


# Iranian Exceptionalism and US-Iran Relations (1979-2021)

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## Abstract

Iranian exceptionalism has been a major factor in preventing rapprochement between the US and Iran. There are two major factions within the foreign policy establishment of the Islamic Republic, representing “reconciliation discourse” and “resistance discourse.” These two sub-discourses within the Islamic Revolution discourse engage in a struggle over their “correct” interpretation. The reconciliation discourse emphasizes “prudence,” while the resistance discourse emphasizes “conscientiousness,” both signifiers within the Islamic Revolution discourse. Both movements agree that these signifiers exist within the discourse, but they disagree about the primacy and centrality of one over the other. The “reconciliation discourse” seeks development as the main goal of Iran’s foreign policy and, hence, considers reconciliation with the US to be a precondition to that goal. Its arguments imply that Iran is not an exceptional country. The resistance discourse, on the other hand, is deeply exceptionalist and deems resistance against the US and maximalist independence to be the main objectives of Iran’s foreign policy. This discourse strongly opposes mending ties with the US because such a move would be understood as a threat to Iran’s exceptionalism. These sub-discourses also perceive the US differently; the reconciliation discourse considers the US to be dynamic and heterogenous, while the resistance discourse considers the US to be unchanging and monolithic, and this disagreement also contributes to their policy toward the US, and this understanding is also closely intertwined with exceptionalism. Overall, the dispute over Iranian exceptionalism has made relations with the US the main issue of contention within Iranian foreign policy discourses.

**Keywords:** US-Iran Relations, exceptionalism, discourse analysis, reconciliation discourse, resistance discourse.

## **Introduction**

More than 40 years have passed since Iran and the US formally ended all diplomatic relations following the takeover of the US embassy by a group of anti-imperialist Islamist students. Throughout these four decades or so, many politicians have come to power in both countries expressing a desire to put an end to tense relations, but none has succeeded so far to make a genuine change. Instead, the history of relations between the US and the Islamic Republic of Iran has been one of some incremental steps toward reconciliation but mostly failed attempts at it. This is despite the fact that the US has been able to maintain a level of diplomatic ties even with the worst of its rivals-ones such as the USSR and China. Iran too has been able to reestablish diplomatic ties with nations such as Saudi Arabia, even though one might argue that Saudi Arabia poses a greater threat to Iran's regional power than the US. What sets the US apart for Iran? This article aims to answer this question.

It argues that belief in Iran's exceptionalism is deeply engrained in the discourse of a powerful faction of the Islamic Republic, and this exceptionalism is constructed in a way that requires the US to function as an Other so that it continues to remain internally cohesive and sensical. This faction represents what is called "resistance discourse" in this paper. The resistance discourse has always employed its power and influence to prevent the other faction from achieving its competing goal of normalizing relations with the US. This second faction could be said to represent a sort of accommodation or "reconciliation discourse." It puts forth arguments that imply that Iran is not an exceptional nation. Therefore, Iranian exceptionalism is one of the obstacles preventing any rapprochement between the US and Iran and also the main issue of contention within the opposing sides of the foreign policy establishment in Iran.

When it comes to exceptionalism, American exceptionalism is usually the one discussed or studied in the literature. The literature on American exceptionalism is incredibly rich and includes polemics arguing for and against the concept. Academic research has also thoroughly dealt with the subject in terms of history, foreign policy, sociology, etc. But exceptionalism is not exceptional to the US. Nicola Nymalm and Johannes Plagemann have argued that exceptionalism can be detected in the national ideology of almost every nation (2019, p. 1). There have been studies on the exceptionalism of Japan, Israel, Britain, China, and India, but in general exceptionalism is a neglected but majorly important subject

matter in the foreign policy analysis.

Iranian exceptionalism in particular has been mostly ignored as no academic research deals with the subject matter in depth. But Iranian exceptionalism is of paramount importance in understanding Iranian foreign policy, whether in dissecting the internal fractures and ideological differences or making sense of Iran's behavior at the world stage. This article aims to provide an important missing piece to the puzzle of US-Iran relations.

Following a short discussion on method, we will first provide an overview of the foreign policy discourses of the two major factions within the Islamic Republic in order to provide context for the role of exceptionalism within them, as these discourses are deeply embedded within the larger cultural contexts of political Shia theology and the Islamic Revolution discourse. Then Iranian exceptionalism as a point of contention between the two factions will be discussed. Finally, how exceptionalism serves as one of the causes of the perseverance of anti-US attitudes among the Iranian foreign policy elite—turning rapprochement into a taboo—and therefore having a major impact on US-Iran relations since 1979 will be examined.

