



Norges miljø- og
biovitenskapelige
universitet

Norwegian University of Life Sciences
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Department of International Environment and Development
Studies, Noragric

Master Thesis 2017
30 ECTS

The Axis of Resistance

Iranian Foreign Policy Discourse and Syria

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International Relations

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Declaration

I, Natasha Alana Bennett Ryel, declare that this thesis is the result of my research investigations and findings. Sources of information other than my own have been acknowledged and a reference list has been appended. This work has not previously been submitted to any other university for award of any type of academic degree.

Signature.....

Date.....

Dedication

To my best friend. Without you this journey would not have been possible.

To my family who have always supported my passion for knowledge and travels across the world.

And to everyone who pushed me to follow my dreams.

Thank you!

Acknowledgements

I would like to thank my parents for all the support during the whole process and particularly the immense help in the final stages of this project. I would not have made it without your help. You are most appreciated!

I would like to thank Kirsti Stuvøy, who helped me find my focus when the project overwhelmed me Thank you!

To all my friends and colleagues, who have listened to my thoughts and discussed my ideas. Your support when I was worried I would never finish has been amazing. Thank you so much for never doubting me.

Abstract

In this analysis, I ask the question: *How is the Syrian conflict represented and framed in official Iranian foreign policy discourse between 2011 and 2016, and how is Iranian involvement justified internationally?* Intrigued by how the Iranian international relations, and how the regime has managed to develop an official foreign policy that is able to adapt to regional developments and challenges, this thesis sets out to explore how the Iranian official foreign policy discourse has framed the ongoing conflict in Syria.

Central to understanding Iranian politics, is the understanding of how Iran frames its foreign policy goals, and how they are projected and justified internationally. The particular foreign policy discourse that developed around the Iranian understanding of the Syrian conflict must also be understood within the regional context, and how Iran has responded to these regional developments. This thesis has therefore decided to examine the development of Iranian official foreign policy in Syria in relation to two other significant regional developments. By placing the Syrian discourse within a larger foreign policy context, this thesis will attempt to identify patterns and changes, and how these might be related to the Iranian perception of national identity.

By applying poststructuralist discourse analysis, this thesis investigates the relationship between official foreign policy discourse and identity. The findings from the analysis shows that the Iranian regime initially responded to the Syrian conflict with silence, as it did not fit into the Iranian 'Islamic Awakening' discourse. After some time, the Syrian conflict was eventually co-opted into the already established Iranian anti-imperialist discourse. This discourse developed to accommodate for developments in the conflict. One of these changes was to expand the enemy perception to include *takfiri* terrorists. This discourse maintained its stability throughout the rest of the period, despite President Rouhani's attempt to establish foreign policy with a more diplomatic approach.

This thesis finds that Iranian foreign policy discourse has a great ability to adapt to new events, because of its relationship with the perception and projection of national identity. The foreign policy's stability and adaptability is due to the revolutionary resistance identity, combined with a perception of Iranian exceptionalism.

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1 Introduction

1.1 Background

Since 2011, there has been immense media and political focus on the wider Middle Eastern region following the ‘Arab Spring’ and the conflict in Syria. At the same time, Iran has gained more attention and re-emerged in mainstream media, as the country is going through a process of re-integration into the global market, following successful nuclear negotiations between Iran and the P5+1 countries. This has resulted in increased studies on the relationship between the Islamic Republic of Iran and the West, particularly with the United States (Maloney, 2008; Fulton, Holliday and Wyer, 2013).

The Iranian involvement in the ongoing conflict in Syria has also been discussed in media and as an academic topic, although the majority has focused on Iran’s military and political presence (Fulton, Holliday and Wyer, 2013); Iranian intentions and motivations in Syria (Ansani and Tabrizi, 2016); and the consequences of the Syrian conflict for Iran (Akbarzadeh, 2013; Jones, 2013). Subsequently, there has been less emphasis on how the Iran regime has attempted to develop and maintain their own particular narrative, and discourse of the Syrian conflict.

The Syrian conflict began as domestic uprisings against the al-Assad regime in early 2011. The West was quick to place the domestic demonstrations into the wider context of the developments in the region, including Syria in the ‘Arab Spring’ discourse. The ‘Arab Spring’ was, through this narrative, understood as multiple uprisings against undemocratic leaders, as the people were demanding democratic freedom and civil rights (Whitaker, 2011). The Syrian regime responded to the demonstrations with military force, and the conflict escalated into violent confrontation from both sides. As the violence progressed and intensified, the conflict turned from domestic to international, as more and more countries attempted to intervene; through diplomacy, political support and military intervention.

