itself as the most generous country on a global scale and proclaims that it seeks a win-win philosophy that should lead to prosperity for all (Erdoğan, 2018). According to Turkey, this is 'humanitarian diplomacy,' and therefore an important pillar of its multi-faceted foreign policy (Davutoğlu, 2015). For this purpose, there are many organizations, amongst them the Turkish Cooperation Agency (TIKA), the Disaster and Management Authority as well as the Red Crescent to 'rush to the help of all those who are suffering and under oppression, regardless of which part of the world they may be' (Erdoğan, 2017). Turkey champions the positive self-portrayal as leading actor and trustable partner (Davutoğlu, 2015), involved in profound humanitarian action, a large donor of aid and recipient of refugees, all the while concerned with other calamities going on around the world. It goes without saying that Turkey is also sending humanitarian assistance to Gaza (Erdoğan, 2016).

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<sup>36</sup> see for example the speeches of Ahmet Davutoğlu (2015), Recep Tayyip Erdoğan (2016; 2017) and Hassan Rouhani (2016) at the UN General Assembly.

However, while Turkey has styled itself as the champion of humanitarian aid, specifically drawing attention to and providing information about its activities in this regard, Iran seldomly points explicitly to its financial support for Palestine. It remains to be read between the lines of the proclamations of government officials:

*That the Islamic Republic of Iran supports the Palestinian nation and other oppressed nations is a source of grace. The Islamic Republic has strengthened the resistance forces in the region that stand against the Zionist regime. (...) The Islamic Republic supported the resistance forces in the West Asian region. This equals defending the Palestinian nation and defending the independence of the countries in the region (Khamenei, 2018).*

Nonetheless, the Islamic Republic has similarly engaged in the delivery of humanitarian aid to Palestine and Palestinian refugees and furthermore continues to provide financial assistance – though there have been interruptions – to groups such as Hamas and the Palestinian Islamic Jihad (The Iran Primer, 2021). The fact that these groups are considered Sunni adherents, is indicative of the Islamic Republic's pragmatic and non-sectarian approach. While Iran's and Turkey's discourses and actions are embedded in their state ideologies and identities, they do not seek division based on sectarian grounds, particularly not in approaching their Arab neighbours. The Islamic Republic of Iran officially rejects the use of sectarianism as presented in the discourses of various Iranian officials (see for example Khamenei, 2007; Rouhani, 2016) and in fact does not see it as a phenomenon emanating from the region itself, but that has been brought to the region by outside powers in order to create disunity and conflict in the Islamic world (Khamenei, 2007). The Iranian officials' posture is de facto stated in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic where it stipulates that the Islamic Republic shall direct all its resources to 'develop and consolidate Islamic brotherhood,' 'develop foreign policy based on Islamic standards' and engage in 'brotherly obligations vis-à-vis all Muslims and unqualified support for all the oppressed nations of the world' (Constitution 1989, Article 3). Seeing all Muslims as one, the government of the Islamic Republic of Iran shall consequently 'be under obligation to lay its general policy on the basis of coalition and unity of Muslim nations and strive perpetually to achieve political, economic and cultural unity of the Muslim world' (Constitution 1989, Article 11.)

In a similar vein, Turkey generally seeks to underline its openness and tolerance, and non-sectarian stance. An often-cited example in this regard is Turkey's reception of around three million Syrian refugees '[r]egardless of ethnic, sectarian or religious differences' (Erdoğan, 2016). In its relations with Turkey, Iran therefore favourably notes that Turkey does not play the sectarian card, despite their sectarian differences. While voices from Iran attribute this to Turkey's non-Arab nature, Akbarzadeh

and Barry (2017, pp. 985-986) name Turkey's secular past as playing a role in this absence of sectarian language in the political debate. In essence, Iran and Turkey both appeal to the Muslim world and the Islamic ummah as a whole, them being part of that whole and Islamic references are used not to divide, but to unite and connect.

