Ayşe İrem Aycan Özer

IRANIAN STRATEGIC CULTURE

Abstract

Strategic culture can explain foreign policy option of a country when realist theory cannot give meaning to why that country acted in a particular way. Iranian strategic culture is, in general, assumed to be understood by focusing on Shi'ism. However, this paper shows that Shi'ism is instrumentally used by the Iranian regime. Iran by taking into account the geographical and political factors acts along its national interests. Religion is useful for the regime in order to gather the support of the people and legitimizing the chosen policy option. The paper will analyze this by looking deeply into the literature on strategic culture, foreign policy-making procedures in Iran and specific foreign policy decisions since the revolution in 1979.

Keywords: strategic culture, Shi'ism, Iran, foreign policy

Ayşe İrem Aycan Özer

Doktora Öğrencisi, Boğaziçi Üniversitesi Uluslararası İlişkiler Bölümü.

İRAN STRATEJİK KÜLTÜRÜ

Özet

Stratejik kültür, realist teori bir ülkenin niçin belirli bir şekilde hareket ettiğini açıklayamadığı durumlarda o ülkenin dış politika kararlarına anlam vermek için kullanılabilir. İran'ın stratejik kültürünün, genel olarak Şiilik üzerinden anlaşılabileceği düşünülmektedir. Ancak, bu makale Şiilik'in İran rejimi tarafından araçsal olarak kullanıldığını göstermektedir. İran, coğrafi ve politik faktörleri dikkate alarak ulusal çıkarları doğrultusunda hareket etmektedir. Din ise, halk desteğini toplamak ve politika tercihlerini meşrulaştırmak amacıyla rejim tarafından kullanılmaktadır. Bu makale, 1979'daki devrimden bu yana, İran'daki dış politika karar alma prosedürlerini ve belirli dış politika kararlarını inceleyerek İran'ın stratejik kültürünü derinlemesine analiz edecektir.

Anahtar Kelimeler: Stratejik kültür, Şiilik, İran, Dış Politika

<div dir="rtl">

الثقافة الاستراتيجية للإيران

المختصر

يمكن استخدام الثقافة الاستراتيجية من أجل إطفاء المعني على تصرفات البلد في السياسات الخارجية في الأحوال التي لا يمكن للنظريات الواقعية تفسير سبب قيام البلد بالتصرف وفق شكل معين في موضوع ما. ويعتقد بأن الثقافة الاستراتيجية لجمهورية إيران يمكن فهمها من على المذهب الشيعي بشكل عام. ولكن هذا البحث يوضح لنا بأن المذهب الشيعي يتم استخدامه من قبل الجمهورية الإيرانية على أنه وسيلة. إن إيران تتحرك وفق مصالحا القومية مع الأخذ بعين الاعتبار العوامل الجغرافية والسياسية. أما الدين فإنه يتم استخدامه من اجل حشد دعم الشعب وكسب المشروعية للخيارات السياسية. إن هذه المقالة تقوم على التدقيق في نظام اتخاذ القرارات في السياسة الخارجية للجمهورية الإيرانية وبعض القرارات المتخذة في السياسة الخارجية منذ تاريخ الثورة في عام 9791 لتقوم بدراسة الثقافة الاستراتيجية للجمهورية الإيرانية بعمق.

الكلمات المفتاحية: الثقافة الاستراتيجية، المذهب الشيعي، إيران، السياسة الخارجية

</div>

Introduction

This paper makes comprehensive research of strategic culture, which takes as its starting point the derivation of the term and continues with how different generations of strategic culture understood and used the concept. When realist reasoning fails to make sense of state behavior, strategic culture offers an alternative explanation with its focus on the role of physical-political geography on a country's culture of security. While providing a thorough discussion on the first, second and third generation of scholars studying strategic culture, I will express my own opinions about their critiques and also review the strategic culture of Iran in particular. Later, I will discuss the impact of geographical, political, and religious factors on Iranian strategic culture.

The general assumption both in political and academic circles that see Iran as motivated by Shiite Islam is not enough to explain why Iran is supporting Sunni groups like Palestinian Islamic Jihad and Hamas. It also cannot explain how Iran can act along with Russia in the Syrian conflict if it is solely motivated by Shiism. In this research paper, this will be the problem I am going to deal with. My main research question is to what extent Iranian foreign policy is shaped by the strategic culture where Shiism occupies a central position. I will argue that Iran's state ideology is primarily influenced by Shiism, secondly by the political isolation of Iran by the world and also in the region which brings it closer to Russia and the Syrian regime. This, as a result, forms its strategic culture which manifests itself in Iran's strategy of arming and sending Shiite foreign warriors to fight wars that will benefit Iranian interests in the Middle East. This strategy is not merely motivated by Shiism but equally importantly by lack of allies in its region. In this paper, I will argue that Iranian strategic culture owes its existence to all these pressing geographical, and political factors on top of religious factors. The period I will be looking at starts with the Iranian revolution which is a critical juncture in Iran's vision of the world and its approach to national security. It ends in recent times in order to take a closer look at Iranian strategic culture in the Syrian civil war.

Academically and security-wise this topic is significant since Iran, on the one hand, is center of attention in the world politics as was the Soviets during the Cold War which led to the emergence of the concept of strategic culture in the first place. On the other hand, its geographical proximity to Turkey makes its strategic culture important for Turkey's security and interests in the region.

In order to learn more about Iranian strategic culture, I am going look at the literature specific to Iran and conduct semi-structured interviews with experts.

