

Ontological Security and Iran's Missile Program

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Abstract

This article attempts to answer the question of why Iran is reluctant to discuss its missile program. Unlike other studies that focus on the importance of Iran's missile program in providing deterrence for the country and establishing a balance of military power in the region, or that view the missile program as one of dozens of post-revolutionary contentious issues between Iran and the United States, this article looks into Iran's ontological security. The paper primarily argues that the missile program has become a source of pride for Iranians, inextricably linked to their identity. As a result, the Iranian authorities face two challenges when it comes to sitting at the negotiation table with their Western counterparts: deep mistrust of the West, and the ensuing sense of shame over any deal on the missile issue. Thus, Iranian officials opted to preserve the identity components of the program, return to normal and daily routines of life, insist on the missile program's continuation despite sanctions and threats, and emphasize the dignity and honor of having a missile program. The article empirically demonstrates how states can overcome feelings of shame and mistrust. It also theoretically proves that when physical security conflicts with ontological security, governments prefer the former over the latter, based on the history of Iran's nuclear negotiations. They appeal to create new narratives to justify changing their previous policies.

Keywords: Iran's missile program, ontological security, United States, nuclear negotiations, identity

1. Introduction

Concerns about the development of Iran's missile program are not new in the international community. For more than three decades, the West has consistently expressed concern about the scope of Iran's missile program, as well as its motives and purposes.¹ The August 2002 disclosure of the new dimensions of Iran's nuclear program heightened these concerns, as there had been suspicions about possible links between the nuclear and missile programs. Therefore, a new concept of "nuclear terror" was coined on the account that Iran was pursuing both nuclear and missile programs.² Such claims have been consistently refuted by Iranian

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¹ Stephen M. McCall, "Iran's Ballistic Missile and Space Launch Programs," *Congressional Research Service*, January 9, 2020, <https://fas.org/sgp/crs/nuke/IF10938.pdf>; "Gulf States: Nuclear talks should address Iran missile programme," *Reuters Agency*, June 16, 2021, <https://www.reuters.com/world/middle-east/gcc-foreign-ministers-iran-missile-programme-should-be-addressed-nuclear-talks-2021-06-16/>.

² Brenda Shaffer, "If Iran is Not Checked, Nuclear Terror is Next: America Needs a Plan," *Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs*, August 9, 2004, <https://www.belfercenter.org/publication/if-iran-not-checked-nuclear-terror-next-america-needs-plan>.

officials.³ However, the West's attention brought Iran's nuclear program to a halt in at least two cases. In the first case, on November 14, 2004, Iran's uranium enrichment program was temporarily suspended as part of an agreement between Iran and the E3 (France, Germany, and the United Kingdom), and Iran voluntarily implemented the Additional Protocol of the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA). In the second case, on July 14, 2015, Iran signed the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), accepting serious restrictions on the number of active centrifuges, the percentage of enrichment, the amount of enriched uranium reserves, and the condition and quality of new inspections by IAEA inspectors, despite not giving up its enrichment. Although these restrictions, which lasted until 2019 and to which Iran adhered, helped to alleviate Western concerns, they did not completely eliminate them. That is why Donald Trump's decision to withdraw from the Iran nuclear deal on May 8, 2018, and reimpose sanctions on November 5, 2018, drew widespread condemnation both inside and outside of the United States. Joe Biden was one of the critics who stressed the need to return to JCPOA and tighten restrictions.

Compared to the nuclear program, the historical course of Iran's missile program is completely different; Iran has never agreed to sit at the negotiation table to discuss the quantity and quality of this military program and express its demands. In the case of the nuclear program, Iran was able to persuade the West that enrichment is its "red line," and that the quantity and quality of enrichment can be negotiated, but it has so far refused to withdraw from its previous positions on the missile program. Furthermore, for many countries, the nuclear program is primarily for civilian purposes, with the goal of producing clean energy. Therefore, countries cannot be prevented from moving towards producing clean energy while global warming has become a serious international concern. The nuclear program is of both civilian and military nature,⁴ and it is unclear in which direction Iran is heading. The US National Intelligence Agency's report explicitly states that Iran's nuclear program was for military purposes until 2003, but from this year onward the country put a halt on it.⁵ The IAEA reports, on the other hand, have always been ambiguous, as they have never expressed confidence in Iran's intention to develop a nuclear weapon.⁶ Under such circumstances, it is difficult to convince the world's public opinion about the nature of Iran's nuclear program and the motivation for its continuation. Lupovici⁷ refers to this condition as a "dual use security dilemma." According to him, once a dual-use technology is securitized (e.g., Iran's nuclear program), this framing sustains the security dilemma because rivals could always point to the ability to use the technology for military purposes, and thus to resecuritize it continuously. The military nature of Iran's missile program, on the other hand, is undeniable, and therefore,

³ Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs, "Spokesman's Reaction to GCC's Baseless Anti-Iran Accusations," June 19, 2021, <https://en.mfa.gov.ir/portal/NewsView/642364>; Ali Khamenei, "Statements in A Meeting with Nuclear Scientists," February 22, 2012, <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=19124>; Ali Khamenei, "Supreme Leader's Message to International Conference on Nuclear Disarmament," April 17, 2010, <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/treatise-content?id=228>; Ali Khamenei, "Statement On the 20th Anniversary of Ayatollah Khomeini's Death," June 4, 2009, <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=7089>; Ali Khamenei, "The President of Tajikistan Met with the Leader of the Revolution," January 18, 2006, <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/news-content?id=1352>.

⁴ Jacques E. C. Hymans, *The Psychology of Nuclear Proliferation: Identity, Emotions, Foreign Policy* (Cambridge University Press, 2006), <https://doi.org/10.1017/CBO9780511491412>.

⁵ Gregory F. Treverton, "The 2007 National Intelligence Estimate on Iran's Nuclear Intentions and Capabilities," *Center for Study of International*, May 2, 2013, <https://www.cia.gov/library/center-for-the-study-of-intelligence/csi-publications/books-and-monographs/csi-intelligence-and-policy-monographs/pdfs/support-to-policymakers-2007-nie.pdf>.

⁶ IAEA Board Reports, "Verification and Monitoring in the Islamic Republic of Iran in light of United Nations Security Council resolution 2231 (2015)," *IAEA*, March 3, 2020, <https://www.iaea.org/newscenter/focus/iran/iaea-and-iran-iaea-reports>.

⁷ Amir Lupovici, "The Dual-Use Security Dilemma and the Social Construction of Insecurity," *Contemporary Security Policy* 42, no. 3 (2021): 257–85, doi: 10.1080/13523260.2020.1866845.

convincing the international community appears to be difficult. It should be noted that, unlike North Korea, Iran has never used its nuclear program to threaten other countries, nor has it initiated the program in response to Western pressure; however, the missile program has always been viewed as a means of deterrence and defense against threats. Iran has used its missile programs in at least three instances in recent years, two of which were targeted specifically at the United States. In the first case, Iran launched missile strikes targeting the ISIS headquarters in Deir-Ez-Zor, Syria, on June 19, 2017, in retaliation of an ISIS-linked terrorist attack on the Iranian parliament on June 7, 2017. In the second incident, on June 20, 2019, it used its missiles to shoot down a US Global Hawk drone that was allegedly violating Iranian airspace in the south of the country. In the latest case, Iran attacked two US military bases in Iraq in retaliation of the assassination of Qasem Soleimani, commander of the Quds Force, by US drones on January 3, 2020. This was unprecedented, as the last foreign government attack against a US territory occurred on December 7, 1941, when Japan attacked Pearl Harbor. Therefore, Iran has demonstrated that it has no red lines in using its missile program. This level of military capability, as well as its likely advancement in the future, has been a source of concern among European and American leaders.⁸ US President Joe Biden promised to address the issue of Iran's nuclear and missile programs. However, this measure does not seem to be easy, at least in the case of Iran's missile program, and it will likely become one of his foreign policy challenges. One of the serious difficulties is that Iran has so far not expressed a willingness to talk about it and has always separated the nuclear negotiations from the negotiations on the missile program.