## CONCLUSION

Departing from the Iranian and Turkish cases as examples, the article presented an in-depth qualitative study of the discursive, symbolic dimension of the making and construction of foreign policy and the strategic use of structurally embedded ideas and beliefs in foreign policy in general and of religious traits in particular. The article analysed Iran's and Turkey's foreign policy approach towards their Arab neighbours during the Qatar crisis and the discursive manifestation of both countries' elites' competition. The article argued that Iran and Turkey employ a similar discursive foreign policy approach towards the Arab world, which is marked by similar ideological undercurrents, which does not, however, particularly play on sectarian identities. Islam, however, nevertheless has an important role in the projection of their state identities. In consequence, the article has studied the different ways in which the contenders use their Islamic identity to appeal to their neighbours and carved out the similarities in their approaches rather than the differences. To that end, the article has demonstrated how the Iranian and Turkish elites use Islamic values, references and symbols that appeal to and resonate with their target audience to compete for discursive hegemony and influence of the regional order. In doing so, the article has demonstrated how both countries' elites resort to the binaries of justice-injustice as well as the oppressors-the oppressed and the issue of Palestine to make their appeals.

Furthermore, sectarianism is neither a driving factor, nor a discursive tool that Iran or Turkey resort to in order to advance their political goals; it is rather pragmatism and interest that constitute the primary motivators for their actions. In fact, the mobilization and evocation of sectarian identities is not conducive for the foreign policy objectives of either state, which, as previously laid out, seek to influence the existing regional order and therefore aim at establishing discursive hegemony to emerge as leading regional actor. Apart from the fact that they proclaim aims of regional peace and security on the one hand and economic development and co-operation on the other hand. The article has demonstrated that to this aim, the emphasis lays on the discursive projection of shared Islamic values,

references and symbols that are meaningful to and resonate with their domestic and regional target audiences and perceived spheres of international influence. While Turkey departs from a more favourable position regarding its image in the Arab world, both Iran and Turkey nonetheless constitute non-Arab countries in an Arab dominated region. Seeking to increase their regional influence, it is clearly not in Iran's or Turkey's – particularly, however, Iran's - interest to widen the gap by emphasizing sectarian differences, but rather, to downplay them by highlighting common ground, i.e., shared Islamic values that transcend national borders. Common identities and shared religious beliefs serve as cultural anchor for their regional political aims. Placing emphasis on communalities rather than differences therefore does not add to the sectarian divide, but to the contrary, willingly, or unwillingly, it adds to building bridges and opens pathways for constructive engagement to foster peace and stability and exemplifies discursive strategies that contribute to co-operation and engagement, even to desectarianization. The similarities in the ideological undercurrents of their foreign policies and the similarities in the choices and the ways in which Iran and Turkey use these shared values, references and symbols that emanate from religious beliefs embedded in their state identities and ideologies also reveals a strategic fit and tacit bond between the two countries laying the ground for possible constructive engagement as exhibited by their calls for co-operation on the Palestinian cause around Al Quds Day 2021. Particularly since the AKP came to power and advanced an increasingly Islam infused political style and afforded religion a much greater role in society than prior regimes with secular views, Iran's and Turkey's ideological convictions have come closer together and in consequence, their discursive strategies and projection as well.

Furthermore, drawing on Islamic values, references and symbols and purposefully advancing them in their discourses, Iran's and Turkey's political elites are able to frame important issues and relations and to categorize and evaluate themselves as well as others. This practice affords their discourses symbolic value by making them intelligible and meaningful for their audiences, while adding a persuasive emotive quality that seeks to convince and mobilize, which is even more important in times of crisis.

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## 8 CONCLUSION

Concluding the thesis leads us back to the research questions it posed, its objectives and hypotheses as well as its main argument, which stipulated that political power is not exercised and projected merely through material or coercive means but also through a wide repertoire of symbolic discursive strategies. With its focus on symbolic politics, the thesis has demonstrated in three articles and a book chapter the importance of ideas and beliefs in the political dynamics of the region, which are often accorded only a subordinate role in favour of material factors. In doing so, the thesis has demonstrated that symbolic politics and the repertoire of different discursive strategies in connection to ideational factors are indispensable instruments in domestic politics and foreign policy. These strategies are even more important in times of crisis, when elite interests are at stake and when the competition with other elites is especially intense. The thesis has thus shown the importance of critically engaging with the symbolic discursive dimension of politics, as exemplified by the Iranian and Turkish case.

The thesis' symbolic politics approach has given valuable insights into the making and construction of domestic and foreign policies in general, and of Iranian and Turkish domestic and foreign policy in particular, while at the same time, highlighting the context that the symbolic strategies emerge from, i.e., domestic, regional, and international dynamics. The thesis constitutes a comprehensive qualitative study of the discursive practices of the Iranian and Turkish political elites, situated at the intersection of domestic and foreign policy and which unravelled the workings of discursive processes at the heart of symbolic politics. In doing so, it gave a systematic and theoretically grounded account of the different mechanisms of symbolic politics in domestic politics and foreign policy.