Despite uncertainty as to the extent of support, sources claim that Iran has supported the Syrian regime not only with political support or in a military advisory role, but also actively supporting pro-regime armed groups (Ansani and Tabrizi, 2016). This support became more evident when Russia decided to intervene in the conflict in the late half of 2015. The Russian-Iranian collaboration in Syria became a ‘hot topic’ of political discussion, and there have been several analyses on what this means for the future of the region, as well as the effectiveness of Iranian proxy wars as a tool increasing regional power (Geranmayeh and Liik, 2016).

Even before the Islamic Revolution, Iran was perceived as being interested in gaining and maintaining power in the surrounding region. After the Revolution in 1979 the dominant Western understanding of the Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy has been one of ideological expansionism, or pragmatic realpolitik. The political and structural uniqueness of the Islamic Republic of Iran, combined with a particularly undiplomatic and tough rhetoric, has intrigued many scholars and produced a vast amount of literature which attempts to understand Iranian State behaviour (Katzman, 2016; Gedikli, 2014).

It has become a common assumption, though at times challenging to prove, that Iran has been and is involved in internal affairs in several surrounding countries through proxies. Sources report that, as the conflict in Syria has progressed, so has the Iranian involvement. Combined with Russian and Turkish efforts, Iran is now perceived as one of the main international players in the conflict, and the country with the most to gain and lose from the outcome (Ansari and Tabrizi, 2016). This is of particular interest to Western countries, which traditionally have had a leading role in diplomatic and military interventions, but have now been placed on the side-line, – even excluded from Syrian peace talks in Astana.

A large part of the research on Iranian involvement in Syria has attempted to document Iranian military and political commitment there, as there is limited information from the Islamic Republic on how many resources they have in Syria. Others focus on explaining the motivations for Iranian involvement. While recognising the importance of this work, particularly for policy makers, this thesis sets out to examine the non-material dimension of Iranian foreign policy towards Syria. By applying a discourse approach to examining Iranian foreign policy on Syria, this thesis will explore the relationship between official policy and projection of national identity. Nevertheless, past work on the relationship between Iran and Syria will serve to explain the empirical case, while analyses of Iranian foreign policy motivations will help to illustrate how Iran has been, and is perceived by the international community, especially the West.

1.2 Problem statement and research question

The aim of this thesis is to explore the language used in official Iranian foreign policy discourse to develop a particular narrative, which legitimises Iranian involvement in the Syrian conflict. By focusing on statements made by Iranian officials, this thesis seeks to identify how a particular Iranian identity has developed and is being maintained, as well as influencing foreign policy.

The main objective of this thesis is to explore how Iran is framing and presenting the conflict in Syria internationally. It intends to analyse how Iran is attempting to develop and maintain discourse with specific narratives about the current events in Syria. These are related to a certain particular understanding of the Iranian Self. Through language, the Iranian regime is attempting to present and frame their version to the international community.

The research question is therefore:

How is the Syrian conflict represented and framed in official Iranian foreign policy discourse between 2011 and 2016, and how is Iranian involvement justified internationally?

In contrast to conventional explanations as to *why* Iran has an interest in Syrian domestic issues, there has been less focus on *how* Iran is framing the crisis and legitimising its involvement. This will be the focus of this research as it aims to analyse the image and narratives portrayed by official Iranian foreign policy discourse in relation to Syrian domestic developments.

Since the Syrian conflict has become an international crisis, multiple actors have become involved and there has been violence spilling across state borders. Therefore, the target audience for the Iranian discourse is not limited to solely a domestic Iranian audience, as the Islamic Republic of Iran has an interest in spreading their particular narrative beyond its own borders.

The aim of this thesis is to study the official voice of official Iran. Due to the political system in place in Iran, this will include both the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei, and the elected political establishment represented by Ahmadinejad and Rouhani, and their foreign ministers. Although at times there have been political tensions or differences in political policies between the Presidents and the Supreme Leader, this has been less evident in the projection of official foreign policy. This is due to the fact that the Supreme Leader serves as

the highest political power, and in practice has the final decision on all policies (Mirshahi, 2014). The study is therefore based on the assumption that there is one official Iranian foreign policy, although the Supreme Leader and the politicians might project this through different approaches.

