

***Realpolitik* in Iran Opportunities and Challenges**

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Abstract

On the basis of Robert Putnam's two-level-game it is assumed that the Iranian anti-Western rhetoric is not primarily directed against the West, but instead towards a domestic audience in order to close the ranks behind the regime. Against this background, the Islamic Republic is constructed as a regional power in terms of Regional Security Complex Theory which is indeed capable and willing to act on behalf of Realpolitik and not only on ideological premises; the aim is to assess its securitizations in four different policy sectors using securitization theory and gain insights as how to mitigate those securitizations by the West. It is argued that – under certain circumstances – it may be possible to come to a limited regional security cooperation which could eventually lead in the end to a security architecture in the whole Middle East. Therefore the RSCT-model is used as a theoretical as well as a methodological tool which incorporates both ideational and structural levels of analysis providing a comprehensive view of threat perceptions and opportunities of cooperation.

Keywords

Cooperation; International Relations; Iran; Realpolitik; Regional Security Complex Theory; Two-level-game; Securitization Theory

Introduction

The aim of this paper is to evaluate possible scope of action for Western Governments¹⁰⁵ to search for and identify possibilities for de-securitization of certain policy fields in Iranian politics. This is done by a) using the framework of the two-level-game introduced by Robert Putnam (Putnam 1988) to demonstrate the gap between Iranian rhetoric and actual (foreign) policy and b) constructing Iran as a regional power within the Middle East using the Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) provided by Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver (Buzan/Wæver 2003) in order to assess Iranian securitizations and possible chances for de-securitization which, in turn, could lead to more readiness to engage in negotiations on both sides.

This paper argues that Iranian foreign policy rhetoric in its most extreme form, namely the anti-American and anti-Israeli propaganda, is not only directed *against* the West and Israel, but a) *towards* the domestic audience and b) *towards* a wider international audience within critics of Western universalism and Western dominance, known under the label “Third-Worldism”. Especially anti-Israeli propaganda is part of Iranian *raison d'être* and thus ideologically motivated; therefore it is important to distinguish it from rhetoric about actual policy.

Due to the methodological approach, which focuses on threat perceptions and vulnerabilities deriving thereof, the paper will try to take the Iranian Republic's view on security matters in order to assess *their* threat perceptions and vulnerabilities and therefore identify Iranian securitization interests¹⁰⁶.

The two levels of Iranian rhetoric

Grounded in the self-definition as a “revolutionary state” it has been the aim of the regime to co-opt and spearhead revolutionary and anti-Western movements and governments around the world, not just Islamist ones but anti-Western governments in general, and it is state doctrine to balance Western spheres of influence wherever possible. To demonstrate these

¹⁰⁵ Speaking of “Western Governments” in this paper generally means the European Union and the USA; this is to be differentiated from the P5+1, which is the official international negotiating program with Iran and consists of the 5 permanent members of the UN Security Council and Germany.

¹⁰⁶ Cf. Andreas Bock 2014: 119 – 120: „The ultimate deciding factor is how the relevant key players perceive and judge the intentions of the threatening state (or alliance), a perception which is strongly influenced (but not determined) by an image already formed.“ Bock shows convincingly that not real or intended threats matter to decision makers, but only perceived threats.

ambitions and to underline the differences the Islamic Republic has in comparison to Western systems, it has been the aim of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) since the inception in 1979 to present the IRI as a reverse image of Western systems, which are described as decadent, imperialist and spiritually superficial, relying only on capitalism and political oppression to exploit third-world-nations (Posch 2013: 14). The republic's founding father Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini wanted to distance the new system especially from its predecessor, the Shah-regime, which was dependent on and a de-facto-colony of the USA, situating the new republic with a strong anti-imperialist impetus. In the first ten years of its existence Iran was in a constant state of exception because of the Western backed invasion of Iraqi forces into Iranian territory in order to destabilise and eventually overthrow the regime; it was in that times when the Islamic Republic undoubtedly was a “revolutionary state”, overtly supporting terrorist organizations both in the Middle East and in Western states, trying to destabilise the whole region and acting anything than pragmatic but only on ideological premises.

With the ending of the war and the death of the revolutionary leader Ayatollah Khomeini in 1989, the politics changed dramatically into a more pragmatic direction as the imperative was now to rebuild the country and to draw foreign investments into it. Therefore ideological ambitions have been abandoned and more pragmatic politics conducted as Telhami et. al. correctly observe:

“The termination of the war laid the ground for dramatic shifts in Iranian foreign policy, and with the death of the Supreme Leader less than a year later, for the nation to redefine itself in the absence of its charismatic leadership. This redefinition was marked by a revival of Iran's non-revolutionary ambitions to establish itself as a great regional power; this goal was a result of both the opportunities at its disposal and the reduction in the force of revolutionary Islamism“ (Telhami and Barnett 2002: 109).

From this moment forth rhetoric and action drifted apart more and more as the newly appointed revolutionary leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei stuck to the old rhetoric while President Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani (1989 – 1997) focused on rebuilding the country and therefore tried to improve relations with the Western countries and the neighbouring Gulf States (GCC) hoping for investments into the Iranian economy. This development went further with Mohammad Khatami as president from 1997 until 2005 and his “dialogue among

civilizations” (*gofi-e-gu-ye tamadonba*) - a policy which had the aim of reconciling IRI and the Muslim countries in general with the Western world (Reissner 2001: 65 f.). After over a decade of rapprochement¹⁰⁷ it was the election of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad in 2005 which intensified both the rhetoric and the distance between the Islamic Republic and the West. Only after the contested 2009 elections which were followed by heavy protests and demonstration that severely shook the regime, the differences of the revolutionary leader and the president became obvious to a wider audience, resulting in a sneaking disempowerment of Ahmadinejad especially in foreign policy.