To understand the exercise and projection of political power by means of symbolic politics, the thesis has shown *how* the Iranian and Turkish political elites use symbolic politics to create, sustain, and change political arrangements and has furthermore demonstrated *how* the Iranian and Turkish political elites use symbolic politics to solicit and mobilize support for their actions on the domestic and international stage. In consequence, the thesis has identified and analysed *which* types of symbolic discursive strategies the Iranian and Turkish political elites use and *how* they are employed. In addition, the thesis identified and analysed the context in which these symbolic discursive strategies that are

used by the political elites take shape. The theory of the sociology of power has proven especially suitable for the research this thesis presents and has particularly enabled an analysis that moves between the domestic and the foreign policy level and furthermore helped to understand the link between structurally embedded ideas and beliefs and the behaviour of actors. Similarly, the approach of critical discourse analysis enabled the analysis of the evolution and use of symbols, ideas, and beliefs as well as their interaction with structural ideational frameworks.

In addition to the concluding remarks regarding the individual publications, by means of comparison, we have furthermore been able to observe that both, the Iranian as well as the Turkish political elites draw on similar discursive strategies at the domestic and foreign policy level in order to differentially accumulate more power and in consequence, more influence than their competitors. Both countries' elites resort to the use of structurally embedded ideas and beliefs connected to their identity and ideology in similar ways and the discursive strategies they use encompass narratives, frames as well as strategies of legitimation and delegitimation in line with the ideological square according to van Dijk (2000) that builds on the idea of 'us vs. them'. We have furthermore observed that elite competition is taking place at the domestic level as well as the international one, where foreign policy serves as an extension of domestic politics.

The collection of publications further endeavoured to contribute to a better and more nuanced understanding of the socio-political developments and dynamics in the Middle East and Persian Gulf region and encourages a 'de-exceptionalised' perspective. By highlighting the inherent connection between the domestic and the international spheres and their reciprocal influence, the thesis furthermore takes part in important and vibrant debates between the disciplines of International Relations and Middle East Studies and advocates for dialogue as well as cross-fertilization and exchange between the two disciplines that the thesis positions itself in. The thesis is thus directed at scholars and students of International Relations and Middle East Studies, while at the same time, however, intending to reach beyond academia and to be of interest to and a resource for a more research- and policy interested audience by providing important insights and enabling future outlooks on the region's actors and dynamics as well as its international relations.

In this context it is opportune to point out once more that the thesis does not suggest that the Islamic Republic of Iran or the Republic of Turkey are exceptional cases or that the symbolic discursive practices that have been analysed are unique to these two countries. Rather, the publications illuminated the ways in which political elites interact with their intended audiences, domestically and internationally, be they supporters or opponents by taking the Islamic Republic of Iran and the Republic of Turkey as

examples. It is therefore possible to apply and extrapolate the framework and findings that the thesis presents to other cases and contexts in- and outside of the Middle East and Persian Gulf region.

The collection of publications has made several original theoretical and empirical contributions as detailed in section 1.8 Contribution & Claims to Originality. The findings of each contribution to the thesis are detailed in the following section, which is followed by elaborations on limitations to the research and concludes with various ideas regarding further avenues of research.

## 8.1 FINDINGS

The first publication (Turkey's July 15<sup>th</sup> Coup Attempt) concluded that Turkish politics was very much a contest over the symbolic world, over power and the management and appropriation of meaning. Within the context of the aftermath of the 2016 coup attempt, the article demonstrated how the Turkish government uses three specific symbolic discursive strategies, namely legitimization, narrativization and ritualization in order to normalize the exceptional and transformative measures it had initiated following the coup attempt and in order to maintain its image and strengthen its dwindling popularity. Furthermore, the article has shown that these strategies of seeking and building public consent and support through acts of discursive persuasion, are fundamental contributors – alongside more coercive and repressive measures – to the deepening of the AKP's authoritarian regime formation. The symbolic strategies have become part of the public discourse and therefore part of people's lives in the form of frames, narratives, and rituals.