The main question that this article addresses is, why is Iran reluctant to negotiate over its missile program? The article examines the role of ontological security in this context. It makes two arguments: First, ontological security is as important as physical security, and, contrary to Mitzen's argument, it cannot be considered only when physical security and the security dilemma fail to explain an issue. Ontological security, like physical security, is a powerful and significant behavioral motivator in countries' foreign policies. States, according to Huysmans and McSweeney, require predictability and order, and they thrive on routine and secure relationships with others.⁹ States construct their identities through these routinized relationships with others. Second, unlike the nuclear program, which was symbolically important for Iran in acquiring the right to produce nuclear energy, the missile program provides both physical and ontological security. While Iran can provide physical security without pursuing a missile program, it cannot achieve ontological security in any other way, since its ontological security is a result of its revolutionary Islamic identity over the last forty-three years and cannot be easily changed. Iran's missile program has become a source of pride for the country over the last four decades and disregarding it undermines its credibility. However, such a hypothesis does not apply to Iran's nuclear program since it has not been able to lead to the proliferation of nuclear weapons and deterrence, nor has it been able to produce enough nuclear power to meet the needs of the country. So, insisting on maintaining the program could lead to additional sanctions. While the development of the missile program may result in sanctions against Iran, it will also prevent any military attack on the country and maintain the regime's credibility among the Iranian people. Iranian officials

⁸ "Brussels Summit Communiqué", NATO, June 14, 2021, https://www.nato.int/cps/en/natohq/news_185000.htm.

⁹ Jeff Huysmans, "Security! What Do You Mean? From Concept to Empty Signifier," *European Journal of International Relations* 4, no. 2 (1998): 226–55.

can regenerate the ideological-revolutionary identity created after the Islamic Revolution by emphasizing the country's independence, nationalism, and the need for a missile program, saving the regime from uncertainty and existential anxiety.

This article makes two original contributions. First, it demonstrates how Iran has integrated its missile program into its ontological security, an issue that has received less attention as most papers, instead, have focused on Iran's nuclear program or quality and quantity of Iran's missile capability. A second original insight revolves around the issue of how states can overcome feelings of shame and mistrust. In constructing its arguments, the article provides a brief overview of Iran's missile program. It then illustrates how ontological security can explain Iran's behavior over the missile program. The final section of the article discusses the weaknesses of the ontological security theory based on the studied case.

2. Literature Review

Iran has focused on improving its ballistic missile capabilities in recent years in order to demonstrate power at a regional level.¹⁰ The origins of Iran's missile program can be traced back to its missile needs during the war with Iraq, which led to the country's self-sufficiency in missile production.¹¹ Iran's move toward missile capability was motivated by its inability to purchase weapons and respond to Iraq's missile attacks because of global sanctions. Therefore, Iran secretly purchased Scud missiles from Syria, North Korea, Libya, and China, and used them in the war while conducting research to develop its own missiles at the same time.¹² In the late 1990s, Iran launched several serious missile projects. These projects included strengthening the range and capacity of the Shahab-3 and Shahab-4 missiles, which could also launch satellites. With Iran's access to the Ashoura, the Ghadr-110, and the Sejil missiles, all of which have a range of over 2,000 kilometers, any geographic location in the Middle East appears to be within Iranian missile range; from Incirlik Air Base in Turkey to Diego Garcia Air Base in the Indian Ocean, and from Tel Aviv to US military bases in the Red Sea.¹³

The question of why Iran is hesitant to negotiate its missile program has been answered in three ways. The proponents of the defensive realism theory have claimed that given the geopolitical implications of Iran's situation in an unstable region¹⁴ where countries like Pakistan and Israel are armed with nuclear weapons, the country should have its own missile capabilities. Such proponents believe that the United States has threatened Iran over the last four decades, explicitly advocating for regime change.¹⁵ Therefore, Iran's effort to acquire missile capabilities is motivated by regional deterrence logic and the desire to maintain its regional position.¹⁶ In this regard, Amir Hatami, the Hassan Rouhani administration's

¹⁰ Farzin Nadimi, "Iran's Asymmetric Naval Warfare," *Policy Focus*, September 7, 2008, <https://www.washingtoninstitute.org/policy-analysis/irans-asymmetric-naval-warfare>.

¹¹ Dinshaw Mistry, "European Missile Defense: Assessing Iran's ICBM Capabilities," *Arms Control Today*, October, 2007, <https://www.armscontrol.org/act/2007-10/iran-nuclear-briefs/european-missile-defense-assessing-iran%E2%80%99s-icbm-capabilities>.

¹² Uzi Rubin, "The Global Range of Iran's Ballistic Missile Program," *Jerusalem Center for Public Affairs* 5, no. 26 (2006): 63.

¹³ McCall, "Iran's Ballistic Missile and Space Launch Programs," 2.

¹⁴ Mohammadreza Hafeznia, *Political Geography of Iran* (Tehran: Samt, 2013).

¹⁵ Ali Ghadim Malalou and S.A Jafari, "The Role and Effect of The U.S. Missile Strategy on I.R.I Missile Strategy," *Journal of Defense Policy* 26, no. 102 (2018): 71-104.

¹⁶ Ehsan Yari, "Geopolitical Requirements and Strategic Requirements of the Islamic Republic of Iran's Missile Program in the Anarchic Environment of the International System," *Scientific Journal of Security Horizons* 12, no. 42 (2019): 38-61; Hamidreza Ghavam Maleki, "The Role of Missiles in Iran's Deterrence Strategy," *Doctrine of Political, Defense and Security Policy* 2, no. 3

minister of defense, stated that “our country is in a geopolitical and strategic position. History also says that this region has always been subject to malicious intent of occupation. In recent days, we have seen the repetition of the phrase ‘all options are on the table’, and our enemy has constantly threatened us with military attack and bombing... Our priority is the issue of missiles, in which we have a strong position and we must upgrade it.”¹⁷

Proponents of the offensive realism theory view Iran’s nuclear and missile programs through the lens of power maximization¹⁸ Iran’s goal, they believe, is to prioritize both programs simultaneously in order to develop offensive military capabilities.¹⁹ In this regard, some scholarly works explain how Iran has sought to expand its regional power and ideologies since the 1979 Revolution. The country also pioneered an alternative approach to the prevailing international order, calling for the establishment of a new Islamic order. Acquiring missile capabilities is a prelude to Iran’s attainment of such a stance. The ideological conflicts between Iran and the United States amplify Iran’s political will to achieve this position. According to Ghadim Malalou and Asghar Jafari, “Iran is seeking to acquire hi-tech missile technologies and increase its defense capabilities due to its ideological conflict with the United States.”²⁰ In addition to gaining missile power, Iran is attempting to strengthen its proxy groups in the region. Iran’s military action in arming groups such as Hizbollah in Lebanon, the Popular Mobilization Forces (al-Hashd ash-Sha’bī) in Iraq, and Houthis in Yemen is part of this grand strategy.²¹ In contrast, some analysts believe that the West’s efforts to address Iran’s missile program should be seen as “Iran phobia” or “Islamophobia.”²² The main argument of these scholars is that the West does not want Iran and the Muslim world to be powerful and independent. Therefore, they obstruct the development of scientific programs in the Muslim world that would guarantee their independence. These scholars state “Iranophobia is the constant policy of U.S. and European countries against Iran.”²³

The third group, which consists of proponents of the liberal approach, also emphasizes the economic circumstances necessary for Iranian society to achieve missile capabilities. Iran’s attempt to acquire the knowledge of missile production could put the government on a list of countries exporting military equipment, which would allow it to diversify its revenue streams beyond oil and gas sales. Therefore, diversifying Iran’s revenue portfolio has been and will continue to be a serious consideration for Iranian officials.²⁴ Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Iran’s Supreme Leader, has called Iran’s reliance on oil revenues “an economic problem,” and has suggested that “non-oil exports should increase to the point where Iran

(2011): 97–117; Bharath Gopalaswamy, “Iran’s Missile Program,” *BASIC Getting to Zero Papers 4* (2008): 2-3.

¹⁷ Amir Hatami, “Iran’s Response to Western Concerns: Our Priority is Missile Power,” *Euronews*, August 18, 2018, <https://per.euronews.com/2018/08/18/our-focus-is-on-missile-power-iran-defense-minister-reacts-to-western-concerns>.

¹⁸ John J. Mearsheimer, *The Tragedy of Great Power Politics* (New York: W. W. Norton & Company, 2014).

¹⁹ Shahram Chubin and Robert S. Litwak, “Debating Iran’s Nuclear Aspirations,” *Washington Quarterly* 26, no. 4 (2003): 99–114. Also, see Ash Jain, *Nuclear Weapons and Iran’s Global Ambitions: Troubling Scenarios*, (Washington DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2011).

²⁰ Malalou and Jafari, “The Role and Effect of The U.S. Missile Strategy,” 71.