### **1. Methodology**

This article utilizes discourse analysis methodology. There have been many definitions of discourse in the academic literature. We do not adopt a critical or post-structuralist approach, as our main aim is to illustrate the importance of exceptionalism as a signifier to the competing interpretations of the Islamic Revolution discourse and its impact on US-Iran relations, thus employing a completely descriptive approach. Our understanding of discourse here is most akin to what David Howarth dubs a “realist” understanding, which basically considers discourse to be a social system that generates intersubjective meaning and ethical norms (2000, pp. 3–4).

Iver B. Neumann describes the process of discourse analysis in international relations as taking place in three stages: The first stage is to select the texts that would be suitable for discourse analysis. Even though it is better to analyze the maximum quantity of the texts possible, it would be impossible to do so. Neumann puts forth two criteria for selecting the texts: texts that are considered critical to the actors and are constantly referred to, and texts that showcase the contrast and conflict with other discourses and are written as polemics against them (2008, pp. 65-70). For this research, mostly the second type of text was consulted; as the sub-discourses belong

to the same larger discourse, central texts that are constantly invoked (the Qur'an, the hadith, the sayings of Ayatollah Khomeini) are common between the two, and their disagreement is over the interpretations. Politicians' books, interviews, speeches, and statements as well as the content of websites representing the two discourses are the texts chosen for analysis, and, of course, all of these texts are in Persian.

The second stage in Neumann's method is to determine which signifiers are rejected in the discourse and which ones are accepted, and also to gauge the level of internal contradictions among the signifiers. Neumann states that this would show how closed and unstable the discourse is (2008, pp. 70-73). For this research, this step is a very crucial one as it argues that the Islamic Revolution discourse is flexible, and this flexibility in itself has given rise to two opposing factions with two different discursive strategies to resolve what might be perceived as tensions. The interplay between the signifiers of the Islamic Revolution discourse is explained in the next section of this article.

The final stage of discourse analysis is to describe the hierarchy of signifiers within the discourse. Different signifiers may matter more or less due to a number of factors, such as historical longevity, the logical dependence of other signifiers on them, their importance in regards to the material realities that are relevant to the discourse, etc. (Neumann, 2008, pp. 73-75). This final stage is important to this research in the sense that it is employed to demonstrate that exceptionalism is the most important signifier when it comes to resistance discourse, and the same is true about development and the reconciliation discourse.

It must be mentioned that in each case the results of the research are presented, and then a particularly illuminating example of a text is used to further elucidate the point. Thus, this paper presents its findings in the reverse order of how the research itself was conducted, as first the texts were analyzed and then the conclusions were reached. It would have been impossible to quote the hundreds of texts that were analyzed for this research, but this research was conducted through the method described in this section.

## **2. Iranian Foreign Policy Discourses: An Overview**

When it comes to the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, there are two broad interpretive divisions within the same discourse. The discourse can be called "the Islamic Revolution discourse," while the two interpretive sub-discourses can be named

"reconciliation discourse" and "resistance discourse."

Within the reconciliation discourse, Iran's development is conditional on solving its international disputes, and it seeks to mend historical wounds, reestablish more or less normal ties with the US, and consequently integrate Iran into the global economy. Almost all reformists, moderates, and some moderate principlists (*osoolgarayan*) belong to this sub-discourse. The most important figureheads are three of Iran's presidents (Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Mohammad Khatami, and Hassan Rouhani), Mohammad Javad Zarif, the foreign minister, and Ali Larijani, the former majlis speaker. This paper will argue that these people are opposed to the idea of Iranian exceptionalism, at least to its extreme form.

In the resistance discourse, on the other hand, Iran reconciling with the US and integrating into the global economy (which they consider to be imperialistic) would only open Iran to be exploited by great powers and, more importantly, would jeopardize Iran's security and its religious/national identity, as foreign powers would not be content with the early concessions and would demand further ones. This would lead to a slippery slope, which would ultimately turn Iran into a western "stooge" and a de facto secular government. They, therefore, oppose any openings or negotiations with the US. Most philosophers, whether moderate or radical, belong to this camp. The most important figureheads are Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, the former president<sup>1</sup>; Saeed Jalili, the former chief nuclear negotiator; and Ebrahim Raisi, the Chief Justice and former presidential candidate. It can be argued that this discourse embraces exceptionalism, more or less, as a core value.

The main author of the Islamic Revolution discourse is Ayatollah Khomeini, the leader of the 1979 revolution. Both factions claim to be the true followers of his words and example and claim to rightly represent the foreign policy implications of political Shiism.

