

IRAN: BEING A NUCLEAR THRESHOLD STATE WITHIN A NATIONAL RESISTANCE CONTEXT

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Abstract: For almost four decades, Iran's foreign policy rhetoric and actions have drawn the attention of the international community. Iran acquired a leadership role in the advocacy of oppressed people against oppressors after the 1979 Revolution. In this direction, it has exhibited two-pronged foreign policy behaviour over the years. One is the axis of resistance politics, and the second is the advancement of a nuclear program. The Iranian-led coalition network known as the 'Axis of Resistance' includes Shiite paramilitary groups in Iraq, the Syrian Ba'ath regime, Palestinian resistance organizations, and Hezbollah in Lebanon. Since the USA adopted the 'Axis of Evil' rhetoric against Iran in 2002, Iran has simultaneously deepened its relations with the axis of resistance in the face of this pressure and has advanced its nuclear activities, which has transformed it into a nuclear threshold state. In this article, we argue that these two main foreign policy activities are inseparable and they are ultimately the consequence of Iran's adopted national role, i.e., the leader of the oppressed. Therefore, we discuss that with its resistance to the pressures relevant to the nuclear program, Iran intends to give a clear message to the proxies on the axis of resistance. We applied role theory on the relationship between the axis of resistance concept and nuclear policy to contribute to the prominent foreign policy debates over Iran's two inseparable foreign policy behaviours.

Keywords: Iran, nuclear threshold, axis of resistance, national role conception, role theory.

İran: Ulusal Direniş Bağlamında Nükleer Eşik Devleti Olmak

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Özet: İran İslam Cumhuriyeti'nin dış politika söylem ve eylemleri kırk yılı aşkın bir süredir uluslararası toplumun odak noktasıdır. İran, 1979 İslam Devrimi sonrasında yeni bir rol üstlenmiştir; bu da ezenlerin karşısında ezilenlerin savunuculuğunu yapmaktır. Bu doğrultuda, İran yıllar içinde dış politikasında iki davranışı ön plana çıkarmıştır. Bunlardan biri, direniş eksenli siyaseti, ikincisi ise nükleer programın geliştirilmesidir. Direniş eksenli, Filistin direniş örgütleri, Lübnan Hizbullahı, Suriye'deki Esad rejimi ve Irak'taki Şii paramiliter grupları içeren İran liderliğindeki ittifak ağı için kullanılan ifadedir. ABD'nin 2002 yılında İran'a karşı 'şer eksenli' söylemini benimsemesinden bu yana, İran bu baskı karşısında eş zamanlı olarak direniş eksenli olarak tanımladığı vekillerle ilişkilerini derinleştirmiş ve eş zamanlı olarak nükleer faaliyetlerini ilerletmiş, bu da onu nükleer eşik devleti yapmıştır. Bu makalede, İran'ın devrimden bu yana öne çıkardığı iki ana dış politika davranışının birbirinden ayrılmaz olduğu ve bunun temel sebebinin de İran'ın benimsediği ulusal rolün, yani mazlumların liderliği rolü olduğu iddia edilmektedir. Dolayısıyla bu çalışmada, İran'ın nükleer programıyla ilgili baskılara direnmek suretiyle direniş eksenindeki vekillerine net bir mesaj

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vermek amacıyla olduğunu tartışılmaktadır. Bu bağlamda İran'ın direniş eksenli siyaseti ve nükleer politikası arasındaki ilişki, rol teorisi üzerinden ele alınmıştır.

Anahtar kelimeler: *İran, nükleer eşik, direniş eksenli, ulusal rol kavramı, rol teorisi.*

1. INTRODUCTION

Despite Iran being a party to the 1968 Nuclear Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT), the international community viewed Iran's continued nuclear endeavours as a threat to the world in the wake of the 1979 Islamic Revolution. Confirming this view, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) issued resolutions involving economic sanctions from 2006 to 2010. Ultimately, after Iran and the P5+1 (the five permanent members of the SC and Germany) announced the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015, there was a short period of peace. According to some scholars, the U.S. policy change from zero enrichment to no nuclear bomb, or the acceptance of Iran's right to run a nuclear enrichment program within the parameters of the NPT, was the primary factor in the success of discussions from 2013 to 2015 (Mousavian and Mousavian, 2018, pp.169-192).

There has been unanimity among the members of the international community that Iran's nuclear program constitutes a threat to global security since the U.S. opted to withdraw from the JCPOA in 2018, but a debate has emerged regarding the JCPOA's future. While Iran claims that all its activities are for peaceful purposes, the P5+1, particularly the U.S., claims that this is an activity that eventually aims to acquire a nuclear bomb (Berg and Bateman, 2022). It should be highlighted at this point that the Europeans and Americans had differing perspectives on the JCPOA. In Europe's largely dismal record of foreign policy, the JCPOA's conclusion stands out as an unique accomplishment. Even though the US and Iran were at the center of the nuclear talks, the European Union played a remarkable amount of value in its supporting role. The Europeans had every right to celebrate their success when the agreement was finally reached in July 2015 since they had successfully expressed their support for the maintenance of the nuclear non-proliferation regime and the elimination of a potential Middle East conflict trigger (Alcaro and Dessi, 2019, p.5).

Vital decisions are typically the result of a complicated string of processes, variables, and decisions, hence it is important to take into account a variety of interconnected elements when evaluating significant decisions made by states, such as whether to go nuclear or not (or the absence of decision) (Cohen, 1998). The Islamic Republic of Iran, which has established itself as a nuclear threshold state in the international arena with its roughly 40 years old nuclear activities and having relatively significant nuclear capabilities than other NPT states in the Middle East region, may remain to be an on threshold for different reasons.

When we ask why Iran continues to advance its nuclear program despite international pressure, it is possible to produce a wide variety of answers. One reason Iran does not accept the pressures of the international community regarding its nuclear program is that it sees resistance to these pressures as a continuation of the resistance policy, which is one of the basic national role concepts of its revolutionary ideology. Therefore, it is possible to evaluate Iran's decision to continue its nuclear activities despite the pressures from the international community, through the lens of role theory, which has a prominent place in foreign policy analysis. Considering the potential problems/threats because of Iran's location in a dynamic and unstable security environment, it seems beneficial for itself to maintain its nuclear latency status for future considerations but refrain from developing nuclear weapons unless there is an imminent threat.