Despite its ideological and offensive rhetoric, Iran has in the past conducted un-ideological and constructive politics when it was in its national interest (Perthes 2010: 98), as was particularly the case in both post-war Afghanistan and Iraq when Iran for example mediated between the Iraqi government and the al-Sadr militias in March 2008 and with its constant and ongoing affirmation to Iraqi territorial unity (Barzegar 2010a: 178; Perthes 2010: 98). It is in fact possible for the Iranian government to recognise overlapping spheres of interest with the United States as is the case in Afghanistan and Pakistan regarding the threat posed by the Taliban or the impending “balkanisation” of Iraq; furthermore Iran never has had any intentions of “support of anti-regime movements in the states of Central Asia, Russia's Caucasus Republics or among China's Muslim minorities” (Perthes 2010: 98). This shows indeed the ability of Iran's government to act on behalf of its own national interest in a remarkable pragmatic way, without almost any restrictions posed by its official rhetoric and state ideology. The only case where rhetoric and politics are entirely convergent is the Israeli-Palestinian conflict which is a highly ideological “matter of faith” (Reissner 2001: 70) for the Iranian government as this rhetorical field constitutes an ideological yardstick for the confession of faith to the regime. All this shows the yawning gap between the revolutionary rhetoric and the actual policy.

¹⁰⁷ For various reasons this rapprochement did not have any real impact; first of all was the election of George Bush jr. and the events of 9/11 that intensified rhetoric on the other side, depicting Iran as part of an “axis of evil” and a rogue state.

Theory: Iran as a regional power

Regional Security Complex Theory

Situating Iran as a main regional power within the Regional Security Complex (RSC) “Middle East” using the theoretical tool Regional Security Complex Theory (RSCT) as provided by Buzan/Wæver is a primary aim of this paper. Therefore in the following paragraph the theory will be paraphrased and applied to Iran.

Barry Buzan and Ole Wæver, both stemming from the Copenhagen School of International Relations, try to incorporate both realist and constructivist elements in their theory of International Politics and furthermore establish a third level between the state-level and the international world order, namely the “regional level” which consists of “subsystems”, that is, a clustering of “security complexes” around the world which are inherently closed and are defined as

“a group of states or other entities [that] must possess a degree of security interdependence sufficient both to establish them as a linked set and to differentiate them from surrounding security regions“ (Buzan and Wæver 2003: 47).

These RSC's usually are mostly identical with geographical borders, although they are socially constructed entities. For this purpose it is crucial not only to analyse the degree of security interdependence by material effects and predispositions but also by

“patterns of amity and enmity among the units in the system, which makes regional systems dependent on the actions and interpretations of actors” (ibid.: 40).

In this way it is possible to analyse every region through the lens of securitizations and underlying security issues that can rely on material effects and capabilities as well as on ideational effects such as identity problems or patterns of amity and enmity as posited by the constructivist school of International Relations¹⁰⁸. Such a security complex consists of four structural elements which are a) a boundary which clearly distinguishes it from its neighbouring RSC's b) an anarchic structure, which means that the RSC is composed of two or more units c) polarity which expresses the distribution of power within the RSC and d) a social construction which covers the patterns of amity and enmity among the units (ibid.: 53). A

¹⁰⁸cf. Wendt ¹⁴2010: 246-313; Katzenstein: A World of Regions

security complex can thus be analysed based on four levels of analysis which are a) the vulnerabilities of the states and the threat perceptions which are generated by them b) the relationship of the states as such c) the interaction of the region with a neighbouring region and d) the role global superpowers play in the region, which is labelled “penetration” (ibid.: 51). Penetration occurs when a global superpower aligns with one of the conflicting parties and thus influences the distribution of power significantly; it is to be differentiated from “overlapping”, which means that the units of the system don't have own interests at all but only interests imposed from an outside power. The Middle East is a prime example not only of a penetrated system in the common sense but also in the narrower meaning of a penetrated RSC.

For a successful process of securitization there are three necessary types of units, according to Buzan et. al. 1998:

“A *referent object*, whose survival is perceived as inherently endangered and has a legitimate claim to survive, a *securitizing actor*, who declares a certain referent object as being existentially threatened – thus making a *securitizing move* and *functional actors*: Actors who affect the dynamics of a sector without being the referent object, nor the securitizing actor, but who significantly influences decisions in the field of security.”

(Buzan et. al. 1998: 36. Emphasis in original).

Furthermore with their wider conception of security, not only encompassing the military and political sector as in classical security studies, it is possible to securitize almost any referent object in any societal sector, be it, e.g. the environment endangered by pollution; be it the national identity, endangered by immigration; be it the national economy (big banks), endangered by the global economic crisis. The necessary and sufficient predispositions for such a securitizing move are a) the social capital of the securitizing actor, i.e. does he have sufficient legitimacy to do so? and b) an audience which agrees upon the need of securitization of some referent object. This leads to another important point, the notion of intersubjective and social construction of securitization:

“Does a referent object hold general legitimacy as something that *should* survive, which entails that actors can make reference to it, point to something as a threat, *and* thereby get others to follow or at least tolerate actions not otherwise legitimate?” (ibid.: 31.