There have not been many attempts to describe the Islamic Revolution discourse. Khosravi (2012, pp. 243-255) writes that the Islamic Revolution discourse has three "principles": to abide by the state's religious duties, to preserve the Shia state's existence, and to be mindful of the extent of the state's true abilities. Moshirzadeh (2007, p. 523) designates three signifiers that create the identity of

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1. Some contend that former President Ahmadinejad's alignment with this discourse is debatable, particularly following his first term in office, given his active pursuit of rapprochement with the United States. This paper posits, however, that his tendencies toward resistance consistently outweighed his inclinations toward reconciliation, though such an assessment remains open to interpretation.

the Islamic Republic: independence, justice, and resistance. For the purposes of this paper, two main signifiers are identified in the Islamic Revolution discourse: "conscientiousness" and "prudence." These are in tension to some degree and therefore make this interpretive struggle possible.

Conscientiousness or commitment to one's mission (*amal be taklif*) refers to the idea that unlike secular states, a Shia state will not only consider material interests but define for itself a religious mission, and it must endeavor to complete this mission at the global stage, even when material costs are involved. As Khosravi mentions, this was due to Ayatollah Khomeini's belief that ultimate victory was a divine promise made to "true Muslims," and as long as they continued upon their struggle, victory would be theirs in the end. This idea led to Ayatollah Khomeini embracing concepts such as martyrdom and resistance against global imperialism (2012, p. 281).

Prudence (*maslahat*), however, represents the pragmatic side of the coin. Rooted deeply in the canon of Shia jurisprudence, prudence requires that the Shia state not go so far in meeting its religious obligations as to endanger its own survival or to overestimate its own powers or the realities on the ground. Prudence is meant to serve as a check on conscientiousness. The duality of these two signifiers can be seen in Ayatollah Khomeini's own handling of the Iran-Iraq War: refusing to end the war for years based on religious principles, but then, once it was made clear to him that Iran was unable to continue the war due to economic and military problems, accepting the UNSC's ceasefire, citing the principle of prudence (Pear, 1988).

It is no surprise that although conscientiousness and prudence are not necessarily inherently contradictory and can be logically reconciled in many ways, their coexistence in a discourse might lead to multiple possible interpretations because there can easily be disputes and uncertainties in determining where the line is—where conscientiousness ends and prudence begins. In the end, conscientiousness somehow rejects the importance of material factors and prudence acknowledges them, making the balancing act difficult.

None of the main actors in Iran's foreign policy reject these signifiers, regardless of their approach. Zarif, for example, posits that a foreign policy based on values is in Iran's interests, and that the difference in values and identities will mean that Iran and the US will never completely overcome their differences and become allies (Raji, 2013, pp. 352-353), and those who belong to the resistance discourse do not reject the importance of material

interests, and frequently argue that anti-US policies will lead to more military and economic power for Iran; for example, Bijan Pirouz, a professor of International Relations at the University of Tehran and a fierce critic of the reconciliation approach, argues that Iranian negotiators had given up too many leverages in nuclear talks, something that would go against the value of prudence (Pirouz, 2015). That said, these two groups shift in how they prioritize these signifiers, i.e., which one they consider to be more important and central to the discourse. The reconciliation discourse considers prudence to be more important than conscientiousness, and the resistance discourse vice versa. Zarif emphasizes that without a prudent foreign policy, none of Iran's values will be actually successful in being implemented, clearly elevating prudence above conscientiousness (Raji, 2013, pp. 259-260), while, in the same aforementioned interview, Pirouz emphasizes Iran's values to be more than its material interests, clearly prioritizing the opposite. This disagreement has led to an internal dispute within the Islamic Republic and a struggle to establish one's own interpretation as the more dominant one.

This disagreement is reflected in how the two groups interpret the wider discourse, i.e., the Shia political discourse. One of these differences is their interpretation of the story of Imam Hassan's peacemaking. Hassan ibn Ali, the second Imam in Shia theology, was engaged in a war against the Muslim ruler at the time, Muawiyah I, as he and not Muawiyah were the rightful caliphs of the Muslims. This conflict ended when the two sides agreed to a peace accord. This is interpreted in radically different ways. For the reconciliation discourse, the story represents the importance of peacemaking, negotiating with the enemy, and taking material limitations into account. Rouhani has brought this interpretation up on many occasions, stating that what must be learned from Imam Hassan is the importance of "rationality, prudence, and moderation" and that at times "heroic flexibility" is more important than "heroic jihad" (Mashregh News, 2015). The resistance discourse, however, underlines that Imam Hassan did not genuinely seek peace, but a group of cowardly and traitorous followers forced him to accept it against his will. In this interpretation, if Imam Hassan's army had persisted against all odds, they would have received the divine reward of victory, but negotiations and peace were foisted upon the holy figure by people who lacked faith (see, for example, Ghazanfari, 2013, p. 25).