In this context, this study seeks to assess whether, in the years following the Islamic Revolution, Iran has adopted the concept of a "resistance leader" as a national role to advocate for the oppressed. We claim in the article that the nuclear program and the axis of resistance serve as the two major pillars around which this resistance leadership is constructed. In this regard, the article explores two crucial issues: how Iran adopted a national role concept as a leader of resistance and how pursuing a nuclear program paved the way for this resistance policy.

The dynamics of Iran's foreign policy following the Islamic Revolution have been the subject of numerous studies. In this article, we felt it was necessary to use role theory to examine Iran's new national role in order to broaden the analysis and add new perspective to previous research. The book "Role Theory and Role Conflict in U.S.-Iran Relations," authored in 2016 by Akan Malici and Stephen G. Walker, which served as the inspiration for this work, should be mentioned in this context. Role conflicts, according to Malici and Walker, lie at the core of the dynamics underlying US-Iran relations. Iran has long wished to play active independence and national sovereignty roles in international politics. However, it was still given patronizing or rebellious positions befitting a lower national status by others. In order to shed light on certain facets of U.S.-Iran relations, their application of role theory is theoretically and methodologically creative and progressive. For the purpose of avoiding errors in foreign policy, it enables a better comprehension of the past, navigating the present, and foreseeing the future (Walker and Malici, 2016).

This article proceeds as follows. Role theory is briefly introduced at the beginning of the study. The nuclear latency status and its relationship to the resistance discourse are then described. The article comes to the conclusion that role theory has the ability to provide a framework for understanding Iran's leadership of the resistance and its connection to nuclear latency.

2. CONCEPTUAL FRAMEWORK AND METHODOLOGY

Role theory is utilized in this article to examine Iran's own role perception as well as the role expectations held by outsiders, since role theory offers a helpful basis to explain changes in actors' foreign policy behaviors. The fundamental components of Iranian role conception and the degree of consistency between role conceptions and observed role performance are two associated topics that this article has focused on. Particular focus is given to the ideological component and how, if at all, this role is reflected in the perspectives of others. Only secondary sources, including books, reports, working papers, articles, theses, news, were used to further the study.

In his article titled *National Role Conceptions in the Study of Foreign Policy* in 1970, J. K. Holsti, took a critical view on the classification of states. For him, the categorizations were under the influence of the Cold War conditions. Thus, there was a need to analyse states' foreign policy behaviours from an alternative perspective. In this context, he constructed role theory as a way to examine foreign policy. In Holsti's opinion, *representing the world in terms of blocs and neutral was only a rough categorization of reality and perhaps increasingly obsolete* (Holsti, 1970, p.235). For this reason, it was time to ask new questions. The first question to be asked was related to the basic roles of states. In addition, the following two questions should be asked: "Is it possible to construct a typology of national roles that takes into account the differences between states by looking at their behaviours?" and "How do policymakers see the role of the states they govern in the international system?" (Holsti, 1970, p.235).

The role theory in foreign policy analysis has maintained its popularity among scholars in subsequent years and has become a valuable theoretical approach. The book entitled *Role Theory and Foreign Policy Analysis* (1987), edited by Stephen G. Walker, is of value in this respect. In this book, Walker outlined the concept of role, examined what its sources were, discussed the conditions under which states pick up roles, and identified the factors affecting these conditions. Similarly, for the advancement of role theory, the works of Naomi Bailin Wish (1980), Margaret G. Hermann (1987), Chih-yu Shih (1988), James N. Rosenau (1990), Marijke Breuning (1995), and Philippe G. Le Prestre (1997) are essential.

The fact that role theorists criticize realists for approaching foreign policy from an outside position is one of the crucial points to mention about them. In general, constructivist theory encompasses role theory. However, role theorists criticize the constructivists' emphasis on the level of systems analysis. They also distinguish themselves from constructivists, whom they believe place an excessive focus on norms and identities. Role theorists, like constructivists, are interested in ideas and norms and how these items affect the international system shifts. On the other hand, role theorists, unlike constructivists, claim that change results from processes at the state level (Breuning, 2011, p.26). At this point, it is possible to say that the role theory has an eclectic vision, namely in that it combines realism and constructivism through its unique approach. (Thies, 2012, pp.28-29).

Throughout the years, divergent trends have emerged among role theorists, particularly between American and European scholars. While European researchers have preferred to utilize a constructivist framework that investigates linguistic skills connections, American role theorists have tended to focus on the actor's material or cognitive qualities as deciding variables and the stability of roles as causes for behaviour. Nevertheless, almost all role theorists agree that it is impossible to theorize roles in international relations without addressing other roles and a fundamental acknowledgment via society (Harnisch, 2011, p.7).

2.1. National Role Concepts

If we look at the key principles of role theory within this context, we should note that Holsti built the theory with the concepts borrowed from the disciplines of psychology and sociology. The leading concepts in question are *role*, *ego* and *alter*. Accordingly, states take on certain roles to respond to both national (self/ego) and international (outer self/alter) expectations. The personality of the leader, values, expectations, and interests of the country in total form the ego of the state. The alter part (outer self) expresses the dynamics of the international system, the general principles of international law, international organizations, and their impact on the roles of states in foreign policy. When the ego meets the outer self/alter represented by the international community, a synthesis occurs, and the position, or role, of that country in foreign policy emerges as an output (Holsti, 1970, p.237). The attribution of this concept to states in foreign policy expresses the expected behaviour from the state. Therefore, the role is a normative concept in its nature.

Another notable concept in studies on role theory is *status*, namely that the economic, social, political, and military power of the states created a certain hierarchy that has allowed states to have a certain status in the international system. (Wish, 1980, pp.536-537). This has determined how effective states will be in their relations with each other or in any behaviour in foreign policy. In a way, status offers states more effective manoeuvring capability and opportunity in foreign policy (Holsti, 1970, p.242). For this reason, status is extremely important during the assumption and performance of roles. For example, if a state is to pick up

a role in the international system, it must have a certain status. An economically weak state that is not strong politically and militarily cannot assume a leadership role in the international system (Chafetz et al., 1996, p.735).