Literature Review on Strategic Culture

In the US, the Foreign Morale Analysis Division of the Office of War during World War II invested in cultural anthropologists to work on the national character of Germany and Japan.[1] Later during the Cold War, scholars started to take an interest in the effect of culture on national security policies. First, Sidney Verba and Gabriel Almond introduced the term political culture into scholarly discussions in the 1960s.[2] It was used to explain state behavior as systemic approaches seemed insufficient. Other than the international environment, identities, beliefs, values, and norms of society had an impact on the political system. However, this was neglected by the realist theory. While the discussions were going on, so was the Cold War struggle. Snyder prepared a report for Deputy Chief of Staff Research and Development Department in which he brought together concepts of security policies and culture and coined the term strategic culture in 1977 in order to interpret the Soviet military strategy.[3] The search for an alternative approach to Soviet military strategy stemmed from the impossibility of reconciling Kremlin's way of thinking and acting with that of rational choice theory.[4]

The term has been in use for quite some time. However, there is still heated debate over its definition and its potential to explain state actions among different generations of strategic culture. When Jack L. Snyder used his framework, he pointed out that nuclear doctrines of the US and Soviets differed depending on different cultural contexts of each side, which were shaped by their unique historical, political and organizational settings.[5] His concept of strategic culture means, "the sum total of ideas, conditioned emotional responses, and patterns of habitual behavior that members of a national strategic community have acquired through instruction or imitation and share with each other with regard to nuclear strategy."[6] As can be seen, by the cul-

---

[1] Michael C. Desch, "Culture Clash: Assessing the Importance of Ideas in Security Studies", International Security, Vol.23 No.1, (1998), pp. 144-145.

[2] Jeffrey, Lantis, "Strategic Culture and National Security Policy", International Studies Review, Vol.4, No.3, (2002), p. 90.

[3] Lantis, p. 93.

[4] Lawrence Sondhaus, Strategic Culture and Ways of War. (Routledge, 2006), pp. 1-3.

[5] Lantis, p. 94.

[6] Jack Snyder, Soviet Strategic Culture: Implication for Limited Nuclear Operations. Santa Monica, CA, Rand R-2154-AF, (Rand Corporation, 1977), p. 8.

ture he refers to the areas that are concerned with strategy, not to culture in its broader sense. This perceptual lens of strategic culture shows that Soviets' adoption of an offensive, preemptive use of force was due to its history of insecurity, which made it take a unilateral approach to damage limitations.[7] In contrast, Americans opted for a cooperative and defensive approach.[8] Gray in his evaluation of two countries concluded that Americans belong to a monochronic culture that views things simply while Soviets belong to a polychronic culture that sees the complexity and interconnectedness of everything.[9] Not being cognizant of this dichotomy, the US looked at the Soviets as if it was a similar unit, and ignored its national styles of strategy. Their realism hence comes short of seeing the difference between the American and Soviet ways of thinking and acting, since for them the states are like units acting in the same international structure which is the basic realist approach to state action in the anarchic, international environment.

The question that American strategists had in mind was would the Soviets respect the rules of the game, if two sides agreed on limited nuclear conflict.[10] According to Snyder, Soviet statesmen and strategists are not culture-free game theorists and even if they were, game theory does not provide the best solution to the problems of complex nature.[11] Hence, Snyder suggests that so as to answer such a question we should not see Soviet leaders as mere players of the Red team ¨but as bureaucrats and politicians who have been socialized into a strategic culture that is in many ways unique and who have exhibited distinctive stylistic predispositions in their past crisis behavior."[12]

Since the Soviet regime was a closed system, which had no free press and no bureaucrats who would publicly exclaim their private thoughts, neither words nor deeds would have given the true intention of the Soviets.[13] The American strategy was developed by civilian intellectuals whereas the Soviet strategy was developed by professional military officers who are predisposed to think in terms of military effectiveness.[14] Having civilian strategists was not something historically established in the Soviet example, but it was

---

[7] Lantis, p. 94; Snyder p. 2.
[8] Snyder, p. iii.
[9] Colin S. Gray, "Strategic culture as context: the first generation of theory strikes back", Review of International Studies, Vol.25, No.1, (1999), p.67.
[10] Snyder, p. 2.
[11] Snyder, pp.4-6.
[12] Snyder, p. 2.
[13] Snyder, p. 5.
[14] Snyder, pp. 6-7.

for Americans. So there is no convincing rationale to think of Soviet strategic thought in isolation from military effectiveness and war-fighting as they did not acknowledge the idea of mutually assured destruction as did the Americans.[15] The position taken by countries cannot be understood without paying attention to the lessons they draw from historical experiences, which in return propel them into "a process of strategic enculturation."[16]

By identifying these historical and organizational factors, the strategic culture approach attempts to explain the origins and continuing vitality of attitudes and behavior that might otherwise seem to American observer inscrutable, wrong-headed, or peculiar.[17]

Similarly, according to Ken Booth, it was not possible to isolate ideas and values that are shaped by one's cultural conditioning about which he warns the strategists.[18] By pointing out the historical differences between the US and USSR, the fallacy Snyder draws our attention to was the assumption that there is only one type of universal strategic rationality that is adopted by each state in every situation. For Snyder "culture is a residual" concept that can explain outcomes unless there is no concrete way to make sense of the action. [19] Epiphenomenal strategic culture, if we are to use the classification of John Glenn, does challenge the ahistorical and acultural assumptions of realism.[20] For this reason, Snyder's report suggests that since realism cannot explain Soviet behavior towards nuclear strategy, it can be better understood by observing that it is "favorably inclined towards unilateral damage limitation strategies than towards cooperative one."[21] Hence, he warns American policymakers to not to rest assured that the Soviets would follow American formulated rules which predicted mutual restraint on nuclear arms race.[22]

After Snyder's strategic culture was studied by scholars such as Colin Gray, and David Jones who are placed into the category of the first generation by Alastair Iain Johnston, they continued the legacy of Snyder by looking at the Soviet strategic way of thinking, which owes its difference to variation in macro-environmental variables.[23] According to Jones, the Soviet strategy

---

[15] Alastair Iain, Johnston, "Thinking about Strategic Culture", International Security, Vol.19, No.4, (1995), p. 36.

[16] Gray, p. 60.

[17] Snyder, p. v.

[18] Ken Booth, Strategy and Ethnocentrism, (Routledge Revivals, 1979), p. 16; Sondhaus, p. 3.

[19] Snyder, p. 4.

[20] John Glenn, "Realism versus Strategic Culture: Competition and Collaboration?" International Studies Review, Vol. 11, No. 3, (2009), p. 533.

[21] Snyder, p. v.

[22] Snyder, p. v.