Using this specific case study, this thesis aims to analyse Iranian official speeches, statements and interviews, using the conceptual framework of poststructuralist discourse analysis to understand how identity and foreign policy are mutually constitutive. Having conceptualised the aims of the thesis, Lene Hansen's (2006) intertextual framework for poststructuralist discourse analysis will serve as the main theoretical framework for the analysis.

1.3 Iranian foreign policy and Syria

Studies of Iranian rhetoric and foreign policy have generally had an emphasis on the Iranian rhetoric towards the West and Israel. Recent publications include work on the Iranian nuclear programme – and nuclear deal – and the implications and limitations of the programme. This is in addition to a more ‘traditional’ focused analysis of Iranian foreign policy in relation to the West, region, Russia, or East Asia (Maloney, 2014; Bowen and Moran, 2014; Geremayeh and Liik, 2016; Price, 2012). Although this has been a main focus of many researchers on Iran, this does not mean that there has not been an emphasis on understanding other dimensions of Iranian politics. This includes publications on the development of Iranian identity since the Islamic Revolution (Nia, 2011), change in Iranian foreign policy since President Rouhani (Akbarzadeha and Dara, 2016), and Iran’s role in the Syrian conflict (Ansani and Tabrizi, 2016). These studies which claim that Iranian foreign policy is influenced by its revolutionary identity, that there has been a distinctive change in policy since President Rouhani, and that Iran has a pivotal role in the Syrian conflict. These claims and arguments have inspired this thesis to study the official Iranian foreign policy in Syria, how it is related to the Iranian projection of national identity, and how these might have changed over the course of the Syrian conflict.

Although it could be argued that the conflict in Syria is relatively new, and therefore it would be expected to be fewer studies conducted on the relationship between Iran and the Syrian conflict, this would be an insufficient explanation as there have already been several articles and studies published on the Iranian involvement and motivations in Syria (Ansani and Tabrizi, 2016; Geremayeh and Liik, 2016). In addition there are several studies on how Iran engaged with in the ‘Arab Spring’ (Mohseni, 2013; Parchami, 2012; Fürtig, 2013), which illustrates the interest in studying Iranian regional relations.

What seems to be lacking, are studies that lie between publications that aim at tracing and documenting Iranian material support on the one hand, and studies that aim at explaining Iranian actions and motivations in the Syrian conflict on the other. There seems to be a research gap which aims at studying how Iranians themselves understand and explain the ongoing situation in Syria, how this is related to national identity, and how this has developed over time. Previous studies have touched upon parts of these issues, but there is a research gap for studying the development of the foreign policy discourse on Syria over time, which also includes the Iranian position to the ‘Arab Spring’. This thesis aims to narrow this gap.

In order to contextualise how Iran and Iranian foreign policy has and is understood, this next section will give a brief presentation of how Iranian foreign policy has been studied. By presenting some of the more common theoretical approaches to analyse Iranian foreign policy, it will demonstrate how this thesis aims at taking a different approach, in order to better understand the policy towards Syria.

According to structural realists (Mearsheimer, 2013, p.73), the world is made up of states that constantly compete among each other, in the struggle to increase their own power. By maximising power and security, states are able to secure their own position and pursue their national interests beyond the national security. Such analyses view states as ontologically significant and the key actors in international relations; therefore they treat all states as the same entity, disregarding individual differences beyond military capabilities, and domestic political systems (Mearsheimer, 2013, p.73). Following such a paradigm, studies of Iran's foreign policy claim that prioritising state interests in the regional balance of power has been the state's priority over ideological motivations (Gedikli, 2014). With such an understanding, Iranian rhetoric is merely an instrument that masks the real issues at hand, securing state survival (Akbarzadeh and Barry, 2016, p.624).

In contrast, analyses that focus on particular domestic political systems in order to explain state behaviour are prone to emphasise on ideological motivations, and argue that state motivation is less affected by structural constraints. Such analyses will tend to highlight the 'uniqueness' of the Iranian political system and the Islamic Revolutionary ideology when attempting to understand how Iran relates to other states, and non-state actors, when arguing that the "foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran mostly is driven by its revolutionary values and ideological perspectives than the logic of nation state" (Nia, 2011, p.279).