²¹ Ariane M. Tabatabai and Colin P. Clarke, “Iran’s Proxies are More Powerful than Ever,” The RAND Corporation, October 16, 2019, <https://www.rand.org/blog/2019/10/irans-proxies-are-more-powerful-than-ever.html>.

²² Ali Alfone, “What Iran’s Military Journals Reveal about the Role of Missiles in Strategic Deterrence,” The Arab Gulf States Institute in Washington, June 25, 2020, <https://agsiw.org/what-irans-military-journals-reveal-about-the-role-of-missiles-in-strategic-deterrence/>.

²³ “Why is the West Afraid of Iran’s Missile Program?,” *Islam Times*, February 4, 2021, <https://www.islamtimes.org/fa/article/914257>.

²⁴ “Iran Plans to Export arms with Sanctions Off,” *DW News Agency*, October 22, 2020, <https://www.dw.com/en/iran-plans-to-export-arms-with-sanctions-off/a-55365469>.

is no longer reliant on oil revenues.”²⁵ The arms market has always been booming with its global customers. As a result, Iran can also get a glimpse of this market. In this regard, in an analysis for the Strategic Research Center of the Expediency Council (the highest advisory organization to the Supreme Leader of Iran), Amir Abbasi Khoshkar proposes the sale of military arms, including Iranian missiles. He explains that “one of the most important goals of arms sales by the Islamic Republic of Iran is to attract financial and foreign exchange resources. Iran exported at least \$200 million weapons and military equipment between 2010 and 2014. Part of the foreign exchange reserves were obtained by selling weapons to the resistance axis [Hezbollah, Houthis, Iraqi militant groups], as well as Latin American and African countries... The resources obtained can be used to fund military research and lay the groundwork for improving the quantity and quality of weapons production.”²⁶

The aforementioned studies have considered the military dimensions of Iran’s missile program as well as its importance in providing physical security. This is while ontological security is as important as physical importance for Iran and these studies ignore it. This article aims to explain how we can understand the political behavior of Iranian leaders regarding the missile program based on ontological security. Some scholars have already used ontological security to explain Iran’s political behavior in relation to its nuclear program. For example, Maysam Behravesht focuses on Iran and discusses its controversial nuclear behavior as an instance of “thin revisionism,” primarily oriented towards acquiring ontological security.²⁷ He explains that ontological security is what drives Iran to maintain an atomic capacity despite significant economic costs: “The most feasible position that would ensure the highest degree of ontological security for Iran is that of nuclear ‘threshold,’ a liminal status in which the identity assurances of latent nuclear capability are at hand while the insecurities and perils of counter-status-quo weaponization are absent.”²⁸ Arash Reisinezhad²⁹ also reiterates the narrative of Maysam Behravesht in a different manner. He emphasizes the importance of ontological security, rather than physical security, in influencing Iranian leaders’ perceptions of the nuclear program’s role in maintaining national security. According to Reisinezhad, the physical interpretation of security in light of the realism theory is insufficient to explain Iran’s decision-making drivers. Producing nuclear fuel and maintaining a uranium enrichment program are important goals for Iran, and they provide the country with a sense of pride and dignity. Thus, the primary purpose of the sanctions was not Iran’s physical security, but actually its ontological security.³⁰ The main purpose of such severe sanctions was to put Iran in a difficult economic situation in order to give up its nuclear program. They sought to make Iran regret pursuing its nuclear program, which the Iranians officials saw as a source of pride and a new identity.

Mohiaddin Mesbahi applied ontological security theory to study Iran-US relations. He believes that “ontological security has seldom been sufficiently present for Iran since the

²⁵ Ali Khamenei, “Supreme Leader Meets Economic Experts,” *The Web site of Khamenei.ir*, August 18, 2011, <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/print-content?id=101504>.

²⁶ Amir Abbasi Khoshkar, “Export of Military Equipment of the Islamic Republic of Iran: Opportunities and Capacities,” *The Strategic Research Center of the Expediency Council*, September 21, 2020, <https://csr.ir/fa/news/1063>.

²⁷ Maysam Behravesht, “State Revisionism and Ontological (in)security in International Politics: The Complicated Case of Iran and its Nuclear Behavior,” *Journal of International Relations and Development* 21, no. 4 (2018): 836–57. <http://doi.org/10.1057/s41268-018-0149-x>.

²⁸ Behravesht, “State Revisionism,” 20.

²⁹ Arash Reisinezhad, “Ontological Security and Iran’s Nuclear Problem,” *International Relations Research* 8, no. 1(2018): 185–214.

³⁰ Reisinezhad, “Ontological Security,” 199.

revolution. Iran's international environment has never generated a stable cognitive condition favoring normalcy and stability.³¹ The host of complex events ranging from military threats to sanctions never allowed Iran to establish trust in the routinization of security as a predictable expectation and right. As a result, "Iran's existential security has been the subject of constant challenges, and thus its attainment has required a constant struggle."³² In the current study, to limit the scope of the research, we will only focus on the behavior and mentality of Iranian officials, and we will not examine the views of US officials on Iran's missile program. Contrary to Iran's nuclear program, which Behraves and Reisinezhad attributed to ontological security, the reasons why Iran is unwilling to negotiate over its missile programs cannot be explained solely by ontological security theory. Such a limited explanation could produce the same inconclusive results as previous research based on the theories of realism and liberalism.

3. Theoretical Framework: Ontological Security

The concept of ontological security was first coined by psychologist R.D. Laing.³³ Following Laing, Anthony Giddens³⁴ applied this concept "to provide a sociological understanding for individual human beings."³⁵ According to Giddens, a human's understanding of "self" should be generated and maintained on a daily and normal basis by the individual's actions.³⁶ If individuals can always offer "answers" to basic questions about themselves, a sense of ontological security will be created.³⁷ For those who subscribe to this theory, humans require a sense of existential security and strive for a constant and stable understanding of themselves throughout their lives. Along the same lines, scholars of international relations agree that "nation-states play a vital role in addressing this need, providing a stable environment and a national narrative that individuals are embedded within."³⁸ They explain that states, as social actors, seek the security of their "identity" as a whole, in addition to physical security and provision of national interests, as well as maximization of material power. This leads to a desire to maintain national identity and subjectivity, which can have a tremendous impact on state behavior.³⁹ In this regard, international relations scholars first used this concept to underline that ontological security is an explanatory factor when realism fails,⁴⁰ and then applied it to an elaboration of the power of deterrence,⁴¹ hybrid warfare,⁴² information

³¹ Mohiaddin Mesbahi, "Trust and US-Iran Relations: Between the Prisoners' Dilemma and the Assurance Game," *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs* 4, no. 1 (2013): 7–51.

³² Mesbahi, "Trust and US-Iran Relations," 29–30.

³³ Ronald David Laing, *The Divided Self: An Existential Study in Sanity and Madness* (London: Penguin Books, 1990 [1960]).

³⁴ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (California: Stanford University Press, 1991); Bill McSweeney, *Security, Identity and Interests: A Sociology of International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 1999).

³⁵ Mesbahi, "Trust and US-Iran Relations," 30.

³⁶ Anthony Giddens, *Modernity and Self-identity: Self and Society in the Late Modern Age* (California: Stanford University Press, 1991), 243.

³⁷ Giddens, *Modernity and Self-identity*, 47.

³⁸ Derek Bolton, "Targeting Ontological Security: Information Warfare in the Modern Age," *Political Psychology* 42, no. 1 (2020): 127–42.

³⁹ Ayşe Zarakol, "States and Ontological Security: A Historical Rethinking," *Cooperation and Conflict* 52, no. 1 (2017): 48–68; Michael Skey, "A Sense of Where You Belong in the World: National Belonging, Ontological Security and the Status of Ethnic Majority in England," *Nations and Nationalism* 16, no. 4 (2010): 715–33.

⁴⁰ Jennifer Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics: State Identity and the Security Dilemma," *European Journal of International Relations* 12, no. 3 (2006): 341–70; Brent J. Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State (New International Relations)* (New York: Routledge, 2008).