Interpreting common narratives in a different manner is a

discursive strategy, enabling one's overall interpretation to dominate the discourse. But so is providing alternative definitions to important signifiers. The two rival discourses prioritize signifiers and interpret common narratives differently, but sometimes they define a common signifier in rather diverging ways. One of these common signifiers is "independence." One of the three main values espoused in the main revolutionary slogan of dissidents against the Shah's regime (liberty, independence, Islamic Republic), independence, has been one of the core values and main signifiers of the Islamic Revolution discourse. While the reconciliation discourse defines this signifier minimalistically, the resistance discourse has a maximalist definition.

The reconciliation discourse defines the independence of a country as enjoying "legal right" to national sovereignty, foreign actors not meddling in its internal affairs, and being treated as an equal player by other states on the world stage. This is a minimalist definition, as it would be difficult to consider a nation "independent" if any of these conditions were not met. This definition does not exclude economic interdependence, cultural exchange, international cooperation or being politically influenced by foreigners. It considers independence a matter of international law and emphasizes that no nation can be free from influence in the globalization era. Zarif, for example, explains that independence is an immensely important value for the Iranian people because of the historical memories of colonialism. He uses the Qajar Dynasty as an example, claiming that during this era "a few foreign embassies" made all the important decisions for Iran and the state had no sovereignty, but also emphasizing that independence does not mean "separating ourselves from the world" and "not interacting with other nations" (Shafaghna News Agency, 2019).

According to the resistance discourse, independence means no interdependence with other states (especially Western democracies), complete autonomy, and minimalizing and hopefully stopping any influence from the outside world (again, especially from the West). This definition of independence means eschewing political, social, economic, and, most importantly, cultural influences, which are compared to "invasion" and "pollution" in discursively strategic metaphors. This definition comes very close to the idea of an autarky. Thus, South Korea and Saudi Arabia, for example, are regarded as being deprived of independence (Sadr Hosseini, 2019).

Created in the same discursive environment but using different narratives and interpretations, the reconciliation discourse and the

resistance discourse end up with different foreign policy priorities. The reconciliation discourse considers Iran's development to be its chief value and the main purpose of its foreign policy. Development is tied to prudence as a signifier and serves as the lodestar of all policymaking decisions. Policy positions such as reconciliation with Iran's neighbors and Western powers, joining international agreements, and emphasizing multilateralism are all justified through the idea of development, which is related to prudence. Hashemi Rafsanjani, the most influential representative of this discourse, who was named as "the reconstruction commander," elevated development into a quasi-religious aspiration equal to jihad (IRNA News Agency, 2018). Rouhani, his disciple and successor, campaigned with the slogan "centrifuges must spin, but also must the wheel of economy," signaling that he considers development to be more important than resistance with the aim of preserving Iran's nuclear program and also stating that Iran's independence would be impossible without its development (Ilna News Agency, 2013), thus revealing that he considers development to be more important than the enshrined and pseudo-sacred values of the 1979 revolution, resistance, and independence. This means that the reconciliation discourse values development above all and considers it the main, if not the only, argument for its political legitimacy.<sup>1</sup>

Within the resistance discourse, on the other hand, Iran's main priority must be resisting imperialism. This does not mean that it does not value development, but that complete separation and autonomy from the West are the preconditions for Iran's development. Thus, the preferred policies would include opposing negotiations with the US, opposition to Iran complying by some international regulations (such as the FATF), and creating self-sufficiency in Iran's economy rather than integration into the globalized system. For the followers of this discourse, resistance is deeply rooted in Shia theology and ideas such as resisting sinful temptations and the principle of "the denial of dominance to infidels" (the idea that infidels shall never rule over the Muslims). In addition, social conservatism in domestic politics and the idea of protecting Iran's Shia culture from "corrupting" influences are another context giving rise to its foreign policy. This is evident in how an article in one of Iran's major newspapers representing this

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1. This may partly explain why Rouhani experienced a decline in support following economic downturns in Iran, whereas Ahmadinejad's supporters remained steadfast despite similar crises. Unlike the reconciliation discourse, the resistance discourse does not derive its legitimacy solely from economic development.

discourse seeks justification for resistance in foreign policy in the Qur'an, stating that resistance is a religious value on both the individual and policymaking levels; that resistance is a "lifestyle." (Farzaneh, 2015).

### **3. Exceptionalism in Iran's Foreign Policy Discourses**

This article argues that Iranian exceptionalism is one of the roots of the discursive disagreements over Iran's foreign policy. While proponents of reconciliation believe Iran to be a "normal" nation, the supporters of resistance see it as an "exceptional" one. This disagreement brings about two different interpretations of the Islamic Revolution discourse and hence different policy preferences. These discursive disagreements and narratives are in a mutually impactful relationship with the domestic disagreements inside Iran. Those disagreements are outside the scope of this article, but their impact must be acknowledged.