[23] Johnston, p. 36.

is molded by two constants: one of them is relatively new, and it is the dogmatism of Marxist-Leninist ideology. The second one is the deeply rooted multinational empire which shall not go unnoticed because even though the Soviets are new compared to the long-lived Russian Czarist Empire, its strategic/military culture continues to be influenced by its past.[24] Even though both are representative of the first generation, Gray and Jones have differences of opinion. Jones claims that the search of strategic culture in a country's peculiar history is defying the "ethnocentric limitations" of analysts trying to figure out the Soviet way of thinking.[25] However, Gray maintains that as developing strategy requires working on human beings, cultural reductionism and ethnocentrism are inevitable.[26] Both of them have a point, but if a culture has so important of an impact on the actions of a state, one should not avoid calculating it when forming a counter strategy.

Whereas Gray and Jones are the first generations, Johnston is mistaken when assuming that they continue the legacy of Snyder because in certain ways they differ in their approach to strategic culture. Snyder as a strategist who was writing in the heydays of the Cold War was more restricted by the perceptions and expectations of his country's administration. Moreover, the time and the iron curtain might have prevented him from seeing the full picture of the strategic culture of the Soviets. When Jones is looking at the Soviet strategic culture, he looks far back in history without being limited by the 20th-century experiences of Russians as opposed to Snyder. Although accepting that strategic culture can change, Gray acknowledges that this change is slow hence looking at the recent history alone is insufficient.[27] Therefore, the contribution of the first generation to the general study of strategic culture is broader and more exhaustive than that of Snyder.

On the other hand, Gray's interpretation of strategic culture and Johnston's definition started a debate between the two in the literature. On the idea of how culture shapes actions Gray and Johnston held different views. According to Gray culture is not only composed of ideas and traditions but it also tells something about preferred modes of operation.[28] He underlines that culture is a combination of ideas and behavior. On the contrary, Johnston sees

---

[24] David R. Jones, Soviet Strategic Culture. In Strategic Power: USA/USSR, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1990), p. 35.
[25] ibid.
[26] Gray, p. 60.
[27] Gray, p. 52.
[28] Gray, p. 51.

culture and behavior as separate entities. For him "culture consists of shared assumptions and decision rules that impose a degree of order on individual and group conceptions of their relationship to their social, organizational or political environment."[29] Johnston presents culture as "ideational milieu which limits behavioral choices."[30] Gray criticizes Johnston for isolating cultural and behavioral patterns, for the sake of studying the effect of former on the latter.[31] So the problem and the rift between them stem from their understanding of culture, what they include into and exclude from the definition of it. Johnston's interpretation of culture causes him to misunderstand and misrepresent the nature of the subject. He claims that strategic culture may exist as context but may not turn into behavior.[32] But the problem with this identification is that if culture may not cause any measurable behavior as he claims, how do we know about it? Even when the culture is being rhetorically used to justify the means by political elites, it carries weight with it. It might lead to policy outcomes that can be empirically observed or stay at the discursive level and point to what is aimed by the politicians.

Apart from the first generation, Johnston introduced the second generation of strategic culture that concentrates on the rhetorical usage of culture. He said that theirs is an ambiguous instrumentality because the real reason why leaders do something and the justification they present for their actions are different.[33] For instance, Bradley Klein says that strategic culture is being used to gain political hegemony by creating a popular reason to use violence.[34] It means that there is an ideal reason put forth by the political elites to make it acceptable for their political opponents whereas the other side of the coin depicts the real picture that serves the political interests of those elites. So according to Klein's understanding strategic culture is more than the military style of the particular state. It is ways in which a state constructs the image of the enemy in a way to legitimize its use of power against it. Snyder, in his Myths of the Empire highlights how state bureaucracies use the security myth through expansion to justify their policies.[35] This is done

---

[29] Johnston, p. 45
[30] Johnston, p. 46.
[31] Gray, p. 53.
[32] Johnston, p. 55.
[33] Johnston, p. 39
[34] Bradley S. Klein, "Hegemony and Strategic Culture: American Power Projection and Alliance Defence Politics", Review of International Studies, Vol. 14, No. 2, (1988), pp: 136-140.
[35] Jack Snyder, Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition, (Cornell University Press, 1991), pp: 1-2-41-58.

to convince the population and sometimes the international public. Snyder calls it traditional explanations for overexpansion, which corresponds in a way to the "ambiguous instrumentality" of Johnston.[36] Snyder goes on to say, "In fact, statesmen pick and choose among the available lessons of history until they find one that fits the strategy that they want, for other reasons, to adopt."[37] So it is searched for justifying the operational strategy in foreign policy. Security literature has abundant resources that make clear references to the role of political elites and interests groups who use their power to manipulate the political and social conditions in a way to make them serve their interests.[38] When Glenn mentions this group, he states that their emphasis is on the contingent use of strategic culture by "interpreting historical events, national symbols, key strategists, national myths, etc. for instrumental ends according to the situation they find themselves in."[39]

One of the biggest traps of studying strategic culture would be assuming that it takes over realist theories. Johnston criticizes the first generation of strategic culture on the grounds that they believe strategic culture leads to a particular state behavior.[40] He claims that security communities have several strategic cultures, which can be even contradictory but the first generation does not see that.[41] That is why he labels them mechanical determinists. However, Gray does not look for an overly deterministic strategic culture that sideline alternative explanations. He says that strategic culture is only "useful when one does not ask too much of it."[42] Colin Dueck similarly highlights that culture should not be taken as a substitute for but rather as a supplement to realist theories of strategic choice.[43] Desch underlines the role of culture in the same way prior to Dueck by stating:

I argue that when cultural theories are assessed using evidence from the real world, there is no reason to think that they will relegate realist theories

---

[36] Snyder, p. 2.

[37] Snyder, p. 14.

[38] As these arguments are not directly revolving around the strategic culture, it would be whole new discussion to start them in this paper. But to see relevant debates regarding military-industry complex, ruling classes, elites, and lobbies and how they affect the military strategy of a country see: United Nation Group of Consultant Experts, Economic and Social Consequences of the Arms Race, In Thee, Marek (ed.), Armaments, Arms Control, and Disarmament: a Unesco Reader for Disarmament Education, (Paris: Unesco Press, 1981) pp. 40-57; Ali L. Karaosmanoğlu, & Mustafa Kibaroğlu, Post-Cold War Defense Reform: Lessons Learned in Europe and the United States. East West Institute, Brassey's, (New York; 2003); P. W. Singer, Corporate Warriors: The rise of the privatized military industry, (Cornell University Press, 2007); J. Paul Dunne, Military Keynesianism: An Assessment, Peace Economics and Peace Science, (2011).