The article has shown that the events following the coup attempt are also a reflection of the power struggle between the GM and the ruling AKP and illustrates how the government has turned away from its former ally and changed its discourse on the GM through strategic framing and reframing. The article also showed that both the media and the state are important resources of power, not only in the elites' competition for power, but also in the subsequent consolidation and monopolisation of power on the part of the AKP. Having control over the media means having the ability to make decisions about the content of the information disseminated in all its aspects. Through the Decree Laws, the media landscape underwent a series of changes that meant that the government could not only control the content and output, but more importantly, instrumentalise and manipulate it, ultimately opening up opportunities to reshape the relationship between the state and society. The successive appropriation

and manipulation of the Turkish state by the ruling elite led, on the one hand, to an expansion of the powers of the government and the president, but also, on the other hand, to a reduction in the independence and diversity of the media, the erosion of freedom of expression and the monopolisation of opinion.

The government's utilization of symbolic strategies moreover contributes to further increasing already existing societal divisions and political polarization based on diverging cultural and political identities and is only exacerbated by popular expressions of dissatisfaction and discontent. In this sense, the article made clear that the legitimizing efforts and consent-building strategies by the government described throughout this article are regarded as vital and necessary instruments for the AKP. In a sense, the AKP's normalizing discourse and acting as if aims at maintaining and broadening the support of the people. These strategies are even more important in times of regime uncertainty and when the power base is contested.

Taking the nuclear issue as a case, the second publication (Ideology & Narrative) has demonstrated how the Islamic Republic's Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei – the Islamic Republic's political elite's most eminent representative and leader of the Islamic Republic's official Islamic revolutionary ideology – resorts to five dominant recurring narratives to represent his interests. The narratives he employs have remained salient over the course of the Islamic Republic's existence and express long-standing tenets of its ideological foundation. They comprise different themes and stories that are familiar to the Iranian audience and are a means to furnish complex content, such as current events and circumstances, in an easy to remember, absorbable, digestible, and intelligible way. In other words, the narratives provide a discursive lens through which social or political issues, such as the nuclear issue, are supposed to be viewed and understood. They are frames for interpretation that are supposed to tell the audience how and what to think about the actions of their own political officials as well as those of other countries.

Furthermore, the article has shown that the appropriation of and control over symbols and meaning takes an important part in the exercise of political power. The article has demonstrated that ideological narratives constitute important instruments of symbolic power and has shown how they contextualize foreign policy issues and how they provide the Islamic Republic with meaning and continuity and a discursive *raison d'être* in upholding the narratives and values of the revolution, and discursively constructing the Islamic Republic. The article has also shown how the employed discursive strategies are part of a larger process and that maintaining consistency in the Islamic Republic's narratives, and

therefore its identity and *raison d'être* are vital for guarding against domestic fissures and in consequence, challenges to the continuity of the system.

With the ideological narratives, Khamenei endeavours to influence, direct, and at times reorient public opinion. As we have seen, in Khamenei's overall discursive strategy, the narratives are used to express resistance, to delegitimize the Islamic Republic's adversaries and their actions, while at the same time rendering legitimacy for the Islamic Republic and its pursuits, to strengthen the system of the Islamic Republic and to build a coherent argument around political decisions, such as the engagement with Western nations for the nuclear deal. The analysis has shown that it is imperative for the Supreme Leader not to compromise on the principles of the Islamic Republic in his discourses and to stay true to the ideals and goals of the revolution. The narratives are also useful when it comes to confidence building and to evoke trust. While this does not necessarily change the course or behaviour of the Islamic Republic's adversaries, the unyieldingness of the 'great powers' is in fact advantageous to further justify and legitimize the Islamic Republic's actions and politics of resistance, in front of its domestic and international audience alike. In line with its discourse of resistance and independence, we have observed that the Islamic Republic is to a certain extent very willing to rather sustain the damaging effects of sanctions than to give in to the so-called great powers when its demands are not fulfilled. Positive self-representation provides legitimacy, amongst others, whereas negative other-representation serves in an effort to unite and rally not only the population but also the political factions behind a common enemy: the Islamic Republic's opponents.

In sum, the Islamic Republic's ideology continues to be of relevance and plays an important role in domestic and foreign policy endeavours. The ideological narratives that the Supreme Leader tells and the ways in which he uses them to frame and contextualize contemporary events provide him with the flexibility to circumvent potential inconsistencies by accommodating his at times shifting attitudes towards political issues and furthermore, offer him the possibility to save face, protect his position and simultaneously safeguard the Islamic Republic's ideological principles and thus, the continuity of the revolutionary system itself.