In many cases, the reconciliation discourse defines Iran as an exceptional nation. Reconciliation with the Western nations requires normalizing Iran's behavior to some extent. This can be repeatedly observed in the language of its proponents, as they constantly use words like "normal" in a positive light and use words that would characterize being exceptional in a negative light, e.g., "isolated." Rouhani has constantly characterized his foreign policy as seeking "win-win" resolutions to contentious issues with Western powers, which implies that Iran and Western democracies are similar to a degree that makes it possible to find ways to satisfy all parties and their interests. Rouhani believes that Iran's foreign policy must be based on "mutual understanding" and "common interests" (Jahan News, 2019). In every aspect, he relies on what Iran has in common with the world, not what separates it, and this pattern is not indicative of an exceptionalist attitude. This is true about the rhetoric of other figureheads as well, especially when it came to Mohammad Khatami and his "Dialogue among Civilizations" project, which regarded "the idea of alliance of civilizations, in the sense that all civilizations merge together as one" (Khatami, n.d.), as a noble aspiration.

This opposition to the idea of Iranian exceptionalism is imbedded into the foreign policy of the proponents of the reconciliation discourse. All of their arguments either explicitly or implicitly reject the idea of Iran's exceptionalism. One favorite argument is to state that Iran is one of the few nations acting in a certain manner, and this unusual status is construed as a negative,

which implies that Iran should act similarly to other nations, which in turn implies that Iran is not exceptional. For example, an anonymous columnist in one of Iran's reformist newspapers argues that Iran should comply with FATF regulations because 194 nations have already done so and only Iran and North Korea are included in the institution's black list (Shargh Daily, 2018).

Finally, this opposition to exceptionalism is directly connected to the idea of development as the main priority in foreign policy. It is argued that there are universal and quasi-scientific laws that govern all nations alike, and development would be achieved if these laws were followed. These laws are objective and apply equally to secular and Shia nations. The idea of the universality of the laws of development is reiterated by Mahmoud Sariolghalam (Sariolghalam, 2010, p. 16), one of Iran's best-known public intellectuals and a leading figure in the reconciliation discourse. Rouhani, whom Sariolghalam once served as an adviser, also thinks the same, stating that because Iran seeks development, there is no "inherent difference between our foreign policy and other nations'." (Rouhani, 2011, p. 81). It is not that the reconciliation discourse does not acknowledge the differences in goals and values when it comes to Iran's foreign policy, but that Iran's similarities are more important and should guide its actions. Iran is regarded as subject to the laws of the international system and economy, and therefore it is basically a normal and unexceptional nation.

The resistance discourse, with exceptionalism as its integral aspect, leads to a foreign policy whose meaning is linked to this concept. From this point of view, Iran, due to its religious identity and theocratic government, is an exceptional nation; this exceptionalism enables it to transcend material worries and resist the imperial powers (who control the material world), and if this resistance fails, it is due to a lack of faith among internal actors, not because of having been overcome by material forces. One can argue that within this framework everything begins with exceptionalism.<sup>1</sup>

Exceptionalism both necessitates and justifies resistance in foreign policy. According to its proponents, Iran is exceptional because it resists, and it must resist because it would cease to be exceptional if it stopped resisting. In this understanding, resistance and exceptionalism mutually constitute each other. If Iran stops

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1. This does not mean that all people who prescribe resistance against the US are necessarily exceptionalists, as many Iranian scholars, especially those ascribing to the realist school of international relations, believe so on the basis of power and security concerns, and they believe this to be a universal rule of power that applies to all nations in similar conditions.

resisting, it will become a nation like South Korea (Sadr Hosseini, 2019), which is undesirable not because South Korea is poorer or less secure than Iran but because it is defined as an unexceptional nation in this discourse. In this discourse, the "ultimate" goal of the US is to normalize Iran, which means not only putting an end to Iran's anti-US activities in the region, but to secularize it and destroy its religious and consequently exceptional identity, which is why resistance must continue (Mohammadi, 2016). Some advocates of this discourse believe that without Iran, there will be no resistance against imperialism-not even other US rivals or opponents such as China, Russia, Cuba, or Venezuela would be willing or able to properly resist the US and what it represents (Fazaeli, 2017). In short, if some American exceptionalists consider the US to be indispensable in preserving the liberal world order, Iranian exceptionalists consider Iran to be indispensable in opposition to the same global system.