[39] Glenn, p. 537.

[40] Johnston, p. 37.

[41] Johnston, p. 38.

[42] Gray, p. 57.

[43] Glenn, p. 526.

to the dustbin of social science history. The best that can be made for these new cultural theories is that they are sometimes useful as a supplement to realist theories.[44]

Johnston's obsession with classifying different generations seems to push him to look for differences that would set this generation apart from the rest. However, on the side of the scholars who study strategic culture, I do not see any attempt to relegate or negate realist explanations. On the contrary, their efforts to find a place for strategic culture in security studies were valuable and got there right on time, when realist logic remained incapable of making sense of the states' behavior. Corresponding to the time of the inter-paradigm debate of the 70's it was seen that what cannot be explained by one paradigm can find meaning under another.[45] Hence, the place of strategic culture in security studies is significant as it contributed to new synthesis and shook the monopoly of realist-liberal ideas in the field of international relations.

Even though Johnston is wrongfully critical of the first two generations in the way that he and others in his generation handle the strategic culture, they differ from the first two generations. He claims that by excluding behavior as an element from the culture, they keep clear of the tautological traps of the first generation.[46] Also, the cultural values they are concerned about do not date back to old times on the contrary to what the second generation argues; instead they are rooted in recent experience. By doing so, Johnston tries to rescue culture from its traditional status.[47] Elizabeth Kier adds that political-military culture depends on the changes in domestic political context and states will adjust their military response accordingly.[48] As claimed by this group culture either provides policy-makers with a restrained set of options, or it acts like opticals that modify the appearance and viability of alternatives.[49] A considerable amount of the work on strategic culture is deterministic Johnston says, because the researcher takes a specific set of assumptions and goes back in time to find similar ones.[50] As a result, the researcher concludes that he found a strategic culture. At this point, intervenes by saying there

---

[44] Desch, p. 141.
[45] Ole Wæver, "The Rise and Fall of the Inter-Paradigm Debate." International Theory: Positivism and Beyond, (1996), p. 150.
[46] Johnston, p. 41.
[47] Johnston, p. 44.
[48] Elizabeth Kier, Culture and Military Doctrine: France between the Wars. International Security, Vol. 19, No. 4, (1995), p. 93.
[49] Johnston, p. 42.
[50] Johnston, p. 50.

were some other historical strategic assumptions, where did they go?[51] Why are we not seeing a continuity with them? There are two answers we can give to these questions. The first is, strategic culture changes over time by adding new things to its baggage through new experiences but this change is gradual, not rapid. The second is, strategic culture is not the one and only explanation for a state's actions. On the contrary just as it is emphasized by Snyder, Gray, Desch, Dueck, and Basrur, it only contributes to realist theories by filling the void existence of which cannot be explained by realists.

Ideas about war and strategy are deeply influenced by the physical and geographical environment one is placed in and molded. Because this environment shapes the culture and culture in return gives context to act within. Historical and geographic conditions determine in a peculiar way what a nation or a security community has to face when trying to sustain its security.[52] A good example of thinking is US Navy Officer General Mahan. He was a citizen of a country located between two oceans and a general in the navy who was educated to prioritize naval power. He might be thinking realistically, but the parameters he is thinking within are drawn by naval dimensions and the unique historical experiences his country had gone through. According to him greater the naval power, greater the worldwide impact of a country would be. A general of a land-locked country would not think so. His view also reflected the logic of Britain, a country, which had done everything in its power to protect its colonies overseas. Having geographical ease of accessing waterways and also the physical power to send its navy to long distances coupled with fulfilling its "obligation" to India, the jewel of the crown, contributed the British strategic culture. Russian strategic culture would not be comparable to the British one for instance as Britain is an island while Russia is surrounded more by land than by sea, and Britain mastered in naval power while Russia's priority was land forces. The very reason why Napoleon had to retreat from Moscow as Russians burnt down the city should be searched for in Russian strategy and culture versus those of Napoleon armies which could not foresee what was going to happen. So "the idea of war, interference, and strategy are influenced by physical and political geography."[53]

---

[51] ibid.
[52] Jones, p. 35; Gray, p. 51
[53] Gray, p. 58.

Research Design

Methodology

My study relied on the literature related to first, second, and third generations of strategic culture and Iranian foreign policy. By doing so, I assessed the role of the strategic culture in Iranian foreign policy, and what are the variables that shaped Iran's strategic culture. In order to understand it, I analyzed alternative explanations that try to give meaning to Iranian foreign policy decisions. Since Iranian strategic culture literature diverges from the general literature due to its peculiar characteristics such as Iran's religion itself,[54] Shi'ite Islam,[55] and Persian civilization[56] that bolster national cultural superiority I will be analyzing the role of these variables on Iran's strategic culture.

The research method of this paper will be process-tracing. As Jack Goldstone had suggested process-tracing is a useful method in explaining "macrohistorical phenomena."[57] Since strategic culture is macrohistorical too that tries to figure out long-term trends and patterns in Iran's approach to its national security, process-tracing will be a helpful method in understanding the Iranian strategic culture. My unit of analysis will be both the state and individual leaders whose understanding and interpretations will be influencing the policies which are determined by strategic culture. I will be analyzing Iran's foreign policy to assess its strategic culture. So as to check my arguments, I will use semi-structured interviews as a secondary source of information which I have conducted with the three academics, a researcher, and a journalist working on the related subjects of security, the Middle East, and foreign policy. Hence, it will be qualitative research.[58]

---

[54] Anthony C. Cain, Iran's Strategic Culture and Weapons of Mass Destruction. (Maxwell Paper, 2002).

[55] Cain; Gregory F. Giles, The crucible of radical Islam: Iran's leaders and strategic culture. Know Thy Enemy: Profiles of Adversary Leaders and Their Strategic Cultures, Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: USAF Counterproliferation Center, (2003); Kamran Taremi, Iranian Strategic Culture: The Impact of Ayatollah Khomeini's Interpretation of Shiite Islam. Contemporary Security Policy, Vol. 35, No. 1, (2014).