The third publication (The Deal of Discontent) takes as a vantage point the discursive interaction among the Islamic Republic of Iran and Saudi Arabia that ensued after the signing of the nuclear deal or Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action, which appeared to foreshadow a major upheaval of the regional balance of power. The article has shown how the Islamic Republic of Iran and Saudi Arabia, both with the aim of increasing their domestic, regional, and international legitimacy, are engaging in the purposeful and strategic construction of the Islamic Republic through frames and narratives in order to evaluate, qualify

and categorize the character and actions of the Islamic Republic in line with their respective positions – with the Islamic Republic being in favour and Saudi Arabia being against it - towards the implementation of the JCPOA. The chapter has shown how both countries' elites aim at dominating the public perception of the Islamic Republic through the strategic employment of frames and narratives which contribute to delegitimizing and negatively representing the Islamic Republic, its actions and relations on part of Saudi Arabia, whereas the Islamic Republic aims at legitimizing itself and its actions as well as positive self-representation.

The publication has shown that the competition of words over representation and perception and thus the deployment of symbolic power in foreign policy discourse is an important tool for both countries' elites in the pursuance of the priorities and interests. The discursive struggle over influence and legitimacy is a means to ultimately secure their own regimes' survival and furthermore impacts wider possibilities for regional peace, stability and security. However, as evidenced by the United States' unilateral withdrawal from the nuclear deal in 2018, the Saudi narrative seemed to have gained vindication and therefore the upper hand in the contest over shaping the perception of the Islamic Republic.

The fourth publication (Iran's & Turkey's Foreign Policy) shows that the Iranian and Turkish elites present a similar discursive foreign policy approach towards their Arab neighbours which is marked by similar ideological undercurrents, which does not, however, particularly play on sectarian identities. Islam, however, nevertheless has an important role in the projection of their state identities. In consequence, the article has studied the different ways in which the contenders use their Islamic identity to appeal to their neighbours and carved out the similarities in their approaches rather than the differences. To that end, the article has demonstrated how the Iranian and Turkish elites use Islamic values, references and symbols that appeal to and resonate with their target audience to compete for discursive hegemony and influence of the regional order. In doing so, the article has demonstrated how both countries' elites resort to the binaries of *justice-injustice* as well as the *oppressors-the oppressed* and the issue of Palestine to make their appeals.

Furthermore, sectarianism is neither a driving factor, nor a discursive tool that Turkey or Iran resort to in order to advance their political goals; it is rather pragmatism and interest that constitute the primary motivators for their actions. In fact, the mobilization and evocation of sectarian identities is not conducive for the foreign policy objectives of either state, which, as previously laid out, seek to influence the existing regional order and therefore aim at establishing discursive hegemony to emerge as leading regional actor. The article has demonstrated that rather, instead of emphasizing sectarian

differences, emphasis is placed on the discursive projection of shared Islamic values, references and symbols that are meaningful to and resonate with their target audiences and perceived spheres of international influence.

While Turkey departs from a more favourable position regarding its image in the Arab world, both Iran and Turkey nonetheless constitute non-Arab countries in an Arab dominated region. Seeking to increase their regional influence, it is clearly not in Iran's or Turkey's – particularly, however, Iran's - interest to widen the gap by emphasizing sectarian differences, but rather, to downplay them by highlighting common ground, i.e., shared Islamic values that transcend national borders. Common identities and shared religious beliefs serve as cultural anchor for their regional political aims. Placing emphasis on communalities rather than differences therefore does not add to the sectarian divide, but to the contrary, willingly, or unwillingly, it adds to building bridges and opens pathways for constructive engagement to foster peace and stability and exemplifies discursive strategies that contribute to co-operation and engagement, and even to desectarianization.

Furthermore, drawing on Islamic values, references and symbols and purposefully advancing them in their discourses, the political elites from Iran and Turkey are able to frame important issues and relations and to categorize and evaluate themselves as well as others. This practice affords their discourses symbolic value by making them intelligible and meaningful for their audiences, while adding a persuasive emotive quality that seeks to convince and mobilize, which is even more important in times of crisis.

## 8.2 LIMITATIONS TO THE RESEARCH

A thesis whether conceptualized innovatively as a collection of articles or in traditional book form inevitably has its limitations. Much can be said in three articles and a book chapter, yet there is still room to say more or to say it differently. Word limits constitute predefined impassable boundaries, while the chosen perspective and methodology are only one of countless ways to approach research on the Iranian and Turkish political elites.