⁴¹ Amir Lupovici, *The Power of Deterrence: Emotions, Identity, and American and Israeli Wars of Resolve* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

⁴² Maria Mälksoo, "Countering Hybrid Warfare as Ontological Security Management: The Emerging Practices of the EU and

warfare,⁴³ state denial of historical crimes,⁴⁴ and changes in the country's foreign policy.⁴⁵

Ontological security, according to Mitzen, is defined as the security of the "self," and not the body, which is defined as who we are and what our identity is.⁴⁶ She believes that a definite need for identity is proportionate to actions with identity. As a result, uncertainty is viewed as a threat to rational action and identity. Forms of uncertainty include fear, ignorance, confusion, and indeterminacy in international relations theories.⁴⁷ Overcoming this fear of uncertainty is achieved through the normalization of current routines and habits of daily life.⁴⁸ States should be able to overcome similar threats to maintain their identities. The identity of a state, which is formed based on a narrative that has developed over time, reinforces its foreign policy actions in interstate relations. Existential anxiety and personal insecurities become important for states when they realize that their actions are incompatible with the identity and developed narrative of their "self."⁴⁹

According to Steele, ontological security is construed by states' actions, which are suggestive of their identities.⁵⁰ Thus, for ontological security, security is driven by individual and national identity, that is, the defense of the virtual self and the collective mental image. Maintaining and shaping the mental image that each society has of itself is a central issue of national security, and any distortion in this virtual self or collective mental view that jeopardizes ontological security can cause individual and national anxiety.⁵¹ It can be concluded that behaviors and actions that contradict national identity and collective mentality might result in shame. Shame is used as a metaphor to explain how identity disruptions cause states to take measures against realistic interests.⁵² At the state level, shame is viewed as a concern about a state's ability to adapt past or future actions to the narrative that it has used to justify its behavior. Shame is intended to cause anxiety and distress about the official narratives and biographies of individuals.⁵³ The ability of actors to justify and make sense of their actions and purpose in ways that are logically compatible with the image that they have of themselves is crucial; this is the core idea of the biographical narrative. Such a narrative becomes one of the manifestations of reality as the identity of an agent depends on it. For Giddens, pride and honor are considered the opposite of shame; a firm assurance of the comprehensiveness and value of the identity narrative that an individual offers.⁵⁴ Honor, according to Richard Lebow, is understood in tandem with individual pride. Honor makes

NATO," *European Security* 27, no. 3 (2018): 374–92.

⁴³ Derek Bolton, "Targeting Ontological Security: Information Warfare in the Modern Age," *Political Psychology* 42, no. 1 (2020): 127–42.

⁴⁴ Ayşe Zarakol, "Ontological (in)security and State Denial of Historical Crimes: Turkey and Japan," *International Relations* 24, no. 1 (2010): 3–23.

⁴⁵ Jelena Subotic, "Narrative, Ontological Security, and Foreign Policy Change," *Foreign Policy Analysis* 12, no. 4 (2016): 610–27.

⁴⁶ Mitzen, "Ontological Security," 344.

⁴⁷ Brian C. Rathbun, "Uncertain about Uncertainty: Understanding the Multiple Meanings of a Crucial Concept in International Relations Theory," *International Studies Quarterly* 51, no. 1 (2007): 533–34; Mälksoo, "Countering Hybrid Warfare," 379.

⁴⁸ Jennifer Mitzen, "Ontological Security in World Politics and Implications for the Study of European Security," CIDEL Workshop, October 22–23, 2004, <http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/viewdoc/download?doi=10.1.1.476.9317&rep=rep1&type=pdf>, 18–19.

⁴⁹ Brent J. Steele, *Ontological Security in International Relations: Self-Identity and the IR State (New International Relations)* (New York: Routledge, 2008a), 13.

⁵⁰ Brent J. Steele, "Ideals were Really Never in Our Possession; Torture, Honor and Us: Identity," *International Relation* 22, no. 2 (2008): 243–61.

⁵¹ Bill Mc Sweeney, *Security, Identity, and Interests: A Sociology of International Relations* (London: Cambridge University Press, 2009), 12–23.

⁵² Steele, *Ontological Security*, 13.

⁵³ Ibid.

⁵⁴ Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, 65.

sense when others accept and admire it.⁵⁵

Since Anthony Giddens⁵⁶ developed the concept of ontological security to provide a sociological understanding of individual human security, it has entered the field of international relations (IR) primarily through the work of Huysmans⁵⁷ and McSweeney.⁵⁸ This concept has been used by researchers to explain state behavior and to launch a new research agenda in international politics.⁵⁹ Despite the allure of ontological security for producing novel insights into some important issues in IR, its application has been met with criticism. Some scholars criticize its use at the state level. According to some critics, the concept of ontological security was originally developed for understanding and analyzing individuals, and it was not meant to be applied to states.⁶⁰ Other critics focus on the definition of ontological security that has been reduced to mere identity preservation and is biased toward continuity and the maintenance of the status quo.⁶¹ Some scholars like Karl Gustafsson and Nina C. Krickel-Choi believe that ontological security has no clarity concerning the key concepts of ontological insecurity and anxiety. So, they propose to adherents of the ontological security theory to distinguish between normal and neurotic anxiety. They argue that not all anxiety is necessarily neurotic. Karl Gustafsson and Nina C. Krickel-Choi explain that “ontological insecurity and neurotic anxiety can be seen as synonymous, while normal anxiety is different and something that we all experience to some degree.”⁶²

Regardless of some criticisms, Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi believe that “ontological security has proved fruitful for addressing a wide variety of theoretical and empirical concerns. It has allowed scholars interested in status revisionism, ideology, and nationalism to enter into a conversation with scholars working on identity practices, material environments, collective memory, transitional justice and reconciliation, diasporas, regionalism, foreign policy, power transitions, popular protests, populism or security communities.”⁶³ There is a growing body of work that is concerned with ontological security scholarship in IR.⁶⁴ One of the issues that is analyzed through this theory is the political behavior of Iranian leaders in relation to the country’s missile program. Iran’s refusal to enter into negotiations over its missile program appears to be motivated by a fear of jeopardizing its identity and ontological security. According to Huysmans and Mälksoo, Iran employs ontological security “as a strategy to manage the limits of reflexivity by fixing social relations into a symbolic and international order.”⁶⁵ In the following section, we will examine how this behavior is formed.

⁵⁵ Richard Ned Lebow, “Constructive Realism,” *International Studies Review* 6, no. 2 (2003): 347.

⁵⁶ Giddens, *Modernity and Self-Identity*, 243.

⁵⁷ Huysmans, “Security! What Do You Mean?,” 226–55.

⁵⁸ McSweeney, *Security, Identity, and Interests*.

⁵⁹ Mitzen, “Ontological Security in World Politics”; Steele, “Ideals were Really Never in Our Possession”.

⁶⁰ Ned Lebow, *National Identities and International Relations* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016); Stuart Croft, “Constructing Ontological Insecurity: The Insecuritization of Britain’s Muslims,” *Contemporary Security Policy* 33, no. 2 (2012): 219–35; Alanna Crolkowski, “State Personhood in Ontological Security theories of International Relations and Chinese Nationalism: an Aceptical View,” *Chinese Journal of International Politics* 2, no. 1 (2008): 109–33.

⁶¹ Christopher S. Browning and P. Joenniemi, “Ontological Security, Self-articulation and the Securitization of Identity,” *Cooperation and Conflict* 52, no. 1 (2017): 31–47; Patricia Greve, “Ontological Security, the Struggle for Recognition, and the Maintenance of Security Communities,” *Journal of International Relations and Development* 21, no. 4 (2018): 858–82.

⁶² Karl Gustafsson and Nina C. Krickel-Choi, “Returning to the Roots of Ontological Security: Insights from the Existentialist Anxiety Literature,” *European Journal of International Relations* 26, no. 3 (2020): 890.

⁶³ Gustafsson and Krickel-Choi, “Returning to the Roots of Ontological Security,” 877.

⁶⁴ Brent J. Steele, “Welcome Home! Routines, Ontological Insecurity and the Politics of US Military Reunion Videos,” *Cambridge Review of International Affairs* 32, no. 3 (2019): 322–43; R. Mac Ginty, “Circuits, the Everyday and International Relations: Connecting the Home to the International and Transnational,” *Cooperation and Conflict* 54, no. 2 (2019): 234–53; Bahar Rumelili, *Conflict Resolution and Ontological Security* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

⁶⁵ Huysmans, “Security! What Do You Mean?,” 242; Mälksoo, “Countering Hybrid Warfare,” 379.

4. Iran and Ontological Security

In the theoretical framework, we argued that states are ashamed of actions that distort the identities they have created. Therefore, they are constantly avoiding performing such actions. This section of the article delves into the concept of ontological security and how it relates to Iran's missile program.