[56] Giles; Lantis.

[57] Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, "Process Tracing and Historical Explanation." Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences, (MIT Press, 2005), p. 206.

[58] All interview transcripts are provided in the Appendix. Some of the interview questions were prepared beforehand to set the parameters within which the conversation will take place. Others were added during the interviews as the answers or comments of the interviewee required further explanations. Hence, semi-structured interviews freed this research from the limitations of fixating questions. I also rarely did skip some questions during the interviews as the earlier answers of the interviewee clearly indicated the answer to that following question. During the interviews, I preferred not to use voice recorder but took notes, extended and organized them later. There are also disadvantages of relying on interviews as a method. It is hard to convince people into talking and especially into sparing time for doing an hour-long interview. It is specifically the case when you want to resort to the knowledge of informed people who are generally really busy. It also takes time to prepare a good set of questions and review them with an advisor in order to prevent asking leading questions. I took the verbal consent to use the information provided during the interview. In terms of the ethical concerns in my design, I prefer not to use the names of my interviewees in order to provide their confidentiality.

Conceptualization

Lantis, Gray, Desch, Kier, Johnston and many others acknowledge the different effect of culture in leading to use force among different states situated in the same international system. However, Lantis' quotation from Rosen combined with Gray's understanding of strategic culture provides a good and comprehensive definition of it, which will be convenient for my study of Iranian strategic culture:

Beliefs and assumptions that frame ... choices about international military behavior (Lantis, 2002, p. 105) and the ideas of interference and strategy as a response to the events happening in physical and political geography by political or religious ideology, and by familiarity with, and preference for, particular military technologies.[59]

The use of strategic cultural components like the religion by politicians in a populist way so as to convince the public is referred to as ambiguous instrumentality by Johnston which will be the second way through which I will analyze Iran's strategic culture.[60]

In his article titled Iranian Strategic Culture: The Impact of Ayatollah Khomeini's Interpretation of Shiite Islam (2014) Kamran Taremi states Islam is influencing the national security objectives of Iran.[61] He claims that Shiite Islam affects both the worldview and action plan of Iran by giving it a specific route to follow in foreign policy.[62] It is arming Shiite mercenaries it recruits from Afghanistan to fight wars in Syria to help the Assad regime.[63] However, Iran is not only supporting Shia in the region. It is also behind some Sunni groups like Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad, and it can act along with Russia which is neither about religion nor about the sect. That means that Shi'ism is being accompanied by other variables like religion and the normative environment in shaping the strategic culture of Iran. Sending Shi'ite warriors to fight wars in the Middle East, the evidence of support for non-Shiite groups, and working in collaboration with Russia in Syria which is the outcome of the normative conjuncture are how I will operationalize the term strategic culture.

---

[59] Gray, p. 58.
[60] Johnston, p. 39.
[61] Taremi, p. 20.
[62] Taremi, p. 19.
[63] Sune E. Rasmussen, and Zahra Nader, Iran covertly recruits Afghan Shias to fight in Syria. The Guardian, retrieved July 30, 2016, from http://www.theguardian.com/world/2016/jun/30/iran-covertly-recruits-afghan-soldiers-to-fight-in-syria

Iranian Strategic Culture

Looking at the Iranian history, the Shiite identity is something that sets it apart from other Muslim countries of the region. It marks even the earlier history of Iran that goes back to the time of Safavid dynasties. However, before the Islamic Revolution in 1979 Iran was being run by a secular, and authoritarian shah regime. Hence, the revolution was a turning point as Iranian domestic and foreign policies have taken quite a different turn since then. Islam started to be taken as all-embracing for life and for a government which left no faith in the existing fundamental law because of its secular nature. Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, the rhetoric used and policies pursued by the Iranian leaders all show a sectarian inclination. In that respects, in order to understand the Iranian strategic culture, it is important to assess how influential Shi'ism is in shaping the foreign policies.

With the revolution, Ayatollah Khomeini became the most prominent figure in Iranian politics as he is the ruling jurisprudent whose "interpretation of Islam is adopted as the state ideology."[64] So he has not only a religious authority but also a political one. This generally accepted rule assumes that Iran is acting according to Islam in every decision it makes. Although Ayatollah Khomeini says the final word even regarding the military issues, he does not make those decisions without being informed by military commanders on military developments.[65] It shows that Iran does not act solely on religious motivations but takes interests of the country into account before reaching a conclusion. Moreover, we see a stretched and warped understanding of Islam under Khomeini. According to traditional Shia understanding, ulema should not take part in politics. Because until the resurrection of the Mehdi, involving in politics means being a part of earthly affairs which cannot be fair.[66] Early on, the clerical circle around Khomeini including the authority of the time Ayatollah Burujirdi was against intervening in temporal political affairs.[67] However, Khomeini challenged this Shiite belief system after the death of Burujirdi and turned to politics which would establish a system with Islamic jurisprudence against secular modernization his country under Shah

---

[64] Taremi, p. 5.

[65] ibid.

[66] Hasan Kösebalaban, Lecture on Modern Sources of Islamism, retrieved from Istanbul Sehir University Islam and Politics in the Middle East Class, (2016).

[67] Ray Takeyh, Guardians of the Revolution: Iran and the World in the Age of the Ayatollahs. (Oxford University Press, 2009), p. 13.

regime.[68] He said that waiting is unnecessary and one can establish a legitimate just rule before Mehdi comes. In that respects, the revolution showed a modified understanding of Shiism which was not seen beforehand.[69]

After the revolution, Iranian foreign policy went through changes which severely affected its relations with its former friends and foes. The close ties with the US during the Shah regime turned to animosity and military, and diplomatic alliances with Israel terminated. Moreover, Iran assigned the Israeli Embassy in Tehran to the use of the Palestinian Liberation Organization.[70] Earlier alliances with sheikhdoms of Gulf came to an end, and they also started to fear Iran's export of revolution. In the defensive sense, an Islamic Revolution Guards Corps (IRGC) was established in order to protect the regime from alternative revolutionary groups and the supporters of the shah.[71] Moreover, the members of this group which is also known as Pasdaran were chosen among pious Muslims and ardent supporters of the new regime.[72] Since IRGC is the military institution of Iran, its formation, and religious character is also representing the strategic culture of Iran.[73] Taremi refers to the religious, ideological character of the IRGC which fight not to "protect the territorial integrity of the country but to safeguard the Islamic revolution."[74] I will measure Iranian strategic culture through four categories which are sectarianism, Pan-Islamism, Persian civilization, and normative international/regional environment.