In this context, it is necessary to mention the *role expectations* attributed to states. Role expectations include the structure and values of the international system, multilateral, and bilateral agreements, formal or implied commitments, and understandings, which have a direct or indirect impact on the behaviour of the actor. States are free to act under these expectations. States evaluate expectations based on their experience and preferences, and then accept, change, or ignore them. This process enables the state to create its own role concept and thus the national role conception emerges (Harnisch, 2011, p.8). The national role conception (NRC) comprises how each state defines its own choices, commitments, laws, and practices. Therefore, the NRC is a roadmap that states rely on in order to move more easily in a complex political environment. So much so that the NRC becomes one of the most fundamental elements that motivate the state in terms of desires and goals. It also allows the state to reject certain actions as inappropriate.

Role concepts are the result of the interaction between history, collective memory, and socialization. Therefore, role concepts may change over time. According to Le Prestre, roles are divided into two *ascribed roles* and *achieved roles* (Le Prestre, 1997, p.7). The ascribed roles are those that arise from the internal dynamics of the states and from the demands of the society that constitutes that state. Achieved roles, on the other hand, are the roles that states acquire as a result of their own will and efforts.

While classifying role concepts in this way, there is a possibility of conflict between different roles over time. According to Barnett, roles are divided into *position roles* and *preference roles*. States have some roles in the international system originating from the institutions and organizations they are involved in, namely position roles. These restrictions and advantages make it easier for states' behaviours to be more predictable. However, there are also roles that states have brought from the past, which are preference roles (Barnett, 1993, p 275) and can sometimes conflict with the position roles. As a result, it's likely that preference roles (i.e. domestic-generated roles) will exert more influence than position roles. Therefore, it is often difficult to suggest how states resolve such conflicts (Barnett, 1993, pp.276-278).

2.2. The Nuclear Latency Status and Iran

There is no agreed definition of nuclear latency and there are different variables to characterize and measure it. A nuclear latent state, in the words of Maria Rost Rublee, is a situation in which significant nuclear capability exists but nuclear restraint has been selected (Rublee, 2010, p. 49). The most important factor affecting nuclear latency, according to conventional wisdom in the literature, is the presence of indigenous enrichment and reprocessing technology (also known as nuclear fuel cycle technology) since the most challenging and crucial phase in creating nuclear weapons is obtaining highly enriched uranium or plutonium that is suitable for use in weapons (Futter, 2021, pp. 18-21, 76-81). A state approaches its ability to make bombs as it gains more complete control over the nuclear fuel cycle. However, the nuclear fuel cycle is only one reason that contributes to the proliferation of nuclear weapons; other factors include the need for a modern army and, perhaps most importantly, political commitment for nuclear. Considering all of these -irrespective of intentions- nuclear latency means possessing some or all the technical, industrial, and military technology, facilities, materials, expertise, and resources needed to manufacture nuclear weapons.

There are currently 22 countries (including 9 nuclear-weapon states) with weapons-usable nuclear materials (Neakrase, 2021, p.19). To name a few examples, Japan, South Korea and especially Iran are the prominent nuclear latent states although these states have varying degrees of latency. Japan, with its advanced civilian nuclear industry, full ability in the nuclear fuel cycle (both uranium and plutonium), large stockpiles, and a modern military is a perfect model of nuclear latency. South Korea operates an extensive nuclear energy infrastructure and technological base, which could theoretically support a nuclear weapons program. However, it does not currently possess any control over nuclear cycle technology (Futter, 2021, p.79). Iran, on the one hand, possesses indigenous uranium fuel cycle capabilities, and large and increasingly sophisticated ballistic missile and space launch programs. According to a 2014 US Intelligence assessment, Iran possesses the knowledge, expertise, and industrial resources necessary to someday develop nuclear weapons. Its political will to do so becomes the main issue as a result (Clapper, 2014, pp.5-6).

Regarding the relative economic advantage of being nuclear latent state, the economic costs of a potential nuclear-weapon program to Iran can be broadly examined in two parts: direct and indirect. Direct costs refer to the expenditure covering nuclear weapons and weapons-related programs. To put it differently, how much a state has spent on the development, maintenance/modernization and delivery systems of nuclear weapons include direct costs.

To estimate the potential direct costs of nuclear weapons, it will be beneficial to look at how much small nuclear weapon states, namely India and Pakistan, have spent, although both refuse to disclose any details of expenditures on their nuclear weapons program. According to the sparse information that is available, India and Pakistan are believed to have spent more than \$5 billion annually in the early 2000s as an initial cost (Lavoy, 2002, p.264). This estimate solely accounts for the fabrication of fissile material and a few nuclear weapons. With a more comprehensive calculation which covers the *hidden costs* as some Indian experts have called it, in 1992, it would have cost around 2.8 billion dollars to fund the complete nuclear deterrent program (Lavoy, 2002, p.266). As specified by another estimate in 1999, an ambitious nuclear program, which could deter China, would cost India over \$13 billion annually. According to the last uncertain figures revealed by the International Campaign to Abolish Nuclear Weapons (ICAN), India spent \$2.3 billion in 2019 (ICAN, 2020). As for Pakistan, according to an independent estimate, nuclear spending was about \$800 million in 2011 (Mian, 2020, p.82). According to ICAN, Pakistan spent at least \$1 billion in 2019. It is crucial to note that China and the United States have both provided Pakistan with economic and military assistance. To give an example of the issue, in 2015, Pakistan agreed to buy eight new submarines from China, the costs of which are estimated at about \$5 billion (Mian, 2020, p.83). If we take into account that these countries are in pursuit of vertical proliferation, meaning improving their existing nuclear weapons capability over years, it will be fair enough to argue that the economic burden of nuclear weapons quickly adds up for each year. This holds true for Iran as well.