4.1. The concept of shame and the continuation of Iran's missile conflict

To comprehend the concept of shame in the theory of ontological security, an analysis of biographical narratives is needed. Shame is formed when an agent, with a reflective attitude towards his or her actions, realizes that the actions are inconsistent with his/her and others' perceptions of him or her. Iran's biographical narrative can be understood in light of three concepts: Islamism, history, and geopolitics. Regarding the first concept, the Islamic Republic of Iran has tried to portray itself as a country that supports all anti-exploitation, anti-colonial, and anti-imperialist movements over the last forty-three years. Administrations that came to power after the revolution, regardless of their political affiliation, have always pledged to support "the underprivileged," a term used in relation to the people of Palestine, Yemen, Iraq, and Afghanistan.⁶⁶ Shiite Iran considers itself as the true representative of Islam and has attempted to introduce its political system as a model to other Islamic countries.⁶⁷ According to Islamic teachings propagated by Iranian clerics, the legitimacy of Iran's system is divine, and the government will be returned to the family of the Prophet and the twelfth Shiite Imam, a redeemer who will appear in the future. To make a provision, Iran must go through five stages: Islamic revolution, Islamic system, Islamic government, Islamic society, and finally, the Islamic civilization, of which the country is currently in the third.⁶⁸ To reach this end, according to Iran's 20-Year Vision Document, the country must in 2025 be "a developed one, regionally first in the economy, science, and technology, with Islamic and revolutionary identity, inspiring other nations of Islam, and with constructive and effective interaction in international and secure relations, independent, and authoritative with a defense system based on comprehensive deterrence."⁶⁹ Iran's missile program is part of the country's military capability to resist oppression and foreign pressure, to assist Islamic movements and the oppressed around the world, to prevent foreign interference in domestic affairs and to preserve its Islamic identity. Iranian officials believe that what distinguishes the Islamic Republic from the Pahlavi era is its independence, sense of dignity, and resistance to oppressors.⁷⁰ These achievements, which shape Iran's new identity, are all the result of military capabilities, including missile technology. According to the Islamic Republic's leaders, halting the development of the missile program will not only thwart Iran's grand plans, but also weaken the Islamic Republic in the eyes of its friends, bringing it

⁶⁶ John L. Esposito, *The Iranian Revolution: Its Global Impact* (Florida: University Press of Florida, 1990). Also see, Mohammad Jamshidi, "Why is Iran's Involvement in the Region More Important than 'the Most Essential Matters of the Country'?" October 23, 2019, <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/7111/Why-is-Iran-s-involvement-in-the-region-more-important-than-the>.

⁶⁷ David Menashri, *The Iranian Revolution and The Muslim World (Westview Special Studies on the Middle East)* (London and New York: Routledge, 1990). Also see: R. K. Ramazani, "Ideology and Pragmatism in Iran's Foreign Policy," *Middle East Journal* 58, no. 4 (2004): 549–59.

⁶⁸ Ali Khamenei, "The "Second Phase of the Revolution" Statement Addressed to the Iranian Nation," February 11, 2019, <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/6415/The-Second-Phase-of-the-Revolution-Statement-addressed-to-the>.

⁶⁹ Ali Khamenei, "The 20 Year National Vision of the Islamic Republic of Iran," November 14, 2003, <https://irandaportal.syr.edu/20-year-national-vision>.

⁷⁰ Ali Khamenei, "Statements at the Meeting of the Commanders and Staff of the Army Air Force," February 8, 2018, <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=38872>.

to shame.⁷¹ Iranian authorities believe that if they retreat to the West and negotiate, they will have accepted the West's superiority over them. This entails giving in to feelings of humiliation.⁷² An action that is not tolerable to Iranians. They are proud of their history and describe it as an ancient empire. A history in which they have never tolerated the domination of other states. French historian and archaeologist Roman Ghirshman states that "the Iranians [during the Achaemenid period] not only established a world empire but also succeeded in creating a world civilization with a vast area of influence."⁷³ He adds The Achaemenids were the first to exchange images and ideas between East and West in terms of material culture, religious beliefs and spiritual culture.⁷⁴ They were the first nation to resist foreign pressures and invasions (Arabs, Mongols, Alexander the Great, Afghans), and were able to integrate the invaders into their culture. The Achaemenids have never been subject to direct colonization and have always resisted all forms of aggression against their territories, which they have proudly defended. These statements have been heard and cited many times by Iranian officials and citizens as they feel a sense of pride for this history.

The Islamic Republic of Iran completed this proud record by projecting an image of the persistent revolution that had placed the Iranians in an ideal environment for at least a decade, and by claiming to be the only nation that had confronted two world superpowers. In fact, when Iranian students occupied the US embassy in Tehran in 1979 and detained 53 embassy officials and personnel, they had a sense of pride given that they were able to humiliate one of history's superpowers, the United States. Every day for several months, Tehran residents gathered in front of the US embassy and chanted anti-American slogans. To this day, the occasion has been remembered as an unforgettably great day; Ayatollah Khamenei called it "the days of God (*Ayam Allah* in Arabic)."⁷⁵ Iran has repeatedly propagated the claim that it is "the only independent state in the world that can stand up to the USA and resist its demands," and attempted to persuade Iranian citizens to believe it. During nuclear negotiations, they coined and used the terms "heroic flexibility"⁷⁶ and "greatest victory" (*fath-ol-fotuh* in Arabic) for nuclear negotiations to illustrate that they have never retreated from their long-held/strong-held revolutionary position. Given this background, it becomes clear that capitulating to Western pressures in missile programs creates a sense of shame for them, diminishing their Islamic-Iranian identity. In actuality, heroic flexibility cannot be applied to Iran's missile programs due to three main reasons. The first reason is that at its peak, Iran's nuclear program could only generate electricity. While the country had other options for generating electricity (using solar power plants, thermal power plants, and hydroelectric power plants), officials feel more secure by obtaining missile power. This sense of security encompasses not only physical security but also a psychological/identity security. Iranian officials are aware that their country is not a member of regional coalitions and does not have a strategic alliance with major powers. Due to this disadvantageous position, citizens have been told for more

⁷¹ Ali Khamenei, "To Say that the World's Future is a World of Negotiation, is either from Ignorance or Treason," *Fars News Agency*, March 30, 2016, <http://www.farsnews.com/newstext.php?nn=13950111000275>.

⁷² Ali Khamenei, "Statements in the Meeting of Professors and Students at the University of Science and Technology," January 13, 2009, <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=4992>.

⁷³ Roman Ghirshman, *Iran: From the Earliest Times to the Islamic Conquest*, Fourth Ed, translated to Persian by Mohammad Moein (Tehran: Scientific and Cultural Pub, 1993), 230.

⁷⁴ Ghirshman, *Iran*, 233.

⁷⁵ Ali Khamenei, "Message about the National Day of Struggle against Global Arrogance[U.S]" November 4, 1990, <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/message-content?id=2376>.

⁷⁶ Ali Khamenei, "Imam Hassan Used the Peace Treaty to Defeat the Enemy," November 7, 2016, <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/4301/Imam-Hassan-used-the-Peace-Treaty-to-defeat-the-enemy-Leader>.

than four decades that producing weapons and achieving self-sufficiency are the only ways to gain security.⁷⁷ As a result of their steadfast reliance on this narrative that they have been reproducing for years, Iranian officials feel threatened by the prospect of negotiations on their nuclear program. They are unable to justify any negotiations concerning the missile program given that such concessions would, in their eyes, humiliate their country.

The second reason is that Iran had squandered all opportunities to obtain a nuclear weapon, and it was difficult to tolerate further sanctions on something for which there was no longer a reasonable justification. In particular, the economic impact of sanctions on people's lives changed their opinion that the nuclear program is worth resisting the West.⁷⁸ As the economic sanctions became more severe, the Iranian people turned away from the Ahmadinejad administration and its claims, voting for the moderate candidate, Hassan Rouhani, in 2013 to negotiate with the West.⁷⁹ The victory of Rouhani in the election aided the regime in overcoming feelings of shame, and ontological insecurity. They began to create new narratives about the nuclear program and the necessity to negotiate with the West.

On the contrary, the Principlist (*Osulgarayan*) won the presidential elections on June 18, 2021, by criticizing the Rouhani administration's foreign policy. They claimed that the Rouhani administration had signed a bad deal. According to them, the JCPOA was a dark moment in Iran's political history. The new administration does not want to repeat a similar measure in this situation, especially since the the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corp (IRGC) is a strong supporter of Ebrahim Raisi and opposes any negotiation on the missile program. According to IRGC commanders, the missile program is a source of pride and national honor.⁸⁰ This source of pride can reconstruct Iran's ontological security.