The same mutual relationship exists between Iranian exceptionalism and a maximalist definition of independence. Iran is exceptional because it is the only "truly" independent nation, free from all foreign influence, and this independence is invaluable because it enables Iran to preserve its exceptional identity (which is deeply tied to Shi'ism). This is evident in the fact that exceptionalists are concerned with the issue of "cultural invasion." Stopping "cultural invasion" is their main priority in both domestic and foreign policies; thus, for example, teaching English in primary schools was banned in order to stop the tide of "cultural invasion"-a decision opposed by the reconciliation-advocate Rouhani (Rahimpour, 2018). The aim of this "invasion" is to destroy Iran's independence, i.e., its cultural identity/exceptionality.

This schism as it exists today may be argued to date back to July 20<sup>th</sup>, 1988, when Iran accepted UNSC Resolution 598, which ended the Iran-Iraq War. Before this watershed event, the Iranian leaders had a more or less common understanding of the Islamic Revolution discourse. It is true that even before this date there were differences, and people such as Hashemi Rafsanjani were understood to be more pragmatic and moderate, but at least in public their understanding of the discourse was the same as the more radical side, and both otherized actors outside the discourse, whether domestic or foreign, as the "enemy." Ayatollah Khomeini continuously rejected all calls to accept the ceasefire. It was only when he agreed to abide by UNSC Resolution 598, an action that he likened to "drinking a poison chalice," that the two sides diverged and began interpreting

the discourse differently. Consequently, not only the outgroup but also ingroup opponents became the main discursive "enemy."

This schism was created because the two sides tried to justify the events culminating in a ceasefire differently. Hashemi Rafsanjani, who was responsible for convincing Ayatollah Khomeini to end the war, and his followers described this as an act of prudence, while the other side decided that victory would have been possible, and Ayatollah Khomeini was forced by traitorous advisers to put an end to the war<sup>1</sup> (Ghazanfari, 2013, pp. 9-11; 47; 215). These opposing justifications of UNSC Resolution 598 have remained at the heart of the conflict to this day. The narrative of prudence versus the narrative of surrender is constantly reproduced and linked to contemporaneous policy disagreements. The metaphor of the "poison chalice" remains one of the most frequently used metaphors in the foreign policy polemics of Iran.

In this narrative, the agency is not ascribed to the foreign enemy but the domestic one. If one searches pro-resistance texts on websites and social media platforms, one finds that mentions of the domestic rivals far outnumber the mentions of the foreign enemy, and vice versa, which reveals that these two discourses are engaged in a struggle over the "correct" interpretation of the Islamic Revolution discourse. In the next section, the consequences of this struggle for Iran-US relations are discussed.

#### **4. Iranian Exceptionalism and the US**

It seems that Iranian exceptionalism is, at least, one of the important factors in reproducing the hostility toward the US.<sup>2</sup> The historical roots of the current struggle hark back to the CIA-backed 1953 coup d'état, in which Iran's democratically elected Prime Minister, Mohammad Mossadegh, a nationalist and a liberal reformist, was removed from office. Before this event, the US was perceived favorably by the Iranian anti-imperialist activists, including Mossadegh himself. It was seen as a benevolent world power that had no history of colonialism in Iran and represented the value of freedom; it was an ally against the UK and Tsarist Russia, which were understood as imperialist powers (Ansari, 2012, pp. 135–136). The 1953 coup d'état changed this perception, and American reputation transformed into one of colonialism and imperialism, the

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1. The parallelism with the discourse surrounding Imam Hassan's peace is deliberate and not coincidental.

2. This article centers on the Iranian perspective. While American exceptionalism undoubtedly plays a significant role and the United States' actions have actively influenced the discourse within Iran, these aspects fall outside the scope of this analysis.

pivotal moment that gave rise to anti-US sentiments in Iran (Mousavian & Shahidsaless, 2014, pp. 23-24).

This anti-US attitude grew stronger in the years to come. The Iranian opposition considered the Shah to be a "sycophant" of the US whose reign was dependent on their support; hence basically a foreign asset. They did not consider him a true patriot due to the US economic and military support of his regime. This led to anti-US attitudes becoming ingrained in the rhetoric of all revolutionary factions, from the Islamists to the secular left (Stempel, 2009, pp. 64-71; 81-82; 88). By the time that the Iranian Revolution of 1979 took place, the US was not merely a symbol of imperialism in the minds of the revolutionaries and masses, but its very embodiment. The UK and the Tsarist Russia were almost forgotten, and words such as "imperialism" harkened only the US. Therefore, it is no surprise that the US began to occupy an outsized role in the Islamic Revolution discourse. This attitude culminated in a group of university students storming the US embassy and taking several American diplomats hostage. This event led to the resignation of Iran's liberal interim Prime Minister, Mehdi Bazargan, and metastasized the anti-US attitude among the Iranian elite. Not long after the revolution, any contact with the US became a grave taboo.