Emphasis in original)

No actor decides alone if a certain object is to be securitized; he does so by making a “speech act” referring to a certain object and speaking to a certain audience. The speech act can only be successful if two main conditions are met, which are: The social capital of the enunciator, who has to have a certain degree of authority over the subject (not everyone can securitize any object with the same degree of legitimacy) and the conjuration of a security threat that is posited by something dangerous (some things are easier to be constructed as a danger, i.e. tanks on borders or masses of refugees). Thirdly there has to be an audience which accepts this claim made in the securitizing move (ibid.: 31 – 33). Furthermore, extraordinary measures have to be accepted in defence of the referent object, not legitimate in situations of “normal” politics to make it a securitization.

The security complex “Middle East”

The RSC Middle East is one of the most complicated complexes as it consists of a relatively high number of states (approximately 20) with a relatively high degree of polarity which means there are two overarching actors as, who compete on a regional as well as a global level. There is a rising polarity between Saudi-Arabia and Iran on the Sunni-Shi'a division lines, who compete for regional dominance on various political sectors, such as militarily but also ideologically. Because of its vast size, this complex is divided into three sub-complexes which are two main ones in its centre, the *Levant* and the *Persian Gulf* and one at the periphery the *Maghreb*. Buzan/Wæver classify it as

“a near perfect example of a classical, state-centric, military-political type RSC. [...] [T]he cross-cutting and mixing of Arab nationalist, Islamic, anti-Zionist, and anti-Western sentiments in the Middle East, not to mention statist concern and regime interests, have meant that balance-of-power policies for both the local states and the intervening powers have been extraordinarily difficult to operate. In the Middle East it is difficult for any actor, whether global or local, to support another against a shared enemy without at the same time threatening a friendly third party.” (Buzan and Wæver 2003: 217 f.)

It is a mixture of many common features which unify the states of the RSC on the one hand, e.g. the important role religion (mainly Islam) plays in the societies or the Arab language which most of the states have in common, and, on the other hand, many structural differences that separate them from one another, such as Islamic vs. secular states (e.g. Saudi-Arabia vs. Egypt),

rich rentier economies vs. relatively poor economies (e.g. Qatar vs. Yemen) and, of course, the alignment within the Israeli-Palestinian conflict which sets states like Jordan or Egypt apart from Syria or Iraq. In the recent past there have been two important turning points for this RSC: The first one, the second Gulf War, coincided with the ending of the Cold War and re-structured the RSC in many ways from the weakening of Iraq to the stationing of Western troops in the region to the beginning of Palestinian-Israeli peace talks (ibid.: 201) The second turning point, and for this paper of much more importance, was the US-led Iraq-invasion and the toppling of Saddam Hussein in 2003, which greatly affected the balance of power and the threat perceptions within the region, above all for Iran.

Significant for this paper is the subcomplex “Persian Gulf” as both Iran and Saudi-Arabia are the major rivals within this subcomplex along several lines of division where Iraq, as an ethnically as well as religiously divided country, is one of the main battlegrounds for hegemony for both of them. The task is to analyse the subcomplex and its actors on the basis of five sectors as provided by Buzan et. al. 1998; they propose analysis of securitizations in each of five sectors, namely the *military*, the *political*, the *environmental*, the *societal*, and the *economic* sector. What follows is a short description of each sector, which possible referent objects it may incorporate and why it is used in this analysis or why it is not.

The most obvious sector for securitizations and security studies is the *military sector*; within which we find typical fields and objects of reference of classical power politics and security studies. Referent objects may include territorial integrity, Buzan et. al. explicitly mention religion as a referent object for the military sector and – deriving thereof – “Western fears of Islam, the rise of Hindu-nationalism, and theories about the 'clash of civilizations'”. (Buzan et. al: 53). But dangers that threaten the survival of the state may not only occur from outside, it may also have to struggle with domestic challenges like secessionists, revolutionaries and all kinds of rebels that question the authority of the current government, as well as organised crime and militias that take the right in their own hand, because they doubt the capacity of the government to deal with certain challenges. The securitizing actor usually is – at least in modern nation-states - the government which is in charge of the military (ibid.: 52–55).

The second sector of analysis is the *environmental sector* which for our purpose can be neglected because as Buzan et. al. put it, here the civilization or the “human enterprise” (ibid.: 76) as a whole serves as referent object, either in a scenario of a nuclear war or a post-environmental apocalypse or as a degrading level of civilization itself. It could also be the water from a river like the Jordan in Israel/Jordan or the Nile in Egypt/Sudan which can be securitized. In the case of Iran there is no such case that justifies the analysis of the environmental sector (ibid.: Chapter 4).

The third sector to be analysed is the *economic sector*; as referent objects come into question state interests such as political status (e.g. a declining hegemon), political leverage (oil for example) or military capability. These examples seem to belong either to the military or the political sector but since the measures taken lie within the economic sector, they are to be analysed within this context (ibid.: 102). In the last years Europe and the USA have witnessed that it is even possible to securitize a single firm, namely banks that are “too big to fail” and need to be rescued by the state because their survival is essential for the economy of the whole state. This would clearly be a case of securitization in the economic sector.