The third reason is that, following the US withdrawal from the JCPOA, Iranian leaders heightened anti-American sentiments by exaggerating their distrust of the United States to the point where returning to the negotiation table may be inconceivable.⁸¹ One of the strategies used by governments to overcome their sense of ontological insecurity is to create an imaginary enemy and magnify its threat to the country's national security. They can strengthen their former political identity and feel safe and secure as a result.⁸²

The last concept that shapes Iran's identity is geopolitics. Iran, according to Tehran officials, is at the crossroads of international events and has long been coveted by foreign powers. Previously, the eastern, southern, and northern parts of the country were separated by the British and the Russian empires. Because of its rich oil and gas resources, Iran has been subject to foreign interference since the First World War, and its most popular administration (Mohammad Musadeq) was overthrown in 1953 by a coup d'état supported by the US and the UK.⁸³ After the Islamic Revolution, efforts were made to change the country's political system through pressure and sanctions. Therefore, Iranian officials fear that negotiating with the West on missile programs will erode the post-revolutionary identity. They are concerned

⁷⁷ See, Ali Khamenei, *Self-Sufficiency Jihad: The Army of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Ayatollah Khamenei's Statements* (Tehran: Islamic Revolution Publications, 2015).

⁷⁸ See, Richard Nephew, *The Art of Sanctions: A View from the Field* (Columbia University Press, 2017), 50-70.

⁷⁹ Farhad Rezaei, *Iran's Foreign Policy after the Nuclear Agreement Politics of Normalizers and Traditionalists* (Ankara: Springer, 2019), 16-8.

⁸⁰ Ali Razmjoo, "Commander of the Navy of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps: Iran's Missile Authority is a Source of National Pride," *Fars News*, June 19, 2017, <https://www.farsnews.ir/news/13960329002027>.

⁸¹ Ali Khamenei, "Statement at the Last Meeting between the President and the Twelfth Cabinet," July 28, 2021, <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=48356>.

⁸² Mitzen, "Ontological Security," 2-3; Browning and Joenniemi, "Ontological Security," 31-47.

⁸³ Ali Khamenei, "CIA Meddled, Plotted Coups against any Popular, Anti-Imperialist Government in Latin America," March 18, 2002, <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/5848/CIA-meddled-plotted-coups-against-any-popular-anti-imperialist>.

about the future and how their citizens will interpret this action. For more than forty years, they have told the people that the US and EU are Iran's enemies,⁸⁴ and now how should they be told that this enmity is over and that weapons can be put aside?

Iranian authorities are not only unable to abandon their missile program, but they also believe that it is one of the pillars on which they can rely to maintain their revolutionary-Islamic identity. When, under external pressures, they realize that this pillar is collapsing, they experience ontological insecurity and existential anxiety. To overcome this sense of identity insecurity, it is natural, according to the logic of ontological security, that they resort to the routine habits arising from their Islamic-revolutionary identity and the reproduction of their previous understanding of themselves. Among the behaviors that reduce ontological insecurity in Iran are the emphasis on national independence, resistance to US pressure, and the preservation of revolutionary identity. Iranian leader Ali Khamenei asserts that "the Islamic Republic has a legal form and a real form. This real form must be preserved. If the legal form remains but the real form is lost, it will be worthless. What is this natural and real form? The ideals of the Islamic Revolution, justice, human dignity, preservation of values, creation of brotherhood and equality, morality, resistance against enemies. If this real theme - which is the main part of the identity of the Islamic Republic - is lost, the legal form of the Islamic Republic will be of no use."⁸⁵

4.2. Iran's basic trust system in the missile program

In terms of ontological security, states prioritize the strategy of normalizing current and daily routines in order to maintain their sense of "identity" in the face of uncertainty and cognitive instability.⁸⁶ Iran is no exception to this principle. Iran's trust system has been harmed in two instances in recent years. First, the 2004 nuclear deal with European countries did not go as planned, and the European countries failed to keep their promises, prompting Iran to resume uranium enrichment. Second, with Trump's election, the JCPOA came to an end, despite Iran's compliance with all its nuclear commitments. Consequently, sanctions were reimposed on Iran in 2018. To Iranian authorities, it makes no sense to negotiate an agreement with states that do not abide by their promises and treaties, and any missile deal will not work any better than the nuclear one.⁸⁷ They even highlight the violation of the agreement with Libya following its withdrawal of its nuclear program and the failure of Trump's promises to North Korea, as objective examples.⁸⁸ Therefore, according to the theory of ontological security, returning to Iran's current and daily routine of "resistance to any foreign pressure" is the best option because it both preserves Iran's credibility and prevents negative consequences and future regrets. In fact, current habits and procedures are considered as goals in Iran's rigid trust system, the maintenance of which becomes the agent's purpose.⁸⁹ Iranian officials prefer to continue their missile tests and feel proud rather than entering into negotiations over a

⁸⁴ Ali Khamenei, "Why Does Iran not Accept to Negotiate with the United States?," October 5, 2019, <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/7082/Why-Does-Iran-not-accept-to-negotiate-with-the-United-States;Ali-Khamenei-What-are-the-5-Predictions-of-Imam-Khamenei-Which-Came-True?What-is-his-Most-Recent-Prediction?>, August 27, 2019, <http://english.khamenei.ir/news/6996/What-are-the-5-predictions-of-Imam-Khamenei-which-came-true>.

⁸⁵ Ali Khamenei, "Statements in the Meeting of Professors and Students at the University of Science and Technology," January 13, 2009, <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=4992>.

⁸⁶ Mitzen, "Ontological Security," 3-4.

⁸⁷ Ali Khamenei, "Statement at Imam Hossein University," May 23, 2016, <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/newspart-index?tid=5502>.

⁸⁸ Ali Khamenei, "Four Narratives of the Experience of the Cost of Compromise," June 7, 2017, <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/others-note?id=36754>.

⁸⁹ Mitzen, "Ontological Security," 4-5.

missile program and ultimately being humiliated by the West. If the missile program fails to provide them with physical security, it can at least strengthen their ontological security. This will be accomplished through the use of the following statements:

- 1) Western countries are not reliable.⁹⁰ So, it is better to rely on ourselves. They want to prevent Iran from developing self-sufficiency and missile capability.⁹¹ Iran must resist these pressures.
- 2) The West is attempting to undermine Iran's sovereignty and independence.⁹² The missile program protects its independence.
- 3) The United States opposes Iran's revolutionary and Islamic identities⁹³, and missile programs are just one excuse. So, it is better not to give up and continue our way.⁹⁴

Iran, therefore, is constructing "autobiographical identity narratives" to explain its actions.⁹⁵ Having a secure autobiography, as well as a firm grasp on its past and history, provides Tehran with a sense of security and allows it to move forward.

4.3. The function of the missile program in creating identity and pride in Iran

As Mehran Kamrava explains "Iranian foreign and security policy is the product of deliberations and give- and- take compromises between three influential but unequal centers of power. These are the presidency and by extension the foreign ministry, whose primary field of expertise and influence is foreign policy; the IRGC, which is in charge of national security inside and outside of the country; and the Leader, currently Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, who has the final say on whatever the other two groups propose and recommend."⁹⁶ Now, unlike during Hassan Rouhani's presidency, the principlists control all three branches of power. Principlists believe that, in addition to providing security for Iran, the missile program has instilled pride in the country. Because it is a national achievement and no country has helped Iran in pursuing it, it cannot be exchanged for anything else.⁹⁷

Recent studies dealing with Iran's missile program have paid much attention to the issue of Iran's deterrence and disruption of the balance of power in the region.⁹⁸ That is to say, Iran's missile program serves a higher purpose: it establishes the country's identity and credibility. Despite the economic, military, scientific, and technological sanctions, Iran has been able to improve the range and accuracy of its missiles while also developing new types. Every year on the anniversary of the Islamic Revolution's victory in 1979 and during "Holy

⁹⁰ Ali Khamenei, "Statement at the Last Meeting between the President and the Twelfth Cabinet," July 28, 2021, <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=48356>.

⁹¹ Amir Ali Hajizadeh, "What is the Reason for the Success of Iran's Missile Industry," June 22, 2017, <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/others-dialog?id=36942>.

⁹² Ali Khamenei, "Statements in the Meeting of the Iranian officials," June 12, 2017, <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=36824>.

⁹³ Ali Khamenei, "Statements in the Meeting of Professors and Students at the University of Science and Technology," January 13, 2009, <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=4992>.

⁹⁴ "Commander Salami: Missile Issues are an Excuse, the Goal is to Surrender the Iranian Nation," *Asrpress Agency*, May 10, 2018, <http://asrpress.ir/fa/news/8753>.