The economic costs will far outweigh the direct costs. In fact, Iran's economy is familiar with the damage longstanding economic sanctions can cause. However, if Iran develops nuclear weapons, the extent and magnitude of economic sanctions and isolation may be greater than they are now. In the face of severe sanctions, Iran has proposed the doctrine of an *economy of resistance* (Koç, 2017,). It significantly relies on this doctrine to build strong economic ties with the East, particularly China and Russia. Economic relations with Russia and China, on the other hand, may not be as beneficial as envisaged. The possession of a nuclear weapon by Iran is an unequivocal redline for these two great powers. History bears witness to Russia and

China's strict postures regarding the issue. The hardening posture against Iran is extremely likely to return, as it did in 2006 when Russia and China supported the IAEA decision to disclose Iran's file to the UNSC, and in 2010 when Russia and China supported UN sanctions against Iran. To give another example, Russian President Vladimir Putin once argued that Iranian nuclear weapons are a strategic threat (Galili, 2007). Therefore, the existing economic crisis would certainly deepen once the threshold is crossed. This is not an attractive scenario for Iranian political elites, including President Ebrahim Raisi, among which there emerged perceived danger over the possibility of social threat rooted in the economic crisis posed to the system itself (Vaez, 2021). All in all, although Iran's civilian nuclear program has already cost a lot to Tehran, crossing the threshold would result in more severe scenarios.

3. A ROLE THEORY FRAMEWORK FOR IRAN NUCLEAR PROGRAM

For more than three decades now, Iran has invested time, money, and resources into its nuclear program. On the other hand, the JCPOA's goal is to slow down Iran's nuclear development, not to fully halt it. Before the Nuclear Deal, in fact, Iran had a stockpile of weapons grade material that could produce up to 10 nuclear weapons (Obama, 2016). This large amount of fissile material was transferred from Iran to Russia under the JCPOA in 2015. The breakout time was estimated back then less than a year. As of May 30, 2022, Iran currently has enough material enriched to 60% that, if it were to be further enriched to weapons-grade material, would provide it with enough uranium to make one bomb (25 kg) in less than 10 days (Davenport, 2022). However, according to Western and Israeli intelligence estimates, Iran would need about two years to build a nuclear arsenal if the political decision to pursue nuclear weapons were made. That is to say, the JCPOA only changed the degree of Iran's nuclear latency. In other words, Iran became a less nuclear latent state under tighter control. But it is important to keep in mind that because of the enormous concealment, global cover-up, and intentional deception, assessing Iran's nuclear latency has always been challenging. In sum, the entire abandonment of the nuclear program has been out of the question among the Iranian elites mainly because of national role conceptions. At this point, it is necessary to ask whether Iran's main goal is to have a nuclear bomb or simply being a threshold state. Secondly, Iran's motivation to demonstrate to the international community that it has an advanced nuclear capacity is noteworthy. In this respect, it raises the question: How the discourse of the *axis of resistance* adopted by Iran while constructing its regional policies after the 1979 Islamic Revolution has turned into a national role and to what extent does it affect Iran's desire to become a nuclear threshold state..

3.1. Finding 1: Being the 'Axis of Resistance' Leader as NRC

For the Islamic Republic of Iran, the concept of resistance is one of the most fundamental notions of revolutionary ideology. In domestic politics, it symbolizes the overthrow of the Iranian Shah. Over the years, resistance has been one of Iran's sources of national identity and means of taking a position against the imperial powers. This perspective is based on the worldview of Ruhollah Khomeini, the founder and the first Supreme Leader of the Islamic Republic, which is also reflected in the Iranian Constitution article 154 (Iran Chamber Society, 2002). According to him, the world is divided in two. States that have power and exploit others, are called *mostakberin* (oppressors) and states that lack power and are condemned to exploitation, which are also called *mostazafin* (oppressed). Per his reasoning, Iran is a sovereign nation that has made a national commitment over the years to defend the rights of the *mostazafin*, which has turned into an NRC over the years.

The institutionalization of resistance has been a critical prerequisite in the battle against imperialism, according to Ayatollah Seyyed Ali Khamenei (2016a), Iran's second and current Supreme Leader. A governmental organization must be in place to keep the resistance movements united. The oppressed cannot fully combat imperialism and oppression without a resistance government. For this reason, the resistance movement must have its own government, including military power. For the aim of having a military power compatible with the resistance ideology, the period immediately following the Islamic Revolution in February 1979, in April 1979, the revolutionary leadership established the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) as an alternative to the inherited Imperial Army of Shah. The main reason for founding this new military force was the doubt about the Army of the Shah, believing that it was under the influence of the ideas of the previous regime (Sinkaya, 2015, p.41). Since then, the IRGC and its Quds Force, which was established in 1990 in order to support Islamic movements and to work for the liberation of Qods (Jerusalem), has been the main apparatus of Iran in terms of implementation of resistance discourse. In addition, the IRGC has become one of the critical actors in the execution of Iran's nuclear program.

Redesigning its national identity as a Shiite state, Iran blended its foreign policy with the ideology created by a new national identity, whereas it also considered geopolitical balances and strategic objectives. Thus, establishing strategic relations through the ideology of resistance became Iran's new foreign policy discourse and behaviour. In this context, the Islamic Republic developed new military-security-based partnerships with nations and proxies in Syria, Lebanon, and Palestine (Soltaninejad, 2019, p.1).

The 1980–88 Iran–Iraq War was the first time the resistance discourse in Iran was brought to light in terms of foreign policy. The war started due to Iraq's demand for Iran to withdraw its troops on the common border, which it claimed it belong to Iraq according to the 1975 Algiers Agreement with Iran. Iran rejected this request. Thereupon, Iraq entered Iranian territory on September 22, 1980. Thus, the war between the two states, which would last for eight years, began (Karsh, 2014, p.22). The resistance, embodied in the voluntary mobilization of the people in this war, formed the basis of Iran's resistance discourse. This war also facilitated the deepening Iran-Syria relations, because, throughout the war, few nations in the world—including Syria—politically and logistically supported Iran against Iraqi aggression (Soltaninejad, 2019, p.3).