Fourth it is the *societal sector*, which includes ideas and practices such as identity, an underlying self-conception, and in some cases religion; these referent objects transcend the political horizon as they do not stop on national borders but encompass social groups and phenomena that are “occurring at both smaller and larger scales and sometimes even transcending the spatial dimension altogether” (ibid.: 119). The authors here refer explicitly to communities with one given identity as referent objects and not only to nations; this may entail supranational groups such as the Kurds as well as sub-national groups such as the Assyrians in Iraq. Typically societal securitization involves fears of immigration or more specifically of “overriding cultural and linguistic influence [...] e.g., Canadian fears of Americanization” (ibid.: 121) or secessionist movements such as Catalonia in Spain. Persian resentments against Arab domination fall into this sector, too, or more generally, fears of Western cultural dominance.

The last sector of analysis is the *political sector*. The typical referent object of this sector is the nation state, although it may also encompass supranational entities such as the European Union or “transnational movements that are able to mobilize supreme allegiance from adherents” (ibid.: 145), such as the Catholic Church in medieval times or ideological

movements such as Pan-Arabism or Communism. Usually it will be the government of a state that is the legitimate securitizing actor or in the case of movements the recognised leader of the movement, such as the Pope in medieval times or any leader of a movement with sufficient authority and adherents to declare anything as a referent object. Vulnerabilities usually encompass ideas such as nationalism or any political ideology, because when these are threatened often the stability of the whole political order is challenged. Usually it is the domestic legitimacy which is put into question or to be weakened by external hostile actors (*ibid.*: Chapter 7). The more a state relies on any state ideology the more it is vulnerable in this sector.

After having analysed the subcomplex and its interrelations among the actors on the basis of these sectors, we should be able to identify referent objects of securitization for Iran and hence possibilities for de-securitization to give policy advices to Western governments in which sectors negotiations promise the most positive outcome.

Analysis

The Subcomplex Persian Gulf – Data and Facts

The subcomplex Persian Gulf consists of Iran, Iraq, and the states of the Arabian Peninsula, bordered by the subcomplex of the Levant (Syria, Lebanon, Egypt, and Israel) and the insulator Afghanistan (belonging to no RSC); west of it lies the weaker subcomplex of the Maghreb, comprising of Libya, Tunisia, Algeria, Western Sahara, and Morocco. The conflict formation clearly is composed of balance of power because the actors have not been able to produce any kind of security regime, either in the whole RSC nor in the subcomplex; this means there are two main rivals - Iran and Saudi-Arabia - and the minor actors are trying to bandwagon on them. The structure of the polarity is mainly driven by the respective government's Islamic confessions, because Iran sees itself as the hegemon of Shi'a adherents, whereas Saudi-Arabia perceives itself as the protector of Sunni Islam. Conflicts of interests exist mainly in states with a strong minority of either of both, e.g. in Iraq with a Shi'a majority (65 - 75%) and a strong Sunni minority or in Yemen with the opposite, a Sunni majority and a strong Shi'a minority (35 - 40%). Furthermore there are noticeable Shi'a minorities in Kuwait (20 - 25%), Saudi-Arabia (10 -15%) Qatar (~10%), UAE (~10%), and Oman (5 - 10%); Bahrain is besides Iran and Iraq the only country with a Shi'a majority of about 65 - 75%,

Iran itself has about 90 – 95% Shi'a population (PEW Research Center 2009). It is mainly an anarchic, unstructured RSC with occasional penetration by a superpower, namely the USA; the penetration occurs primarily on the Arabian Peninsula, made obvious by the strong presence of US-military on the whole peninsula as well as along the shores of the Persian Gulf and the Strait of Hormuz.¹⁰⁹ But it doesn't go as far as being an overlaid region not being able to form an RSC because of the heavy penetration from outside (cf. Buzan and Wæver 2003: 62 f.). The countries clearly have their own interests and the region has its own, distinguished security interdependencies which are not entirely *given* from outside by an external actor but only *shaped* by penetration from outside. The dominant actors are, as mentioned earlier, Iran and Saudi-Arabia, where also the main processes of securitization occur; both try to dominate the region politically and militarily by supporting groups which are ideologically close to them, as experienced with Iran supporting the Assad-regime in Syria, the Hizbullah in Lebanon and several Shi'a-militias in Iraq or Saudi-Arabia supporting the regime in Bahrain against a democratic movement or, more recently, the Yemeni government against the Houthi-rebels as well as supporting Islamist rebels against Asad in Syria.

Iran's securitizations and vulnerabilities

1. The military sector

The most frightening development in Iran's immediate neighbourhood is the Islamic State (formerly known as ISIS¹¹⁰) in Syria and Iraq which directly threatens not only Shi'ites in Iraq and the Assad-regime in Syria but the overall territorial integrity of the Iraqi state which Iran wants to be preserved by all means necessary; it is a major securitization interest for the Iranian government that Iraq remains led by a Shi'ite, Iran-friendly government and ISIS poses a major threat against that (Bazzi 2014). This offers great possibilities for cooperation between the USA and Iran, Mohamad Bazzi even speaks of an “undeclared alliance”. Although Iran denies any direct involvement in the Iraqi operations against ISIS it is clear that it is offering weapons, training and personnel for the Iraqi government; there are even speculations about Iranian air strikes against ISIS, maybe even with the tacit and indirect knowledge of the US-government (Cockburn 2014). Such an “undeclared alliance” continues what the US- and the Iranian

¹⁰⁹cf. attached image “air bases”.