Sectarianism

Although Shi'ism is said to be embedded deeply in Iran's strategic culture there is no consensus over Shiism being a real motivation behind foreign policy behavior or just a rhetorical tool to keep the Shi'ites united.[75] Cain explains in detail how the system of governance and appointment of individuals to political positions is determined by the religious authority, velayet-e faqih, who is also in charge of affairs of the state.[76] Being appointed as the

---

[68] Takeyh, pp. 13-14.
[69] Kösebalaban.
[70] Taremi, p. 9.
[71] Gregory D. McDowall, Clerics and commanders an examination of the evolution of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps' role in the political economy of Iran, (2011), p. 1.
[72] Taremi, p. 10
[73] ibid.
[74] ibid.
[75] Cain; Giles; Taremi.
[76] Cain, p. 142.

supreme leader of Iran for life, the power to declare war and peace rests with him. Also since Ayatollah is deciding whether or not someone can run in the elections, he is not expected to let someone against his mindset run in the first place (Interview 5). Besides, "if Hamaney had not let it even the international agreement easing the embargo would not be signed" (Interview 5). That is how influential the Shia authority over foreign policy. Making foreign policy attached to Shi'ite belief and codes are also followed by all leaders (Interview 4).

Moreover, there is the Council of Guardians duty of which is to decide whether the decisions of the Parliament and President are Islamic.[77] Apart from the shadow of Supreme Leader's over the formal political institutions, highest officials of the Intelligence Ministry are graduates of a pioneering theological school in Qom which again makes religion an important factor in preparing security strategies for the country.[78]

On the other hand, some see Shi'ism only as a useful tool and façade for real political interests (Interview 1-2-3-4). Shi'ism is most obviously seen in Iran's strategy of maintaining paramilitary forces beyond its territories. There are militant groups like Haşd-i Şabi, Houthi militias in Yemen and Quds Brigades which fight on behalf of Iran in the region. Iran is using these proxies to balance against the policies of the US, Saudi Arabia, and Israel in the region (Interview 1-2-5). With the help of the militia forces, it managed to become the most significant actor in Syrian politics (Interview 1).

Adopting a different approach to the effect of Shi'ism in Iranian strategic culture, Giles claims that practice of taqiyeh (hiding one's true intentions to protect itself against Sunni Islam and other enemies) in Shi'ism makes the professed intentions of Iran's leader questionable.[79] So, what the leader defends publicly or in front of the international community may not represent his genuine objectives. Iran did not use Shi'ism before or after the Islamic Revolution as a source of foreign policy decision making (Interview 1-4). Moreover, there is a significant regional reality that makes Shi'ism even more crucial and useful. "Iran is the only support center for Shi'ites in the region. It has a monopoly (Interview 3)." It is similar to Papacy call a crusade in that regard. "Crusades were not just related to Christianity but also motivated by material expectations. They used that motivation for getting what they want

---

[77] ibid.
[78] Cain, p. 145.
[79] Giles, p. 147.

materially (Interview 1)." In one case Christianity, in another case, Shi'ism was a smokescreen before the real political objectives according to this view. Rather than providing tangible incentives, one can reduce transaction costs by using a sectarian language (Interview 3).

Pan-Islamism

Shi'ism is not the only thing that comes to minds when one is talking about Iran and its political character. Islam can look like a point of reference at first glance when the empirical cases like anti-Israeli stance and support given to non-Shi'ite groups are considered. Also looking at the inception of the revolution which was a strong reaction against a highly secular regime, it is possible to see the call for an Islamic regime. A famous slogan during the revolution was "Istiqlal, Azadi, cumhur-u Islami" another version of which was "Neither Western nor Eastern, inqilab-e islami[80]". It was the case during the revolution, but "it did not change. It still represents where Iran is situated in the world and the region (Interview 2)." Islamic ideology was presented as a variable that defines Iranian strategic culture by Cain (2002) and Mahdi Mohammad Nia (2012). For Cain, Iran's policy choices cannot be thought in isolation from religion. Cain states "The Iranian theocracy filters its interaction with the international community through the lens of Koranic law" which is a constitutional requirement.[81] During the Iran-Iraq War, Khomeini condemned the use of chemical weapons basing his argument on Islam's prohibition against the use of poison.[82] However, Cain adds that it was an instrumental use of Islamic law since the reaction came only after the international community's failure to take any action against Iraq.[83] Even this case indicates practical usage of the concept by Iranian leaders.

Nia, on the other hand, refers to the use of Islamic unity as a foreign policy discourse in order to establish a just global system in alliance with other Muslim countries.[84] However, it was predominantly used during the first years of the revolution as it was more consistent with the political conditions of the time.[85] The change of language from Islamic to a sectarian one was about the changing needs of Iran (Interview 3-4). Also, it can be argued whether Pan-Islamism was just a shield or a real goal they were trying to reach

---

[80] Interviewee 2 referred to this as : Ne şarkî ne garbî inkilab-ı İslamî
[81] Cain, p. 5.
[82] ibid.
[83] ibid.
[84] Mahdi Mohammad Nia, "Discourse and Identity in Iran's Foreign Policy". Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs, Vol. 3, No. 3, pp. 37-48.
[85] Nia, p. 49

(Interview 5). Iran is taken as a country that uses Islamic rhetoric as a foreign policy tool just as any other country would use what is instrumental in order to expand its zone of influence.

"Islam is not the real cause of its foreign policy behavior. Israel is number one enemy of Iran, so to speak. But for 30 years there is no reactionary policy towards Israel, no direct conflict between these two countries. In 2007, Iran set up Forces for Quds. They did not do anything for Quds but fought for Assad (Interview 1)."