In the following years, combined with the export of regime policy, the first Israeli War in Lebanon (1982–1985) contributed to the resistance institutionalization and relations with Hezbollah, a Shiite group fighting against Israel in the south of Lebanon. Concerning Iran-Hamas relations, the dialogue started relatively late. As a voluntary organization and an Islamic resistance movement against the occupation of Palestinian lands by Israel, Hamas had already used the resistance terminology. The relations between Iran and Hamas became clear in 1992 when a Hamas delegation visited Tehran for talks. Iran allowed Hamas to open an office in Tehran and subsequently the IRGC began training Hamas militants in Iran and Hezbollah camps in Lebanon (Karmon, 2008, p.18).

The initial incident that institutionalized Iran's resistance alliances under the *Axis of Resistance* label (mehvar-e moqâvemat) has been the rhetoric adopted by the U.S. towards Iran in the wake of the September 11 assaults in 2001. First, in the State of the Union address in January 2002, U.S. President George W. Bush designated North Korea, Iraq and Iran as being components of the so-called "Axis of Evil" (Washington Post, 2002). In response to this statement, in an article written in Libya's daily newspaper Al-Zahf Al-Akhdar, under the title of *Axis of Evil or Axis of*

Resistance the writer drew attention to the fact that the “*only common denominator among these countries was their resistance to US hegemony*” (Amour, 2020, p.95).

The major phase in the entrenchment of the axis of resistance was the process that started with the 2003 U.S. war in Iraq. The invasion of Iraq triggered a radical change in Iran, both in the institutions of the state and the balance of political power within the state. In addition, Iraq's gradual integration into the alliance from this date has had significant consequences in terms of the ideological structure and effectiveness of the alliance (Uzun, 2018, p.160). Since that date, the IRGC and its Quds Force, the main stakeholder in establishing and managing these alliance relations, gradually became the most important element in the making of Iran's foreign policy (Sinkaya, 2015, p.52). Qassem Soleimani (1957-2020), the commander of the Quds Force at the time, supported Shiite groups with different political and ideological visions to enter the political party process and the election system through umbrella alliances and played an important role in helping Iraqi Shiites gain political power.

The period that started with the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad as president (2005) in Iran, shows that the axis of resistance discourse in Iranian foreign policy expresses not only the relations established with the proxies in the region but also the resistance against the pressure from the international community regarding the nuclear program. The UN has regarded Iran's nuclear program as a threat to global peace since 2006. As a result, the UNSC imposed increasingly severe economic sanctions on Iran for its nuclear activities between 2006 and 2010, and Iran resisted this pressure by using the rhetoric of economic resistance. Thus, Iran expanded the circle of the Axis of Resistance, namely besides providing military support to the proxies in the region, anticipating psychological support over the image of being a nuclear threshold state also started.

Another turning point that cemented the axis of resistance occurred in 2011. The anti-Assad protests in Syria turned into a civil war and then into a proxy war of various regional and global actors. As an extension of the Axis of Resistance policy, Iran is directly involved in Syria by supporting Shiite militia groups militarily under the guise of protecting Shiite sites. Concerning the axis of resistance strategy, Syria has acted as a gateway for Iran to the Eastern Mediterranean by also being the transition geography of the line going to Palestine and Hezbollah. Khamenei once stated that if they had not opposed the enemy in Syria, they would have had to fight in Kermanshah, Hamadan and in other cities of Iran. Khamenei said: “*The martyrs sacrificed their lives to defend the country, the nation, the religion and the Islamic Revolution*” (Khamenei, 2016b).

Since then, the resistance narrative began to include fortifying ties with proxies in Syria, Lebanon, Palestine, and Iraq, as well as increasing nuclear activities. Following Hasan Rouhani's 2013 win, Iran started intensive diplomacy with the P5+1 regarding its nuclear program. Finally, in 2015, the P5+1 nations and Iran were able to strike a nuclear agreement through reciprocal concessions and common ground (Parsi, 2017). Throughout this process, Iran carried out active diplomacy with the international community, meanwhile it systematically maintained relations with its proxies. Thus, Iran has presented its efforts to make the international community accept its nuclear program, which it claims to be for peaceful purposes, as a basis of its Axis of Resistance policy. In the eyes of the axis of resistance, in the aftermath of the JCPOA, Iran became a guardian that gained economic strength, which enhanced its military support.

3.2. Finding 2: Being a Nuclear Threshold State as a Fulfilment of the NRC

It is possible to evaluate Iran's nuclear program in light of different standpoints. National security is seen as the primary driver of why some states have strong commitments to the development of nuclear fuel cycle technology but remain on the threshold. This reason applies to Iran who sits in a volatile region. Iran appears to be cautiously exploring future alternatives for building the bomb without embracing the economic and political dangers that come with a declared choice to proliferate. Within this line of thinking, the future calculations of Iranian elites are most likely to be shaped by the cost-benefit assessment of whether to go nuclear or not to go nuclear until the emergence of an immediate threat from the United States and Israel. On that account, facing all these threats, Iran sees itself as a self-sufficient country that resists oppression and protects all oppressed peoples while doing so. This resistance describes the *ego* of the state, which is defined as the sum of the personality of the leader, and the values, expectations, and interests of the country in role theory.

Politically Iran's civilian nuclear doctrine has proven to be a useful tool to foster a sense of national unity despite the financial and political costs the Iranians have paid so far. According to a public survey conducted in 2020, while 59% of Iranians oppose acquiring nuclear weapons, 90% believe that their government should ensure a peaceful nuclear strategy (Smeltz and Farmanesh, 2020, p.2). The majority of Iranians have always been against the possession of nuclear weapons yet they are supportive of the development of nuclear programs in Iran (Sadjadpour, 2004; Loschky, 2013). Therefore, we can deduct from these figures that nuclear weapons will have only poor value as a political tool in increasing the state's prestige and strengthening the current political system among the Iranian people on the other hand, being a nuclear threshold state will empower the country's ego.