⁹⁵ Innes Alexandria and Brent J. Steele, *Memory, Trauma and Ontological Security. In Memory and Trauma in International Relations: Theories, Cases, and Debates*, ed. Erica Resende and Dovile Budryte (London: Routledge, 2014), 17.

⁹⁶ Mehran Kamrava, "Institutions and Policy in Iran's Relations with the GCC," *The Muslim World* (2021): 2.

⁹⁷ Ali Khamenei, "Statements in a Virtual Meeting with the Participants in the Ceremony of Honoring the Veterans of the Holy Defense," September 21, 2020, <https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=46525>; see also: Ghafar Hadadi, *Frontline: Documentary Story of the Formation of the Iranian Missile Unit* (Tehran: Shahid Kazemi Publisher, 2014).

⁹⁸ Farhad Rezaei, "Iran's Ballistic Missile Program: A New Case for Engaging Iran?," *Insight Turkey* 18, no. 4 (2016): 184. Also see: Robert Einhorn and Vann H. Van Diepen, "Constraining Iran's Missile Capabilities," *Foreign Policy at Brookings*, March 2019, <https://www.brookings.edu/research/constraining-irans-missile-capabilities/>.

Defense Week” in the last week of September,⁹⁹ Iran exhibits and boasts about its latest missile achievement.

Missiles are currently an important part of the military capabilities of great powers, and are seen as a symbol of power and prestige as well as a necessary component of the new military force. One of the reasons that this type of weapon appeals to developing countries is the increased international influence, credibility and practical independence that they gain in the face of regional competitors and superpowers.¹⁰⁰ However, none of these characteristics is as important as the sense of pride and identity gained from their accomplishments.

Fundamentally, committing acts of pride is a way for a state to establish its identity both domestically and internationally. Domestically, Iran has been attempting to portray its forty-three-year record as an efficient example, encouraging citizens to continue their support for the political system by building new missiles and acquiring new technology. They reproduce the identity and enhance a sense of pride in their citizens by emphasizing military self-sufficiency and its importance at critical times, especially in times of foreign threats and sanctions, and comparing the country’s current situation with the pre-revolutionary period, a period of military dependence as they claim. Playing epic songs repeatedly, displaying Iran’s national flag, and boasting about the accuracy of the missiles in the face of any US military threat are components of a psychological operation used by Islamic Republic officials to effectively shape the Iranian mentality. States like Iran, as Jelena Subotić explains, construct “their biographical continuity through internal efforts to maintain their self-reflexive narratives, their positive views of self, at times of crisis. Narratives are important for seeking state ontological security because they provide autobiographical justification and continuity with the ‘good past.’”¹⁰¹

On the international stage, Iranian officials have repeatedly stated that missiles are used to deter and ward off enemies, while also condemning Saddam Hussein’s strategic mistake in submitting to the arms control program and limiting his missile power in the 1990s.¹⁰² According to the Iranian officials, Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi’s downfall was a result of their trust in the West as they agreed to comply.¹⁰³ Instead, the Iranian missile program has been cited as a source of national pride on at least four occasions: the Iran-Iraq War, Iran targeting the ISIS Headquarters in Deir-Ez-Zor, Syria, shooting down the US Global Hawk aircraft, and Iran’s attack on US military bases in Iraq.

4.3.1. Iran-Iraq War

In the winter of 1987, as the war with Iraq turned out to be an instance of urban warfare and cities were rocket-rained, the Iraqis fired 189 missiles in approximately 50 days.¹⁰⁴ Of these, 135 landed in Tehran, 23 in Qom, 22 in Isfahan, and the others in Tabriz, Shiraz, and Karaj. The attacks killed more than 2,000 Iranians and forced a quarter of Tehran’s population to

⁹⁹ This week commemorates Saddam Hussein’s invasion of Iran in 1980, and Iran’s resistance to this invasion.

¹⁰⁰ Andrew W. Hull, *Role of Ballistic Missile in Third World Defenses Strategies* (Institute for Defense Analyses Alexandria VA, 1991), 3.

¹⁰¹ Subotić, “Narrative, Ontological Security,” 5.

¹⁰² Stephen Black, “UNSCOM and the Iraqi Biological Weapons Program: Implications for Arms Control,” *Political and Life Science* 18, no. 1 (1999): 62–9.

¹⁰³ Mohammed Elbaradei, *The Age of Deception: Nuclear Diplomacy in Treacherous Times*, trans. Firoozeh Doroshati, Second Edition (Tehran: Iran Publication, 2014), 176. Also see: Ali Khamenei, “Why Does the Leader of Iran Support Nuclear Talks?,” November 3, 2013, <http://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=27591>.

¹⁰⁴ “Iran Missile Chronology,” *The Monterey Institute of International Studies*, 2011, https://media.nti.org/pdfs/iran_missile.pdf.

flee the capital city.¹⁰⁵ Although the Iranians responded by firing 75 to 77 Hwasung-5 missiles (made by North Korea), they had to pay a high price to gain access to these missiles.¹⁰⁶ Even during the height of the sanctions, Iran's missile response to the Iraqi attacks sparked a wave of pride among Iranians, who continue to respectfully refer to Hassan Tehrani-Moghaddam, who was in charge of the missile program, as "the father of Iran's missile program." Tehran's officials constantly recreate their narratives about missile-building and claim it as a major achievement. These narratives help to shape the Islamic-revolutionary identity of Iran.

4.3.2. Targeting the ISIS Headquarters in Deir-Ez-Zor, Syria

After the rise of ISIS in the Middle East, Tehran found a new opportunity to show off its missile capabilities. While the moderate faction was in power and they argued that instead of building missiles, Iran should negotiate, the radical conservative faction allowed ISIS to conduct limited operations in Tehran to silence the opposition.¹⁰⁷ This operation, which was a terrorist attack on the Iranian parliament on June 7, 2017, resulted in the deaths of 17 people and injuries of 52 others. Iran used the Qiam missile for the first time on June 18, 2017, in response to the ISIS terrorist attack on the group's military base in Deir-ez-Zor, Syria. The launching of six missiles at ISIS's headquarters shortly after the group's operation inside Iran provoked a new wave of pride among Iranians. The country's media reported that the missile attacks claimed the lives of 170 ISIS members.¹⁰⁸ This action aided Iran to create a new narrative about the missile program. As Berenskoetter states "a coherent narrative can include all sorts of change as long as a sensible link from 'before' to 'after' is maintained."¹⁰⁹ Iran has demonstrated for the second time that its missile program is effective in defending its Islamic identity against other Islamic identities, such as those of ISIS and al-Qaeda.

4.3.3. Shooting down the US Global Hawk Aircraft

Iran's third success in the construction of missiles and air defense systems was the downing of the US RQ-4 Global Hawk UAV near the Strait of Hormuz by the Third-of-Khordad Air Defense System. Targeting the world's largest military power's super-advanced, high-altitude, remotely-piloted surveillance aircraft, which was claimed to have entered Iranian territorial waters, heightened Iranian pride. Iran's military commanders once again demonstrated their missile and defense capabilities by displaying the plane's wreckage at an exhibition in Tehran on June 20, 2019.¹¹⁰ Tehran's officials showed that they can always "manipulate stories to convince their followers of a specific policy, in the process of making political resources out of narratives. They seize on collectively remembered history to make specific political points of the present."¹¹¹

¹⁰⁵ Guy Perrimond, "1944–2001: The Threat of Theatre Ballistic Missiles," *TTU Online*, 2002, 6, <http://www.ttu.fr/site/english/endocpdf/24pBalmisileenglish.pdf>.

¹⁰⁶ Mohammad Javad Zarif, "Defense of Mohammad Javad Zarif of Iran's Missile Program," *Pars Today*, February 3, 2017, <http://parstoday.com/fa/iran-i54019>.

¹⁰⁷ Ali Khamenei sharply criticized those who called the present and the world of tomorrow the world of negotiation and said: "The enemies are constantly strengthening their military and missile capabilities. In this situation, how can we say that the days of missiles are over?" *Mashregh News*, March 30, 2016, <https://www.mashreghnews.ir/news/550919>.

¹⁰⁸ Marjohn Shekhi, "Iran Missile Attacks Killed over 170 Terrorists in Deir Ezzor," *Mehr News Agency*, June 22, 2017, <https://en.mehrnews.com/news/126101/Iran-missile-attacks-killed-over-170-terrorists-in-Deir-Ezzor>.