Moreover, Iran's support for Hamas and Palestinian Islamic Jihad is also taken as a part of its anti-Israeli rhetoric rather than a sign of Islamic unity. It is a political maneuver to be on the side of such Sunni groups (Interview 1-4-5). In this case, having a common enemy, Israel, forms a unity of purpose between Iran and these groups (Interview 1-2-3-4). Furthermore, they are also not favored by Saudi Arabia which is a key player in the region against whom Iran is trying to counterbalance. However, to say that Iran is giving this support just out of religious concerns would be wrong. "Inside Palestine, there are many Sunni groups but Iran is supporting only the ones that are most compatible with Iranian foreign policy goals (Interview 2)." By forming an ideological tie with them around a shared enemy and connecting through giving arms, Iran is increasing its zone of influence in the region (Interview 5). It is just a sui generis alliance between Iran and its associates rather than long-term cooperation (Interview 1). This shows that Iran's cooperation with such groups is pure realpolitik.

Persian Civilization

Instead of merely focusing on sect or religion, Gregory Giles' book chapter on Iran's Leaders and Strategic Culture (2003) analyzes Iran's cultural superiority through looking at 3000 years old Persian civilization. Iran as the sole owner of this cultural legacy has a unique identity and pride according to Giles.[86] Before converting to Islam, Iranians were Persian. Also, Iran choosing Shi'ism was the result of a desire for differentiation of a deeply-rooted civilization (Interview 5). Iranian culture with its language, customs, and history are effective over Iran's strategic culture (Interview 4-5). In addition, being invaded over centuries during the Persian Empire makes Iranians view foreigners with suspicion which affect their foreign policy decision making and let "artifice, flattery, dissembling, and treachery to become standard for sur-

---

[86] Giles, p. 146.

vival."[87] That is also why Giles says the country is so prone to explain random events with conspiracies.[88]

Lantis (2006) see Iranian strategic culture not something that develops only out of religious influences. He also takes into account historical, cultural and geographical variables while explaining Iran's approach to building nuclear weapons.[89] In a later version of the article Lantis draws the attention of the reader to how high-level of personal appeals during the Obama administration led to negotiations over the nuclear issue.[90] Conversely, earlier "efforts to dissuade and deter potential enemies from developing nuclear weapons have largely been unsuccessful."[91] Obama's secret letter to Ayatollah Khamenei to improve relations in that respect is interpreted as a tailored deterrence which enabled the US to reach out to a country that has a strong national cultural identity which could not be done before.[92]

Normative International/Regional Environment

The changing regional environment also provides a rationale behind the change of language from an Islamic to a sectarian one. Nia says the nature of normative international environment plays an important role as well.[93] Fighting a war with Iraq for eight years and seeing all the Arabs on the other side apart from Syria renders using a pan-Islamist language meaningless (Interview 3). However, a sectarian pan-Shi'ite language can be supported by action. "Pan-Islamist language has no real reflection anymore (Interview 3)." Nia also claims that the international environment can push Iranian foreign policy towards moderation or radicalization depending on the kinds of policies the West follows towards Iran.[94] According to this view, the confrontational language during the Bush administration encouraged Iran even more to continue uranium enrichment program.[95] Later on, the attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq which are in close proximity to Iran stimulated it to take up arms to

---

[87] ibid.
[88] ibid.
[89] Jeffrey S. Lantis, Strategic culture: From Clausewitz to constructivism. In Strategic Culture and Weapons of Mass Destruction, (Springer, 2006), p. 30.
[90] Jeffrey S. Lantis, Strategic Culture and Tailored Deterrence: Bridging the Gap between Theory and Practice, Contemporary Security Policy, Vol. 30 No. 3, (2009), p. 473.
[91] Lantis, 2006, p. 30.
[92] Lantis, 2009, p. 47.
[93] Nia, p. 30.
[94] ibid.
[95] Nia, p. 54.

protect itself from spreading the invasion to its land.[96] Because Iran started to become suspicious of US intentions which might include an invasion of Iran afterward (Interview 1-2). Moreover, the motivation behind the prevention efforts against any possible American aggression in Syria, Lebanon, and Yemen is its own defensive concerns (Interview 2).

On the other hand, the time of the Shah regime before the revolution put Iran into an inferior position to the US. Shah was seen as the puppet of the US by especially the opposition in Iran. Hence, after the revolution, the US became the major enemy due to the historical events between the two countries. "The US is using patron-client relations in its contact with other countries. Because of that after the revolution, they did not want to take the US as a respondent. However, they were open to dialogue with any other country that is willing to treat Iran equally (Interview 2)." If these are taken into account, it is possible to see the clear effect of what is happening "in physical and political geography" on strategic culture.[97]

Conclusion

Discussing the literature on strategic culture has shown that international political behavior and military strategy of a country is shaped by its strategic culture which is influenced by that country's religious and political ideology, by its nation's deep historical roots and by the normative international/regional environment. Specifically, in the case of Iran, Shi'ism is seen as the prime mover behind its foreign policy decisions. There are also claims about Iran's policies being motivated by unifying Pan-Islamic inclinations. However, my study suggests that the influence of religion and sect is being used as a tool of legitimacy and to elicit support from the public, from the Shi'ites, and the Muslims according to the situation the state faces. My results strongly show that Pan-Islamic language which was used especially during the early years of the Islamic Republic and sectarian rhetoric that has been in use since the collapse of Pan-Islamism is justifying the operational strategy of the country. Iran does not follow an Islamic or a sectarian route when it might hurt its national interests. Its selective support of only particular Sunni groups in Palestine is evidence of that. Whenever sectarianism or Islamic unity is used

---

[96] Liu Yongtao, Discourse, Meanings and IR Studies: Taking the Rhetoric of "Axis of Evil" As a Case, CONfines de relaciones internacionales y ciencia política, Vol. 6, No. 11, (2010), p. 104.

[97] Gray, p. 58.

as framing the foreign policy, it cloaks the real objectives which cannot be justified by using a blunt, aggressive expansionist language. Hence, rather than being the real driving force behind international political moves, the power of these concepts comes from their ambiguous instrumentality since Iran is using these frames whenever they are applicable to use. Iran acting along with Russia in the Syrian crisis is an example of that which cannot be explained by religion or sect.