¹¹⁰In the following it will coherently be named ISIS.

government de-facto practised since the end of the Saddam-regime – a silent and covert cooperation on the basis of mutual aims and goals in Iraq, namely the territorial integrity and a stable and cooperative government. Possibilities for de-securitization seem perfectly possible as the West and the Iranian government have exactly the same goals in this issue, supporting the government of Haidar al-Abadi, the Iraqi prime minister, and defeating the Islamic state. This analysis is valid for the Iraqi battleground; regarding Syria it is completely different as Iran is a close ally of Basher al-Assad and wants him to stay in government by all means necessary. With respect to Western indecisiveness regarding the strategy towards the Assad regime (and the Syrian rebel groups) it would be recommendable to cooperate with Iran against ISIS (which promises more room for de-securitization and thus limited cooperation) and take the Syrian civil war on a different agenda as it is much more complex. On this agenda there will be much less room for cooperation as the West and Iran have diametrically opposing goals and interests. So the battle against ISIS can serve as a trust building means during the rapprochement and the differences should be cast aside as long as there's a common enemy. This may seem naïve in the eyes of some hardcore realist analysts (cf.: Weiss and Pregelut 2015)¹¹¹ which see gains of Iran as losses of the USA in the Iraqi and Syrian battlefield but within a coherent realist-constructivist framework, which tries also to incorporate the Iranian government's point of view, one cannot but come to the conclusion that there are to expect far more gains in cooperation than losses as cooperation would force the Iranian government to act more responsibly and give it an opportunity to ease its rhetoric. A common enemy therefore is one of the best starting points for the building of mutual trust. Apart from that, there will be no solution in the Syrian civil war without a proper engagement of Iran, either in negotiations with the Assad-Regime, or by direct negotiations with Iran. The situation is far more complicated since the Russian intervention allegedly against ISIS, but in fact against all groups fighting against the regime.

Another securitization interest within the military sector is the massive presence of American troops along the Iranian borders as well as in the Persian Gulf; even if one subtracts the bases

¹¹¹ I will not go into detail why the line of argumentation in this article is at least in parts wrong, but one must not confuse cause and effect in the ongoing civil war between Sunni and Shiite sects and the US-backed government of Prime Minister Maliki has done everything to escalate this conflict and the subsequent rising of ISIS.

in Iraq and Afghanistan there remain bases in NATO-state Turkey, in Kuwait, Bahrain, Saudi-Arabia, Oman, Qatar, Pakistan, Turkmenistan and Tajikistan as well as a strong maritime presence in the Persian Gulf along the shores of Iran with at least two aircraft carriers in the strait of Hormuz. Even though it is not only because of Iran, the government feels definitely directly threatened by these troops not only on an abstract level but concretely in its sovereignty as it has fears of a regime change; these fears have lessened since the Iranian government and the P5+1-group have agreed to a “Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action” in July 2015¹¹² but they are still in the back of the government's minds. Of course, the possibility of an escalation remains, especially as there are no official direct contacts between the two governments (Posch 2013: 27) but right now signs of de-escalation are more evident. Thus de-securitization on this topic seems much more difficult as it is not possible for the US-government to withdraw these troops in the near future as Iran wishes; the only way Iranian fears could be further lessened would be more means of building mutual trust which could be achieved in the political sector, i.e. the recognition of the regime as it is. This will be analysed in the next paragraph.

2. The political sector

Regarding ideological vulnerabilities within the political sector, the Iranian government has several securitization interests, because, as Buzan et. al. put it, Iran

“resists this process [towards market economy and democracy organised around a Western centre], thus becoming an outsider in which one operates in the more traditional way, with more extensive use of the slogans of non-intervention and sovereignty – and thereby also with the more extensive use of the label security to describe threats to the state” (Buzan et. al. 153).

This describes perfectly the Iranian stance towards the present international order in which it doesn't want to integrate wholly but at least only partially; it does not fully fit within the Western created international order, neither politically nor economically. On the contrary, the regime constantly tries to challenge that order - at least rhetorically – with its emphasis on Third-Worldism (Posch 2013: 22) and therefore isolates itself from the world community. According to Buzan et. al. these states are more vulnerable to political securitization and Iran is no exception; the main referent object of the securitizing move is the Islamic Republic itself

¹¹² Cf. http://eeas.europa.eu/statements-eeas/docs/iran_agreement/iran_joint-comprehensive-plan-of-action_en.pdf

and thus the regime. Since its inception the Islamic Republic feels threatened in its very existence and continues to do so, especially – and paradoxically – after the overthrow of the Saddam regime, because on the one hand, the Iranian regime has gained the most of the revolution in Iraq but on the other hand it is now encircled by US-troops and the only remaining ideologically hostile regime to the USA in the Middle East, making it the prime target for regime change. The only option to immunise itself from that constant danger – in Iranian views – is to be at least a “virtual nuclear power”, i.e. to have the potential to build a nuclear warhead without explicitly possessing one (Posch 2013: 23f.). These ambitions are rendered by a discourse Walter Posch calls “nuclear justice” and Homeira Moshirzadeh sets into a broader context when she aptly notes that there are

“two main meta-discourses that give meaning to Iranian foreign policy in general and its nuclear policy in particular: the *discourse of independence* and the *discourse of justice*” (Moshirzadeh 2007: 528. Emphasis in original).