As previously stated, the alter part (outer self) expresses the dynamics of the international system, fundamental treaties and conventions, and international organizations, and further their impact on states' roles in foreign policy, according to role theory. The International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA), which was founded in 1957, is the principal organization responsible for implementing an effective control mechanism inside the UN system (Sharma, 1995). The IAEA is charged with key verification duties under the Treaty on the Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT), which is the basis of the nuclear non-proliferation system. Iran was one of the NPT's earliest signatories. In 1974, it penned the Comprehensive Safeguards Agreement with the IAEA. It also signed the Additional Protocol (AP), but did not ratify it, in 2022. As part of confidence-building efforts at the onset of the 2000s, Iran decided to apply the AP for a brief amount of time. Under these international engagements, Iran is obliged to apply certain rules regarding its nuclear program. This means that the outer self/alter part i.e., the international engagements, urges the country's ego i.e., the values, expectations, and interests of the country, to act in full compliance with its principles.

As part of its pre-defined NRC, Iran claims it is the protector of the oppressed against the oppressors. Since the Axis of Resistance symbolizes the oppressed, Iran's NRC converted itself as the vigorous leader of the Axis of Resistance as reflected in the Supreme Leader's words (Khamenei, 2017). As explained above, *role expectations* refer to the behaviours expected from the actor in action. Regarding the relationship between Iran and the Axis of Resistance, the proxies expect Iran to resist the pressures coming from the outside world at all costs. In many statements, both Hezbollah and Hamas leaders have expressed their support for Iran regarding its nuclear activities (Levitt, 2021, pp.4-22). Therefore, Iran's adoption of the NRC, i.e., being the leader of the Axis of Resistance, is compatible with the roles that are anticipated of her.

There are several potential goals that states might aspire to accomplish by acquiring nuclear weapons, according to theories of international relations. The first and foremost objective that may lead Iran to nuclear weapons is security as acquiring nuclear weapons is seen as the most effective deterrent to guarantee survival. This equation is based on the Mutual Assured Destruction (MAD) theory, which claims that mutual vulnerability to a nuclear assault might lead to stability in nuclear interactions (Futter, 2021, p.92). However, nuclear weapons do not strategically offer a guarantee of protection without a robust and survivable system of delivery capabilities known as second-strike capability or retaliatory strike. That is to say, for nuclear deterrence to work through MAD, the credibility of second-strike capability should be ensured by building more nuclear warheads, diversified delivery systems, prepared responses to nuclear attacks, and diversified deployment of launching mechanisms in a country, as well as a safe and secure command and control system. Iran seems to be far off from that technology as open sources suggest (Walden, Walsh and Weedon, 2020). Therefore, carrying out a nuclear test or withdrawing from the NPT before developing robust retaliatory strike capability would probably put Iran in a riskier position where a pre-emptive strike, not a limited operation, is more imminent (Juneau, 2015, p.184).

On the other hand, Iran, faced with threats from an aggressor (mostly Israel and the United States), could threaten to go nuclear in response. A preliminary empirical study shows that nuclear latency lowers the risk of being targeted in military conflicts, according to a preliminary empirical study (Fuhrmann and Tkach, 2015, p.444). A non-proliferation regime is still a top priority for US foreign policy. As a result, despite Iran's negative conduct, the US has kept itself and Israel from engaging in aggressive military action. Because in such a setting, the belief that Iran would become more aggressive and finally acquire nuclear weapons faster won out. Iran may believe that the threshold status improves its hand against a US threat because of this widespread fear among US elites in the past.

In this context, Supreme Leader Khamenei's fatwa (religious decree) in 2002 comes into the spotlight. The revelation that Iran engaged in nuclear activity in violation of the NPT without informing the IAEA in 2002 marked a turning point in both Iran's nuclear programs and relations with the West. Upon the disclosure of the People's Mujahedin Organization of Iran (PMOI) or Mujahedin-e-Khalq (MEK), an opponent of the Iranian regime, on 14 August 2002, that Iran was engaged in nuclear activities in secret facilities from the IAEA, Iran closed its facilities to the visit of the IAEA auditors in June 2003. As an answer to claims against Iran's nuclear program, in 2012, Khamenei issued an edict (fatwa) outlawing the development and implementation of WMDs. Since then, the Supreme Leader's fatwa has been a guide to the Islamic Republic to refrain from producing, acquiring, stockpiling, and using all sorts of WMD (Sirjani, 2013, pp.65-66). In the years that followed, he continued to emphasize how forbidden it is for Muslims to produce, store, and use nuclear weapons.

This fatwa from Khamenei serves as a type of assurance that Iran's nuclear activities won't result in the development of a nuclear bomb. This is compatible to *position role* according to Barnett's categorization of national roles. For Barnett, the position roles are the well-defined guides for states to take action (Barnett, 1993, p.275). However, when we ask whether capabilities are indicators of intent, it is confusing that Iran is moving towards a capacity to make a nuclear bomb. In response to this, it is possible to deduce that Iran considers being a nuclear threshold state much more valuable in terms of its strategic interests. This can be named as *preference role*. Considering the strategic relationship established with the Axis of Resistance, especially since 2002, Iran's simultaneous increase of its nuclear activities and

resistance against the international community, the NRC, which is an outcome of a *preference role*, becomes in the spotlight. At this point, it is possible to say that Iran's position role, which entails not possessing a nuclear weapon, and her preference role, which entails possessing the industrial, scientific, and technical capability to one day build nuclear weapons, are at odds. These two conflicting positions of Iran make it difficult to predict what stage the nuclear program will take and what Iran's ultimate behaviour will be.

For Iran, a couple of factors have highlighted the links between enhancing a nuclear program and its NRC. One is the resistance against U.S. interventionism. Immediately following the 2003 Iraq War, as part of the Axis of Evil rhetoric, there was almost a consensus that the next target for the U.S. would be Iran. Since then, Iran's nuclear program became the target of UN sanctions urged by the United States. The Iranian resistance against U.S. policies toward its nuclear program created a sense that one of the distinguishing characteristics of Iran's role in the Middle East is standing against the United States, which was adopted by the members of the Axis of Resistance.