¹⁰⁹ Felix Berenskoetter, "Parameters of a National Biography," *European Journal of International Relations* 20, no. 1 (2014): 279.

¹¹⁰ Richard Sisk, "Iran Makes Show of Drone Wreckage After Trump Calls Off Retaliatory Strike," *Military Com*, June 21, 2019, <https://www.military.com/daily-news/2019/06/21/iran-makes-show-drone-wreckage-after-trump-calls-retaliatory-strike.html>.

¹¹¹ Subotić, "Narrative, Ontological Security," 3.

4.3.4. Targeting the US military bases in Iraq

Following the assassination of Qasem Soleimani, the commander of Iran's Quds Force, on January 3, 2020, by a US drone attack, Iranian officials retaliated by firing 13 Qiam and Fateh-313 missiles at Iraq's Al-Taji and Ayn al-Asad military bases on January 8, 2020. Iran's swift response to the assassination of its highest-ranking major general, at a time when his glorious funeral was still ongoing, demonstrated the effectiveness of missiles in protecting Iranian pride once again. The operation was so important to Iranians, regardless of the number of casualties, that for the first time since World War II, a developing country dared to strike a military blow at US interests, and the US failed to reciprocate. What added to this sense of pride was the fact that the boastings of Trump and other US military officials before the missile strikes were absurd.¹¹²

The examples reviewed above confirm Johnston's claim that "government behavior cannot be interpreted solely in terms of realism and the search for power and security. For leaders, dignity is as important as security. If governments pay attention to security, it is because it can be effective in achieving their dignity."¹¹³ The missile program has not only improved Iran's military power deterrence, but it has also elevated Iran's status among its domestic and foreign supporters. They are pleased that Iran is not merely chanting anti-American slogans in response to any American action. The Iranian authorities are pleased with their revolutionary identity and are attempting to maintain it, or, in Mitzen's terms, they are "getting back to normal."¹¹⁴ As a result of such satisfaction with this revolutionary identity, there is little hope for dialogue and compromise.

5. Theoretical Critiques Based on the Iranian Case

Although the theory of ontological security appears to be capable of explaining state behavior in the face of external pressures and demands from other countries,¹¹⁵ it has significant flaws. This theory cannot explain why governments eventually agree to negotiate and accept the demands of their opponents despite their insistence on maintaining their identity, and their fear of jeopardizing their position. The nuclear case of Iran and Libya are two prominent examples in this regard. While Mahmoud Ahmadinejad's administration (2005-2013) rejected giving any points to the other side in nuclear negotiations, Hassan Rouhani's administration practically accepted many of the demands.¹¹⁶ The crucial question is whether this retreat jeopardized Iran's previous identity. Ontological security does not address this question. The point that the followers of ontological security theory overlook is that states care just as much about their physical security as they do about their ontological security. Choosing one of the two dimensions of security (ontological security or physical security) is a difficult task. It is determined by domestic conditions as well as the states' external environment. States may act differently in the same situations. Iran and Libya have demonstrated that states can change past narratives and create new narratives about their nuclear program. As new narratives

¹¹² "Remarks by President Trump on the Killing of Qasem Soleimani," *The White House*, January 3, 2020, <https://www.whitehouse.gov/briefings-statements/remarks-president-trump-killing-qasem-soleimani/>. Also see: Trump, Donald J. (2020), Tweeter post, January 3, 2020, <https://twitter.com/realDonaldTrump>.

¹¹³ Johnston Alastair Iain, "Cultural Realism and Strategy in Maoist China," in *The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics*, ed. Peter Katzenstein (New York: Columbia University Press, 1996).

¹¹⁴ Mitzen, "Ontological Security," 3-4.

¹¹⁵ Bahar Rumelili, *Conflict Resolution and Ontological Security* (New York: Routledge, 2015).

¹¹⁶ Kelsey Davenport, "The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) at a Glance," *Arms Control Association*, March 2021, <https://www.armscontrol.org/factsheets/JCPOA-at-a-glance>.

create opportunities for action, past narratives can render certain actions unimaginable. In Iran, they began to construct new narratives to replace previous narratives of their identity. These narratives are presented in such a way that there is no clear and explicit conflict with the previous narratives. For example, in Iran Hassan Rouhani's administration replaced the "discourse of interaction and reconciliation" with the narrative of "nuclear resistance discourse." He explained to the Iranians that Iran would not relinquish its nuclear rights and that his only goal was to ensure the welfare of the Iranian people alongside the nuclear program.¹¹⁷ On this point, Wittes has demonstrated the importance of narratives and how collective memories of past traumas impact the ongoing negotiation styles between, for example, Israelis and Palestinians.¹¹⁸

Wendt¹¹⁹ and Mitzen¹²⁰, on the other hand, argue that states may be willing to compromise some aspects of their physical security in order to maintain their identity, or their sense of self. Even if they are more concerned with physical security, it does not mean that their actions have no implications for their ontological security. When states hold a deterrence identity and fail to deter meaningful attack, Lupovici asserts, "they are forced to address the resulting ontological insecurity and feelings such as humiliation, shame, nostalgia, frustration, and anxiety."¹²¹ Despite the constructive implications of ontological security theory in explaining states' anxieties on various issues, less attention has been paid to the process by which states overcome these concerns. Addressing this question may be a concern for future research, but if we want to provide an initial answer, a possible remedy for states' security anxiety is the reconstruction of identity over time and the construction of new narratives by governments to justify their actions to citizens.

6. Conclusion

States, like individuals, need assurance in the continuity of self-identity as well as a firm grasp of identity. They like to use their actions against other states to demonstrate their identity. They are not only concerned about their physical security, but ontological security is also important to them. This ontological security is provided by a sense of continuity and order in events. Iran sees itself as a victim of an unfair distribution of resources, including power and prestige in the international arena, as well as feelings of dissatisfaction, injustice, and loneliness. Threats to Iran's ontological security have contributed to the routinization of conflict with the west, which is a key source of identity reassurance. They have instigated a struggle aimed at precluding identity erosion.

Iran, suffering from a lack of great prestige in the international system, considers its missile program as a symbol of efficiency and independence. The missile program acts as a formidable barrier against identity erosion, contributing to their ontological security. It helps Iran in reconstructing its identity. The missile program not only serves as a powerful deterrent to external conquest, but also helps the leaders in viewing the country with "awe" both at home and abroad. A complete halt to the missile program will pose a threat to Iran's

¹¹⁷ Ali Bagheri Dolatabadi and Mohsen Shafie, *From Hashemi to Rouhani: Study of Iran's Foreign Policy* (Tehran: Tisa, 2014), 337–41.

¹¹⁸ Tamara C. Wittes, *How Israelis and Palestinians Negotiate: A Cross-Cultural Analysis of the Oslo Peace Process* (Washington, DC: United States Institute of Peace Press, 2005).

¹¹⁹ Alexander Wendt, "Collective Identity Formation and the International State," *American Political Science Review* 88, no. 2 (1994): 384–96.

¹²⁰ Mitzen, "State Identity and the Security Dilemma," 344.

¹²¹ Lupovici, *The Power of Deterrence*, 59.

self-identity. Surrendering to Western pressures undermines Iran's narrative of independence, self-sufficiency, and security, and discredits it in the eyes of its citizens. As Thomas Schelling explains, "this kind of face [sense of honor and respect] is one of the few things worth fighting over."¹²²

In the context of the missile program, Iran's ontological security appears to be tied to its physical security. If Iran abandons its missile program, it will be vulnerable to security threats, and ashamed of surrendering to external pressures. Although ontological security advocates' arguments for state behavior seem plausible, states will ultimately act on the logic of realism and countering physical threats. The experience of Iran's nuclear negotiations has shown that when Iran believes that its physical security is in danger, it attempts to escape the sense of shame by creating new narratives of their identity (ontological security). Some of the actions used by states to justify their decisions include presenting themselves as the victor in negotiations, humiliating the other side, making the enemy's actions immoral, and emphasizing justice.

In response, Iran has depicted its missile program as a symbol of government efficiency, national pride and arrogance, endurance and resistance, based on which identity has been created. Therefore, as long as the political option of negotiation is not seriously on the US agenda, and it is unwilling to take into account Iranian officials' feelings of shame associated with prospective negotiations, or does not seek to restore Iran's lost trust, in accordance with the ontological security theory, Tehran will not abandon its current resistance habits.

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¹²² Thomas C. Schelling, *Arms and Influence: With a New Preface and Afterword* (Yale University Press, 1966), 194.

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