One thing that has emerged as a result of this research is the power of Persian roots in shaping the strategic culture which proved to be more powerful than Islam or Shi'ism. The long historical process that goes back to earlier centuries left a legacy of a deep sense of insecurity to Iranians since their land had been invaded by foreigners many times. The recent history of the region also served to keep those memories vivid with the invasion of Afghanistan, and Iraq. Their insecurity and the fear of being the next soil to be invaded pushed them to assume a more proactive role in the case of Syria. Besides, being the only Shi'ite and Persian country in the region and perceptions about Iran's revolutionary agenda by many Arab countries of the Gulf makes Iran feel surrounded by hostile regimes and alone.

In short, the roots of Persian civilization and the normative environment are more in connection in shaping the Iranian strategic culture. They also can be said to be more influential since Iran's defensive concerns in highly turbulent geography are reinforcing its fear and insecurities since it does not have a strong ally and left out of the international and regional system. Moreover, acting with such motivations do not run counter to Iran's national interests. On the contrary, following a religious or a sectarian policy without paying attention to its results on Iranian national interests would not be a logical action for a state. Hence, use of such framings is the resort only when they can be a good cover for national objectives.

BIBLIOGRAPHY

Alastair Iain Johnston. Thinking about Strategic Culture, *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 4, (1995).

Alexander L. George and Andrew Bennett, "Process Tracing and Historical Explanation." Case Studies and Theory Development in the Social Sciences, (MIT Press, 2005).

Ali L. Karaosmanoğlu, & Mustafa Kibaroğlu, Post-Cold War Defense Reform: Lessons Learned in Europe and the United States, East West Institute, Brassey's, (New York: 2003).

Anthony C. Cain, Iran's Strategic Culture and Weapons of Mass Destruction, (Maxwell Paper, 2002).

Basrur, R. M. (2001). Nuclear Weapons and Indian Strategic Culture. Journal of Peace Research, 38(2), 181–198. https://doi.org/10.1177/0022343301038002004

Bradley S. Klein, Hegemony and Strategic Culture: American Power Projection and Alliance Defence Politics. *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 14, No. 2, (1988).

Colin S. Gray, Strategic culture as context: the first generation of theory strikes back. *Review of International Studies*, Vol. 25, No. 1, (1999).

David R. Jones, Soviet Strategic Culture. In Strategic Power: USA/USSR, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1990).

Elizabeth Kier, Culture and Military Doctrine: France between the Wars, *International Security*, Vol. 19, No. 4, (1995).

Firoozeh Papan-Matin, The Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran, Iranian Studies, Vol. 47, No. 1, (1989).

Gregory D. McDowall, Clerics and Commanders an Examination of the Evolution of the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps' Role in the Political Economy of Iran, (2011).

Gregory F. Giles, The crucible of radical Islam: Iran's leaders and strategic culture. Know Thy Enemy: Profiles of Adversary Leaders and Their Strategic Cultures, Maxwell Air Force Base, AL: USAF Counterproliferation Center, (2003).

Hasan Kösebalaban, Lecture on Modern Sources of Islamism, retrieved from Istanbul Sehir University Islam and Politics in the Middle East Class, (2016).

J Paul Dunne, Military Keynesianism: An Assessment, *Peace Economics and Peace Science*, (2011).

Jack Snyder, Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition, (Cornell University Press, 1991).

Jack Snyder, Myths of Empire: Domestic Politics and International Ambition, (Cornell University Press, 1991).

Jack Snyder, Soviet Strategic Culture: Implication for Limited Nuclear Operations. Santa Monica, CA, Rand R-2154-AF, (Rand Corporation, 1977)

Jack Snyder, The Concept of Strategic Culture: Caveat Emptor. In Strategic Power: USA/USSR, (London: Palgrave Macmillan, 1990).

Jeffrey S. Lantis, Strategic Culture and National Security Policy. International Studies Review, Vol. 4, No. 3, (2002).

Jeffrey S. Lantis, Strategic Culture and Tailored Deterrence: Bridging the Gap between Theory and Practice, *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 30 No. 3, (2009).

Jeffrey S. Lantis, Strategic Culture: From Clausewitz to Constructivism, in Strategic Culture and Weapons of Mass Destruction, (Springer, 2006).

Jeremy Black, Rethinking Military History, (Psychology Press, 2004).

John Glenn, Realism versus Strategic Culture: Competition and Collaboration? International Studies Review, Vol. 11, No. 3, (2009).

K. P. O'Reilly, A Rogue Doctrine?: The Role of Strategic Culture on US Foreign Policy Behavior. Foreign Policy Analysis, Vol. 9, No. 1, (2013).

Kamran Taremi, Iranian Strategic Culture: The Impact of Ayatollah Khomeini's Interpretation of Shiite Islam. *Contemporary Security Policy*, Vol. 35, No.1, (2014).

Ken Booth, Strategy and Ethnocentrism, (Routledge Revivals, 2014).

Lawrence Sondhaus, Strategic Culture and Ways of War, (Routledge, 2006).

Liu Yongtao, Discourse, Meanings and IR Studies: Taking the Rhetoric of" Axis of Evil" As a Case. CONfines de relaciones internacionales y ciencia política, Vol. 6, No. 11, (2010).

Mahdi Mohammad Nia, Discourse and Identity in Iran's Foreign Policy, *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs*, Vol. 3, No, 3, (2012).

Michael C. Desch, Culture Clash: Assessing the Importance of Ideas in Security Studies, International Security, Vol.23 No.1, (1998).

Ole Wæver, "The rise and fall of the inter-paradigm debate." *International Theory: Positivism and Beyond.* (1996).

P. W. Singer, Corporate Warriors: The Rise of the Privatized Military Industry, (Cornell University Press, 2007).

Ray Takeyh, Guardians of the Revolution: Iran and the World in the Age of the Ayatollahs. (Oxford University Press, 2009).

Steve Smith, Ken Booth, & Marysia Zalewski, International Theory: Positivism and Beyond. (Cambridge University Press, 1996).

United Nation Group of Consultant Experts, Economic and Social Consequences of the Arms Race. in Thee, Marek (ed.), Armaments, Arms Control, and Disarmament: a Unesco Reader for Disarmament Education, (Paris: Unesco Press, 1981).