Since then, the history of US-Iran relations has been one of disagreements, misunderstandings, and failed attempts at reconciliation. Reconciliation with the US has been the main point of disagreement between the two foreign policy factions. Hashemi Rafsanjani, Khatami, and Rouhani all argued for a degree of reconciliation while being staunchly opposed by their opponents.

None of the signifiers of the resistance discourse are definable without an "other." One must resist against something; be independent from something; be an exception in comparison to a normal. Inherently, these signifiers require an Other to derive meaning from. For the resistance discourse, the US has been defined as this Other. If we want to think of this in terms of Derridean binary oppositions, the US has become synonymous with the less equal or "governed" binary, or in more colloquial language with the less desirable element in the dichotomy: i.e., if we define the binary oppositions as resistance/surrender, independent/dependent, and exceptional/unexceptional, a relationship with the US means that Iran has surrendered, is dependent, and has lost what made it exceptional, while the opposite is true if Iran's contentious relationship with the US continues. Due to this, the US is considered a threat to Iran's exceptionalism in the resistance

discourse and therefore a threat to Iran's identity.

One might posit that the true binary opposition is anti-imperialist/imperialist and the US is simply an imperialist power. This attitude was exemplified in the slogan "neither East nor West," which meant to deny allegiance to both the USSR and the US during the Cold War, as both powers were deemed imperialistic (Keddie & Gasiorowski, 1990, p. 3). This slogan is considered so crucial to Iran's foreign policy that it is carved on the entrance of Iran's Ministry of Foreign Affairs. But in practice, Iran has never really had such a contentious relationship with powers that challenged the US, whether the USSR or Russia and China afterwards. Some might suggest that the binary opposition is actually better defined as East/West, or maybe Islamic Republic/liberal democracy. But Iran has been able to restore or pursue relations with European nations without it becoming very contentious domestically, and even whenever the proponents of resistance criticize Europe, they do so in terms of Europe being an obedient "sidekick" or a "lapdog" of the US. For example, a former member of Iran's Parliament asserted that Europe would not help Iran after the US withdrew from the nuclear agreement because European nations have no "free will of their own" and they are "slaves" to the US (Rezai, 2019), demonstrating that Europe, seen independently of the US, is not a threat in his understanding.

As far as foreign policy is concerned, for the resistance discourse, no other nation is as important as the US, and no other nation poses such an existential, discursive, and ontological threat to Iran. This is a reoccurring theme in this discourse. For example, it is said that it is impossible for Iran to remain independent without struggling against the US (Saam Daliri, 2019); if Iran attempts to coexist peacefully with the US, its very "identity and ontological security" would be seriously jeopardized; enmity against the US and "Zionism" is an "integral element" of the Islamic Revolution discourse; and mending ties with the US would only lead to a "crisis of identity" (Ghaderi Kangavari, 2015, pp. 5-6).

The US is defined as a monolithic and unchanging entity in this discourse: there is no real difference between the Democratic and Republican parties and neither between different US administrations throughout its history. An example of this is an official statement made by the General Staff of the Armed Forces of the Islamic Republic of Iran on the anniversary of the hostage crisis at the US Embassy, in which it was emphasized that the US has never done "anything" but "warmongering, creating divisions, and exploiting

other nations,” and it is reiterated that the US has never been and will be different in its entire history (ISNA, 2016). The US is also defined as a declining power, and a complete decline in its power is seen as the ultimate endpoint to resistance. The US is an entity that has and always will try to destroy Iran's Shia identity and subjugate it, but it is also declining, and therefore the resistance can continue until it is no longer a superpower. All of this culminates in the assertion that Iran must continue to resist the US in order to preserve its exceptionalism. Iran's exceptionality would fade away if resistance against the US comes to an end. Iran can continue resisting against the US infinitely because it is an exceptional nation, and reconciling with the US would be an act of "normalization" (see, for example, Mohammad Dehghan's, a member of the Guardian Council, remarks in Fars News Agency, 2019).

The reconciliation discourse perceives the US differently. The opposition to the US is not considered to be an integral part of or inherent to the Islamic Revolution discourse but a historical anomaly. For example, while Zarif recognizes that there are cultural and ideological differences and disagreements between Iran and the US, he does not attribute the hostile state in US-Iran relations to these differences but to mistrust, lack of political will, and mutual misunderstanding, and states that he does not consider the US to be Iran's "enemy" and dislikes the use of this word in a diplomatic context (Raji, 2013, pp. 167-170; 88). These factors can clearly be overcome without creating a discursive or identity crisis for Iran. Seyed Hossein Mousavian, a former diplomat known for being one of the main spokespeople of the reconciliation discourse, is even franker on this issue and emphasizes that enmity with the US is not an inherent characteristic of the Islamic Revolution discourse and it must end at some point, even claiming that Ayatollah Khomeini and Ayatollah Khamenei could potentially be open to such rapprochement, claiming that Ayatollah Khomeini was initially opposed to hostage taking and that Ayatollah Khamenei agrees that the US and Iran will one day reinstate diplomatic ties (Mousavian & Shahidsaless, 2014, pp. 5; 57-59; 164; 263). It does not matter whether Mousavian is correct in his interpretation of the Iranian leaders' positions or not. What matters is the fact that obedience to both Supreme Leaders is crucial to Islamic Revolution discourse, and Mousavian attempts to argue that reconciliation with the US is not a threat to Iran's Shia political identity.