And both of these discourses fall squarely into the political sector because they are directly affected by sovereignty and independence. Within the discourse of independence one can identify at least two opposing but complementary narratives: a) the glorious past and b) the victimization of Iran which interact in such a way that it allows Iran to oscillate between hubris and vulnerability that seems so unsettling to Western actors and what Anoushiravan Ehteshami calls the “geopolitics of autonomy and ambition” (Ehteshami 2002: 284). Yet it is perfectly logical within the Iranian framework of narratives as they perceive their country, especially the 20th century, only as a plaything for Western powers, especially Great Britain and the USA but also Russia. Only a superficial analysis suffices to give evidence to this view beginning with the events revolving around the “constitutional revolution” 1907/08 to the toppling of Mohammed Mossadegh 1953 who was elected by the Iranian people to the support of Saddam Hussain in his chemical warfare against the Islamic Republic (Moshirzadeh 2007: 529; Bock 2014: 122 - 124). This explains the strong emphasis on independence; never again shall Iran be dependent on foreign powers and the safest way to achieve that independence is to make Iran as strong and powerful as possible. Here are also great possibilities to at least ease these securitizations; if the West is willing to accept and to take serious those sentiments and above all give the Iranian government the feeling that it has not to fear

a regime change, much would be done in this respect. Of course, this is no one way road and Iran also has to “tone down its anti-Americanism and speak directly to the United States” (Posch 2013: 30). After all, Iran wants to be treated as an equal under equals and is desperately looking for full recognition as a regional power in its own right. When it will have achieved such a status it will eventually also ease its rhetoric or in other words:

“It is only through recognition of the country’s rights on the basis of international principles, rules, and norms that Iran will see its dignity as an ‘independent state’ as being guaranteed.”
(Moshirzadeh 2007: 538 f.).

This entails some right to nuclear energy of any kind whatsoever, the recognition of Iran as a main regional player and above all not to strengthen beliefs within the Iranian elite about any aggressive behaviour against Iran or a lack of respect in the negotiations with it. Furthermore, “recognition of the country's rights on the basis of international principles, rules, and norms” also entails to quit applying double standards by Western governments. The Iranian regime constantly feels discriminated when it is accused of violation of human rights and lack of democratic institutions – which is correct – but other regime's flaws in this direction, e.g. Saudi-Arabia's, are generously overlooked. This amplifies suspicions within the Iranian polity that the normative rhetoric and demands from the West are nothing but that – rhetoric – and that the Iranian government can do little to mitigate these accusations. To ease these securitizations is no easy task for Western governments as the adoption of a coherent policy would be necessary in order to regain credibility in the field of norms and human rights irrespective of economic or political interests. At the end of the day, the West supports a system that forbids women to drive cars and is publicly beheading regime opponents and only rhetorically adhering to Western norms such as human rights and religious freedom. Moreover these states are overtly funding jihadist movements in Syria, like the Jabhat al-nusra (Ownes 2014; Walsh 2010), which Iran is also accused of. The task for Western governments would be to deal with Iran on the same non-ideological and pragmatic level as with other powers in the region. For this purpose, the preliminary agreement on the Iranian nuclear programme is a great leap forwards.

3. The economic sector

It is difficult to see any real securitizations within the economic sphere which do not also spill over to other sectors such as the political. As an example, the low oil price is a major threat to the Iranian economy and it is mostly caused by the Saudi government which displays a willingness to take chances on its own economy in order to damage the Iranian economy (Stephens 2014). This is a securitization issue on the Iranian side, because the government may decide to take every means possible to get back to a higher crude oil price, as “Iran's economy is heavily reliant on hydrocarbons, which make up some 60% of its export revenue and provided 25% of total GDP in 2013” (ibid.). These numbers show how extremely vulnerable the Islamic Republic is with regard to oil and gas exports; the problem is that there is no short-ranged solution for the government, because it cannot simply increase its production of crude oil with the economic sanctions in the back. The only solution lies in the political sector where any kind of rapprochement has to be made with the Saudis to terminate this “Cold War” between the two regional powers and Michael Stephens sees some positive developments in that direction when he observes that “recent attempts by the Saudis to diplomatically engage their Iranian counterparts, particularly on regional security issues like Islamic State appear positive” (Stephens 2014); here again, a common enemy to fight against may help to overcome differences and maybe come to a longer lasting agreement in the region even beyond the fight against ISIS. A requirement would be that both Iran and Saudi-Arabia would not think in terms of a zero-sum game and balance-of-power logics, but rather in terms of “balance-of-security” as Kayhan Barzegar suggests (Barzegar 2010b). But there's still a long way to go to overcome the deep mistrust between these two regional players, which will be discussed in the last section of conclusions.