Secondly, Iran's NRC in relation to the Axis of Resistance can be summarized as a normatively superior, vigorous leader that protects the oppressed against the oppressors. In a letter he wrote to President Rouhani in October 2015, shortly after the JCPOA came out, Khamenei listed nine principles regarding the continuity of the agreement. Among these, there was one that directly points to the Axis of Resistance: "*The claim of any state that is party to the agreement that Iran supports international terrorism and violates human rights will be an obvious violation of the agreement. The government has the authority to take the steps.*" (Khamenei, 2015). The phrase "international terrorism," according to Khamenei, referred to proxies of Iran's Axis of Resistance. As a result, Khamenei strengthened connections with proxies, claiming that charges that Iran sponsors international terrorism would be a breach of the deal. This declaration had aimed to show that Iran was determined to act in full compliance with the JCPOA unless its relations with the Axis of Resistance were under question. With this commitment, Iran created the image that it could withdraw from the JCPOA if its relations with the Axis of Resistance were targeted. Eventually, through these nine principles, Iran reinforced its role to be the protector of its proxies in the region.

In relation to this, another factor that might encourage Iran to become a threshold state is that it would allow it to expand its regional influence and power. This can be explained through Le Prestre's *ascribed roles* and *achieved roles* categorizations. Since Iran is in the Middle East where it has direct and indirect threat perception both from the neighbouring countries and the U.S., its motivation to increase its nuclear power applies to its ascribed role. As IR scholars suggest, nuclear weapons improve the possessor state's strategic position over its environment to expand its control through coercion. However, given their impracticality and immense destructive potential, nuclear weapons are clearly among the worst tools of coercion, according to pertinent research. In addition to this, Iran's possession of nuclear weapons cannot have coercive advantages vis -à- vis the U.S. who maintains one of the world's largest operational nuclear arsenals, and Israel who is believed to have at least 90 nuclear warheads and a sophisticated conventional military. Arguably, as in the case of Pakistan's influence in Afghanistan through militants, covert and overt influential stakeholders, Iran's power mostly lies in its own creation of ideological non-state actors (Siddiqi, 2021; Juneau and Razavi, 2018, p.16).

The protective role Iran gained through its relationship with the Axis of Resistance is its achieved role. At the current juncture, Iran, as the only nuclear latent state, has a strategic

position vis -à- vis other regional actors. To put it differently, with reaching threshold capability, Iran gained status in the regional and international arena. For instance, Henry Kissinger argued that Iran's latent potential caused the nations that Iran's military could penetrate to realign their political allegiance to Tehran (Kissinger, 2012).

Furthermore, the Middle East's strategic environment may change as a result of the advent of nuclear weapons. That is to say, the balance of power can partly concentrate on nuclear developments. This new element will work to the detriment of Iran's existing strategic and tactical imagination and power centred on asymmetrical ways mentioned above. With Iran's attainment of nuclear weapons capability, other regional states, namely Saudi Arabia and Turkey, can build a more robust nuclear-weapons program with superior nuclear weapons arsenal and delivery systems with the possible help of the United States. Meanwhile, Iran would have to rely on its indigenous, but rather less sophisticated, nuclear weapon capabilities while being isolated both economically and politically.

4. CONCLUSION: LESSONS FROM APPLYING ROLE THEORY TO IRAN'S LATENCY STATUS

Since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, Iran has been one of the main concerns in international politics. The primary cause of this is that a profound transformation in foreign policy behaviours was brought about by the revolution's foundational ideology, which offered an axis shift. Through rhetoric that almost challenged the bipolar system forming the structure of the Cold War period, Iran intended to form a new bipolar structure, as the oppressed would constitute one pole and the oppressors the other. Then the country assigned a new national role concept for herself as the protector of the oppressed, which meant a new leadership.

Since then, Iran has had two main foreign policy concepts to maintain its newly established national role. One involves embracing the revolution's founding ideology—unification via Shiite identity—by adopting the revolution's export strategy. The ultimate goal in this regard has been the establishment of alliance networks, which has evolved into an institutional relationship known as the Axis of Resistance over time. Second, the Islamic Republic continued its nuclear activities inherited from the Shah period in the mid-1980s mainly for national security reasons and advanced it throughout the years at the expense of its economy and diplomatic relations. For Iran, the nuclear program has become an unavoidable rather than a discretionary policy. That being so, the Axis of Resistance and maintaining nuclear endeavours have evolved into two essential components for the achievement of Iran's new national role conception, namely the guardian of the oppressed and the leader who resists the oppressors.

Iran's nuclear program is now the longest-running non-proliferation crisis in history. Iran's secret nuclear programs and facilities have been exposed since the early 2000s, and the US has attempted to prevent Iran from developing uranium enrichment capabilities. However, this policy was counter-productive. Iran is now a nuclear threshold state. It is fair to argue the non-proliferation regime has slowed down and increased the cost of Iran's pace of nuclear proliferation by means of verification, surveillance, and economic sanctions. To eliminate the threat fully, however, the regime needs to address the driving force behind the behaviour of the handful of states, including Iran, to change it in a way that fits with international non-proliferation regimes and norms. It appears that nuclear non-proliferation has failed to stop Iran from moving forward with its nuclear program. Therefore, how events unfold in Iran's case will depend on the political situation in Iran, the region and in the international arena.

Iran will resist increasing international pressure, particularly from the United States, in order to maintain its Axis of Resistance policy. To send a clear message to its proxies, it will eventually maintain its nuclear threshold position. While Iran's nuclear program was curtailed by the JCPOA, it was not completely stopped. However, what this once in a blue moon agreement teaches is that the Iranian nuclear program is negotiable. This means that Iran has not centred its security calculations on the possession of nuclear weapons either in the past or now. The possible nuclear-weapons program is economically costly and seems to provide insufficient benefit strategically and politically. Rushing into nuclear bombs will both increase the possibility of a military strike against Iran and will invite U.S. military presence in the region in a more prolonged and strengthened way. Therefore, crossing the nuclear threshold would be detrimental seemingly on every front for Iran. History has shown us that a cost-benefit approach guides Iran's decision making. This cost-benefit analysis of nuclear weapons demonstrates that external factors are mostly responsible for Iran's willingness to go nuclear.