The reconciliation discourse differs from the resistance discourse in perceiving the US in other critical ways. It does not consider the

US to be static throughout its history. For example, Mousavian posits that he is optimistic that US attitude toward Iran would one day change (Mousavian & Shahidsaless, 2014, p. 6). It also does not consider the US to be monolithic and acknowledges the differences between the two major parties; Zarif, for example, praises Obama for being a "symbol of change" and considers that a source of soft power for the US (Raji, 2013, p. 119).

But the importance of reconciliation with the US goes beyond mere possibility. The reconciliation discourse considers rapprochement with the US to be a necessary precondition to Iran's development. If the aim is to be integrated into the global economy, reconciliation with the US is inescapable. Mousavian narrates that Hashemi Rafsanjani came to the conclusion that Iran's development would be impossible without mending ties with the US (Mousavian & Shahidsaless, 2014, pp. 108-109). For the reconciliation discourse, the binary opposition is development/backwardness, and the US is associated with the governing and desirable signifier, the complete opposite of the resistance discourse.

There is no sign of exceptionalism in the reconciliation discourse as far as the US is concerned. In this narration, both Iran and the US are "normal" nations; their differences are the consequences of "normal" intersubjective and material factors, and "normal" solutions are available. This understanding becomes apparent in one of Rouhani's statements as a presidential candidate. He argues for diplomacy as a solution to Iran's nuclear disagreement with the US and emphasizes that nations such as Libya were unable to continue resisting against US pressure and abandoned their nuclear programs, and if Iran aims to preserve its own, it needs to turn to a "constructive interaction" (Iranian Diplomacy, 2013). This statement not only reveals that Rouhani considers resistance useless, but he also considers Iran to be exceptional enough that it would face the same fate as Libya if it continued on the same road.

## **Conclusion**

It can be argued that Iranian exceptionalism is at the heart of disagreements about the US among Iranian political elite. One faction perceives Iran to be exceptional, and it consequently opposes any mending of ties in order to protect Iran's exceptional identity. The other faction considers Iran to be a normal country, subject to the laws of the international society of the states, and believes that these laws require rapprochement with the US as a precondition to Iran's development. These two factions have

extremely different approaches toward the US because one of them believes in Iranian exceptionalism and the other does not.

This paper focused on the Iran-US relations as the subject matter, but it can be argued that Iranian exceptionalism plays a role in other contentious areas of Iranian foreign policy as well, including Iran's policies in the Middle East region, different attitudes toward international institutions and regimes, and more specifically in how the discourses have defined JCPOA as the other point of contention in the discourse.

Of course, it can be argued that both sides are exceptionalist to a degree, or more precisely, even those who belong to the reconciliation discourse might reproduce some of the narratives and metaphors pertaining to exceptionalism in their texts, but this is true in matters of degrees and the primacy and dominance of exceptionalism in the foreign policy arguments of each discourse.

These findings have some implications for the field of foreign policy analysis. As mentioned earlier, the US has dominated the academic (and non-academic) literature on the interrelationship between exceptionalism and foreign policy decision-making processes. But there have been incremental steps in studying the role of exceptionalism in the foreign policy analysis of other states. This paper is the first to attempt to extend this fledging academic movement to Iran. This paper argues that exceptionalism is a crucial aspect of Iran's foreign policy discourses and disputes, and understanding its role is integral to a comprehensive analysis of Iran's policies since the 1979 revolution. More broadly, studying exceptionalism might prove fruitful in many disciplines, including Iran studies, cultural studies focused on Iran, and even Iranian domestic politics.

This paper does not intend to argue that exceptionalism is the only factor involved. There are certainly a multitude of factors, including subjective and material ones. However, exceptionalism is an important factor when it comes to the durability and intensity of the struggle. It is precisely due to the fact that Iran's identity in the resistance discourse is completely intertwined with its opposition to the US that any approach is being resisted. Iran has continuously mended ties and negotiated with rivals such as Saudi Arabia and Europe, and at times the relations have deteriorated again. But all in all, the US has not been merely a rival but a discursively defined other.

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