Apart from the limitations that every thesis project incurs in one way or another, other occurrences set unexpected limitations to mine. While the thesis was not depended on physical presence in the



countries of research, facing limits to travel to both Iran and Turkey were an unexpected restraint and made it impossible for me to conduct the 4-month research stay at Tehran University in the Department of International Relations funded by the Alianza4Universidades. Also, the still ongoing pandemic added further difficulties and made a second research stay at Boğaziçi University impossible at the time it was due. This also reminds us that conducting research on the Middle East and the Persian Gulf, while always having been challenging for different reasons, has become a delicate endeavour and a researcher's safety and security have become important issues to consider apart from issues of *force majeure*.

To add a positive note, until the tide changes, there are fortunately myriads of different and creative ways to contribute to further our knowledge and understanding of the countries of the Middle East and the Persian Gulf.

### 8.3 FUTURE AVENUES OF RESEARCH

Having contributed a small piece to the puzzle, there is undoubtedly still so much more interesting work to be done on the subject. The contributions to this thesis sought to answer a set of questions, but also raised new ones pointing to future avenues of research. All publications constituting the thesis have centred on the Iranian and Turkish political elites and their strategic employment of discursive symbolic politics. However, the use of symbolic politics from a discursive approach offers a wide array of possible further research, both as single case studies as well as from a comparative perspective. Furthermore, there are a number of questions regarding the receiving end of those strategies that deserve to be illuminated. This includes, for example, questions such as whether or to what extent the audiences that the Iranian and Turkish political elites address buy into their strategies or how effective or ineffective these symbolic strategies will be in the *longue durée*. As pointed out in the first publication (Turkey's July 15<sup>th</sup> Coup Attempt), according to studies, the effects of symbolic politics can go both ways. While they may appeal to some parts of society and may help to create unity and a shared identity, they may also have the opposite effect in other parts of society where they may create apathy, contention, or opposition. To this end, a study of reception through means such as surveys, interviews and focus groups could give valuable insights to such questions.

Additional insights as to the dynamics of symbolic politics can for example be drawn by broadening the base in terms of individuals of the political elites studied, the analysed timeframe and context or the repertoire of resources that the elites use in their competition for power. The publications of the thesis particularly draw on the Iranian and Turkish governments, i.e., their presidents and foreign ministers and in Iran's case, also the Supreme Leader. Including a broader base of individuals of the political elite pertaining to the same and different factions will help ascertain the competition among and between the Iranian as well as the Turkish political elites and the discursive strategies they use. In this sense, it will be worthwhile to dive further into the competition at a domestic but also an international level and how the domestic competition feeds into foreign policy and *vice versa*.

Broadening the timeframe will reap additional insights into ruptures and continuities. In this sense, and especially in relation to the second publication (Ideology & Narrative), which defined five dominant narratives in the Islamic Republic's ideological discourse, extending the timeframe to include both, the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah as well as the Islamic Republic will make it possible to observe the changes and continuities in the ideological landscape, which narratives have been adopted by the Islamic Republic, which ones have been abandoned. However, also an extended research frame spanning the Islamic Republic's entire existence will be a worthwhile endeavour to similarly determine ruptures and continuities comparing the times of Khomeini with the times of Khamenei. How has the ideological landscape changed with the change in leadership? Which narratives have remained salient? Which ones have disappeared or changed?

In addition, it will be crucial to investigate in further depth, how the narratives that the second publication (Ideology & Narrative) has identified or the frames that the first and third publication (Turkey's July 15<sup>th</sup> Coup Attempt, The Deal of Discontent) explored are indeed impeding other actors from acting outside this established discursive structure. And further, how do competing actors move around and within the hegemonic, ideological, and discursive frame and how do they use the dominant ideology to their advantage or conversely, are they forced to use the dominant ideology in order to reach their aims? And if so, how?

Other questions to consider include the application of the framework elaborated in the first publication (Turkey's July 15<sup>th</sup> Coup Attempt) to contexts other than the Turkish case or the failed coup attempt for that matter. To name but two examples, the Revolution or the Iran-Iraq war particularly lend themselves to an exploration through the lens of this framework in order to study how these events have been legitimized, then narrativized and lastly ritualized and how these events have seeped into the daily lives of citizens. In this regard, ideas and beliefs have no borders and an exploration of the

theoretical lens not only at a domestic, but a transnational level could give insights into elites' cross-border activities from a symbolic politics perspective and how the competition outside national borders takes place.

Along these lines there are myriads of possibilities for further exploration. In other words, the journey has only just begun.

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