To conclude, as part of its national role concept, Iran will continue to be a nuclear threshold state as long as it continues to feel threats by the U.S. to the Axis of Resistance. Without Iranian threat perception about the U.S., Iran might have not seen the nuclear heading strategy as necessary particularly after Iraq stopped being a threat. Although Iran has its own regional ambitions, a potential conflict between Iran and the U.S. makes up the key driver behind Iran's missile development and asymmetric deterrent strategies. Consequently, the circumstances described in this article indicate that Iran's interactions with the Axis of Resistance and the nuclear threshold state—two inseparable phenomena—will be a prominent topic in foreign policy discussions.

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ÖZET

Amaç

Bu çalışma, İslam Devrimi'ni takip eden yıllarda İran'ın mazlumları savunmak adına edindiği "direniş lideri" söylemini bir ulusal rol kavramsallaştırması üzerinden benimseyip benimsemediğini değerlendirmektedir. Makalede, nükleer programın ve direniş ekseninin, bu direniş liderliğinin iki ana sütunu olduğu iddia edilmektedir. Bu bağlamda, makalede iki önemli konunun incelenmesi amaçlanmıştır: İran'ın direniş lideri olarak ulusal bir rol kavramını nasıl benimsediği ve nükleer bir program izlemenin bu direniş politikasının yolunu nasıl açtığı.

Yöntem

Bu makalede dış politika analizi çalışmalarında önemli bir yeri olan rol teorisi kullanılmıştır. Rol teorisi, aktörlerin dış politika davranışlarındaki değişiklikleri açıklamak için yararlı bir temel sunduğundan, İran'ın kendi rol algısını ve dış dünyadaki rol beklentilerini incelemek için kullanılmıştır. Çalışmada rol kavramlarının tespiti için yalnızca kitaplar, raporlar, makaleler, tezler, haberler gibi ikincil kaynaklar kullanılmıştır.

Bu makale şu şekilde inşa edilmiştir. Rol teorisi, çalışmanın başında kısaca tanıtılmaktadır. Daha sonra nükleer eşik durumu ve bunun direniş söylemiyle ilişkisi açıklanmıştır.

Bulgu 1: Ulusal Rol Konseptinin Bir Devamı Olarak Direniş Ekseni Lideri Olmak

İran İslam Cumhuriyeti için direniş kavramı, devrimci ideolojinin en temel kavramlarından biridir. İç politikada İran Şahı'nın devrilmesini sembolize etmektedir. Dış politikada ise yıllar içinde direniş, İran'ın ulusal kimlik kaynaklarından biri ve emperyal güçlere karşı pozisyon almasının araçlarından biri olmuştur. Bu bağlamda ulusal rol konseptinin iki temel dayanağı olan vekiller ağı yanı direniş ekseni ile yıllar içinde geliştirilen nükleer eşik devleti statüsü birbirini besleyen iki ulusal rol olarak ortaya çıkmıştır.

Bulgu 2: Ulusal Rol Konseptinin Bir Devamı Olarak Nükleer Eşik Devleti Olmak

İran, uluslararası toplumun nükleer programıyla ilgili baskılarını kabul etmemekte, bu baskılara karşı direnişi, devrimci ideolojisinin temel ulusal rol kavramlarından biri olan direniş politikasının bir devamı olarak görmektedir. İran'ın dinamik ve istikrarsız bir güvenlik ortamındaki konumu nedeniyle ortaya çıkabilecek olası sorunlar/tehditler göz önüne alındığında, nükleer eşik durumunu gelecekteki değerlendirmeler için sürdürmesi, ancak yakın bir tehdit olmadıkça nükleer silah geliştirmekten kaçınması kendisi için faydalı görünmektedir.

Sonuç

İran'ın 1979 İslam Devrimi sonrasında Soğuk Savaş döneminin yapısını oluşturan iki kutuplu sisteme meydan okuyan bir söylemle, bir kutbu mazlumlar, diğer kutbu ise zalimlerin oluşturduğu yeni bir iki kutuplu yapı oluşturmayı amaçlaması onu mazlumların koruyucusu adı altında yeni bir ulusal rol benimsemeye sevk etmiştir ki bu da yeni bir liderlik anlamına gelmektedir.

Makalede İran'ın geçen 43 yılda, benimsediği liderlik rolünü sürdürmek için iki ana dış politika konsepti geliştirdiği tespit edilmiştir. Bunlardan biri, devrimin ihracı stratejisini benimseyerek devrimin kurucu ideolojisini çevreye yayma politikasıdır. Zaman içinde bu yeni politika Direniş Ekseni olarak bilinen ve kurumsal bir ilişkiye dönüşen ittifak ağlarının kurulması stratejisine dönüşmüştür. İkincisi, İslam Cumhuriyeti, Şah döneminden miras kalan nükleer faaliyetlerini 1980'lerin ortalarında esas olarak ulusal güvenlik nedenleriyle sürdürmüş ve yıllar boyunca

ekonomisi ve diplomatik ilişkileri pahasına ilerletmiştir. Zira İran için nükleer program, keyfi bir politikadan ziyade kaçınılmaz bir politika haline gelmiş; böylelikle Direniş Ekseni ve nükleer çabaları sürdürmek, İran'ın yeni ulusal rol anlayışına ulaşması için iki temel bileşene dönüşmüştür: ezilenlerin koruyucusu ve zalimlere direnen lider.

İran, Direniş Ekseni politikasını sürdürmek için, özellikle ABD'den gelen uluslararası baskıya direnecektir. Vekillerine açık bir mesaj göndermek için, sonunda nükleer eşik konumunu koruyacaktır. Sonuç olarak, İran, ABD'nin Direniş Eksenine yönelik tehditlerini hissetmeye devam ettiği sürece, ulusal rol kavramının bir parçası olarak nükleer eşik devleti olmaya devam edecektir. Bu makalede açıklanan koşullar, İran'ın Direniş Ekseni ve nükleer eşik devleti ile olan etkileşimlerinin iki ayrılmaz olgu olacağını göstermektedir.