The second major referent object is the national economy which is crippled by the sanctions imposed on Iran by the international community, and here, the solution lies clearly in the political sector and the negotiations with the P5+1. There is slight optimism about an eventual implementation of the nuclear agreement and thus a lifting of sanctions within the next year. As a consequence the former securitization, the crude oil price, would be of a minor significance, as the Republic's economy would have the chance to recover on a more general level. It is one of Rouhani's major pre-election promises to mitigate the economic differences the Iranian Republic is facing, especially the extreme inflation. Also the revolutionary leader

has expressed his good will about the ongoing implementation and the willingness to adhere to the conditions of the deal. The most important aspect until now is the currency of trust; both sides have experienced that it is in fact possible to come to honest negotiations with one another and to reach a deal which satisfies both side's needs.

4. The societal sector

As the main securitization interests within the societal sector lie within identity and a “construction or reproduction of 'us'” (Buzan et. al. 1998: 120) one has to look at Shi'a politics on the one hand, as Iran perceives itself as the hegemon of Shi'ite adherents in the Middle East, and to the global political order on the other as the Iranian government perceives itself as an outsider of that order and constantly feels endangered in its very identity by it (Ghahrenmanpour 2011: 66). Buzan et. al. explicitly mention Iran as feeling culturally vulnerable by “a homogenizing 'global' culture, such as the U.S.-Western Coca-Cola (or, more recently, McDonalds) imperialism” (Buzan et. al.: 124). Iran sees itself, as shown above, as a spearhead of anti-Western, anti-globalization movements and as pioneer for a more multi-polar world order that seeks for more independence from the West both culturally and economically. These may not be the most pressing issues in day to day politics for the Iranian government, but they definitely play a role in the approach Iran is choosing in negotiations with the Western countries. Homeira Moshirzadeh calls this stance towards the West a posture of “hyper-independence” encompassing a negative definition and a positive one: the negative being the refusal of foreign dominance and dependence and the positive being the quest for own real independence and self-reliance, in Persian terms “khod-kafaya” (Moshirzadeh 2007: 530; Ehteshami 2002: 285). The second concern within the societal sector lies in the political identity of the Islamic Republic; if it would engage in full dialogue and cooperation with the West, it would lose much of its state identity¹¹³ that comprises of anti-Western, anti-American sentiments, as well as a spearheading of anti-globalization movements all around the world.¹¹⁴ So negotiations itself are a threat to the legitimacy of the government, at least when they implicit “any unbridled engagement with the West” (Ghahrenmanpour 2011: 67); from this

¹¹³ cf. graphic 2: “state identity vs. national identity”.

¹¹⁴ The West in general and the USA specifically are perceived of as the “other“ in terms of identification processes; therefore it is a main concern to distance the IRI from that other, but coincidentally also get in contact with that other as there is no other way because it is the dominant form of politics and economics.

perspective, and even so-called moderates in Tehran cling to this view, there is little room for unrestricted cooperation and integration into the international system as these kinds of rhetoric – as shown above – are part and parcel of Iran's political identity. Iran has in the past indeed shown some willingness to integrate partially into the wider international community but there is a prevalent view that initiatives in a positive direction from the Iranian side are not always reacted to properly by Western governments, i.e. there was no gratification for rapprochement policies for Tehran in the Khatami era for example¹¹⁵.

Much can be done in this direction if concessions made by Tehran would be named and honoured as such. Iran wants to see itself as a cooperative and constructive but also a critical player in the international system and wants to be treated like that. If the Western Countries would show some willingness to acknowledge this position of not wholly integrating into the Capitalist system, again, Iran would ease its rhetoric and gain some leverage policy-wise. It has to be acknowledged by the West, that the Islamic Republic is neither wholly hostile towards the Western order, nor wholly friendly but wants to occupy a middle position. After all, not only the Islamic Republic has a very ideological approach regarding the West, but also the West, especially the USA and Great Britain, have one, too, as William Beeman in an extensive study aptly demonstrates¹¹⁶. It is up to both sides to reduce ideological “warfare” and move on to real politics or *realpolitik*.

Conclusions and policy recommendations

Based on the analysis of the four sectors in the section above, what follows will be a conclusion of the securitizations and based on that policy recommendations will be given in order to come to a more coherent policy regarding Iran.

The West in general and the USA specifically have to face some bitter truths regarding Iran and the Middle East if they want to build a stable security architecture in the region. First, Iran is to be recognised as one of two regional powers, as many Middle East scholars agree, with the other being Saudi-Arabia, an old “ally” of the West. But as the latter is neither able nor willing to permanently play a constructive role regarding the regional security as it has proven

¹¹⁵ cf. Nicholas D. Kristof: Diplomacy at its worst.

http://www.nytimes.com/2007/04/29/opinion/29kristof.html?_r=0 (last access: 14.10.2015)

¹¹⁶ Cf. Beeman 2005.

by sponsoring Wahhabi sectarianism around the world and Jihadi terrorists (Esfandiari and Tabatabai 2015: 12) and furthermore using its oil reserves as an economic weapon, not only against Iran but also against the United States, the West needs someone who is able to play a constructive role in such an undertaking. Not that the Islamic Republic is the perfect partner, but it is a capable and fitting one. And it is longing for an – at least partially – better integration into the international community and the lifting of the sanctions that are crippling its economy and heating the inflation. Therefore not a real “normalization” of relationships between the USA and Iran is necessary, but only a rapprochement based on a limited cooperation on a limited number of issues in order to gain mutual trust.

Militarily there are a number of common goals between Western countries and the Islamic Republic, first and foremost the battle against ISIS in Iraq and the strengthening of Iraq's newly appointed prime minister Haidar al-Abadi; in a best case scenario Iran and the USA would go beyond their hitherto “undeclared alliance” and work – if not strategically, then at least on a tactical level – together in Iraq on a military basis; as an interim arrangement limited military cooperation in Iraq can be supposed as a means to strengthen mutual trust and to acknowledge common interests in the region. The civil war in Syria, on the other hand, poses a far greater test to mutual cooperation as here the interests are diverging rather than converging; but again, no solution is in sight which ignores the at least implicit cooperation of the Islamic Republic. Iran has to be incorporated in a political solution regarding Syria because against Iran there will be no agreement, as its obstructionist means are too effective to be ignored. Here, Iran could play the role of a broker between the parties although it has vital interests in Syria. Despite its own interests in Syria, which includes the regime of Bashar al-Assad sticking to power, there is a chance that a political solution can be found with both sides saving their faces and some form of power transition may be executed. Without Iranian involvement the blood-shedding and the military stalemate will not end. A recent analysis by the International Crisis Group reaches the same conclusion:

“Both sides and their state backers will need to make significant concessions to address now inescapable realities: Bashar Assad cannot rule a post-war Syria; Iran’s influence in the Levant cannot be eliminated.” (Crisis Group 2015)

This entails significant concession by both sides and serious engagement in negotiations. Western powers have to make clear to Tehran that its exclusive influence over a future government in Damascus will be less than what it had; and they themselves have to face the reality that there has to be a political agreement with which Tehran will be satisfied, too (Crisis Group 2015).

With the moderate president Hassan Rouhani and a “lame duck”¹¹⁷ Obama, chances are better than ever to come to the situation where both governments see “the gains of cooperation on a positive-sum formula rather than sticking on zero-sum basis” as Kayhan Barzegar aptly suggests (Barzegar 2012: 20). The same can be said about the relationship between Iran and Saudi-Arabia which nowadays is fashioned within a Hobbesian framework to use Alexander Wendt's notion, but has chances to move more towards a Lockean framework where the actors still are in a state of rivalry but not of enmity and focus on mutual gains rather than on relative gains (Wendt 2010: 264 – 283). For Kayhan Barzegar it even is “inevitable” that the Persian Gulf moves from a Balance of Power system to a Balance of Security system, which would entail “greater regional cooperation and constructive rivalries” (Barzegar 2010b: 86); this claim seems a bit too optimistic about the future developments especially with regard to the relations with Saudi-Arabia, but there is reason to be slightly optimistic. In the end, both sides have to come to the conclusion that a stable security architecture will be more effective and less costly than mutual containment as this is an illusory goal on both sides.

Politically the Islamic Republic wants to be recognised as a member of aspiring countries like South Africa, Brazil or India and be treated like them. In this regard it is essential to strengthen the moderates in the Iranian government and the best way to do this is to grant them political achievements and successes; this would entail, as stated before, a nuclear deal and a lifting of the sanctions with an agreement that saves every side their faces. In case of a failure, as Hossein Bastani remarks, those “who favour interaction with the international community [...], will never be able to return to the sphere of foreign policy in Iran” (Bastani 2014: 15) resulting in the repeated ascent of hard-liners to the government and make Iran ever more

¹¹⁷ The term “lame duck” here is used in a rather positive notion as Obama doesn't have to struggle with a possible re-election but only with his “legacy”; with regard to the peace process in the Middle East leading literally nowhere, chances to come to any limited agreement with Iran have been increased in recent years.

resilient against pressure from outside as has been seen under the presidency of Ahmadinejad. With an incremental lifting of the sanctions and concomitant economic recovery, President Hassan Rouhani and his administration could effectively be strengthened and their credibility be proven, and thus the populist movement of Ahmadinejad, who recently returned to the political stage, be further discredited. Therefore it should be a main aim of Western politics to strengthen the moderate forces in Iran under president Rouhani in order that they gain credibility within their constituencies and are able to deliver on their promises. The hope is that after economic recovery within the next two years and a re-election of a moderate government, in the next legislature period, political and societal liberalisation may take place.

The responsiveness to such politics of the Iranian regime, again, seems better than the Supreme Leader's rhetoric proposes at first glance. When he still depicts the USA as a "Great Satan" this is part of some kind of a "division of labour" in which the Supreme Leader satisfies the ideological needs of the state identity and the (moderate) president acts on his behalf in day to day politics within the framework the Supreme Leader predetermines, as has been shown above with the two-level-game approach. As he tacitly approved of a slow liberalisation after the election of Rouhani, hopes are justified that after a recognition of the regime, its right to nuclear energy and a slow but steady economic recovery a likewise incremental political and societal liberalisation may take place, as the Islamic Republic will see the benefits of such an opening to the world.

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Appendix

Graphic 1: “Air bases near Iran”. taken from http://m5.paperblog.com/i/39/398566/iran-america-and-strict-dominance-L_ICf5M.jpeg



Graphic 2: Own graphic

National Identity

- Religion (Islam)
- Language (Farsi)
- pre-islamic Heritage
- Counter-Identity: Arabs
- Founding myth: Kerbala

State Identity

- Leadership-Cult: Khomeini
- Martyr's cult (Shia)
- Counter-Identity: Shah, the West
- Founding myth: Revolution 1979