Studies of Iranian foreign policy can broadly be divided into two main camps. On the one hand the Islamic Republic is presented as a state which behaves as an ideological actor, based on the principles of the Islamic Revolution. This state has a particular agenda that seeks to expand the revolutionary ideology across state borders and sees itself as the leader of a pan-Islamic, non-nationalistic mission which encompasses all Muslims across the region and beyond (Khamenei, 2016b). On the other hand, the Islamic Republic of Iran is a state which emphasises national self-interests at all costs; even at the expense of its revolutionary ideology. This state behaves in accordance to pragmatic principles to ensure regime survival and increase its national security (Gedikli, 2014; Ramazani, 2004). Focusing on the international structural constraints, which both limits possibilities and creates opportunities for foreign

policy is useful in understanding aspects of Iranian international behaviour, but “it does not fully account for the ideational elements in Tehran’s foreign policy strategies” (Akbarzadeh and Barry, 2016, p.615).

Both these approaches focus on explaining the causes of state behaviour, emphasising less on the linguistic dimension, which enables Iran to develop particular narratives and discourses to legitimise their behaviour.

Stepping out of the academic sphere, Iran has been portrayed – particularly by Western media and the United States – as a “rogue state” (Preble, 2005). The United States demonising rhetoric and condemnation of the Iranian regime has continued from the Islamic Revolution (Beeman, 2008), but was conceptualised by former President Bush as part of the prominent “Axis of Evil”; whereby Iran was portrayed as a state which “aggressively pursues [weapons of mass destruction] and exports terror, while an unelected few repress the Iranian people’s hope for freedom” (The Washington Post, 2002). This harsh rhetoric is mirrored in statements from Tehran against the United States and the West, claiming that ever since the Islamic Revolution, the United States has conspired to over-throw the Iranian regime (Khamenei, 2016d). Statements such as these illustrate how Iran has been, and continues to be dealt with in international politics – and particularly in the West. Through such a construction of an ‘Other’, Iran is portrayed as an irrational, deeply religious dictatorship; a dichotomy to Western liberal democracy (Beeman, 2008, p.70). This understanding and particular narrative of Iran – as a religious, authoritarian state, a pariah, and a rogue state – has meant that Iran’s own foreign policy justifications have at times been seen as less interesting – or non-believable by the West. This has been particularly evident in the case of Iran’s ambitions to require nuclear weapons (Kemp, 2003; Waltz, 2012; Sagen, 2006), where the West has been focused on Iran’s capabilities and motivations, despite Iran continuously claiming that they do not seek to develop nuclear weapons (SBS Dateline, 2012)

This study is based on the assumption that treating Iranian rhetoric merely as propaganda should not prevent us from engaging with, and interpreting Iran’s own official justifications for its foreign policy. At the same time, it is also important to bear in mind that language is a powerful instrument, which can be and is used to create particular narratives to serve particular agendas. It is therefore important to keep in mind the possible instrumental logic, and maintain a critical perspective.

In addition to this study's claim that there exists a research gap to be narrowed, it is also important to attempt to understand the Iranian involvement in Syria because of Iran's critical role for the course of the conflict. Researchers studying Iran and the Middle East continue to argue that there is little chance of a political or military solution in Syria that does not include the Islamic Republic of Iran (Ansani and Tabrizi, 2016; European Council on Foreign Relations, 2017). The relationships between Iran and the different players will not only affect and direct the course of the conflict, but also influence the dynamics of the regions long-term development in the future.

Several observers (Tabrizi, 2015; European Council on Foreign Rrelation, 2017) of the Middle East have commented that Iran is pivotal for any peaceful solution to the Syrian conflict. By emphasising Iran's important role in conflict and the region, there is a strong argument for understanding Iran's role, but also how Iranians themselves understand the conflict and project their own involvement. In order to do so, it is necessary to study how Iran has presented the conflict, and how this might have changed over time. In addition it is useful to study how this particular projection of foreign policy is connected to national identity, and how national identity and state action can be connected through the projection of language and foreign policy discourses.

Attempts to understand how Iran portrays its involvement in the conflict, and how Iranian identity and foreign policy is related might not be able to predict how Iran will act in the future or establish what constitutes Iranian foreign policy, but tracing the developments of this particular discourse may increase the understanding of how identity and foreign policy might be connected and how it is important to acknowledge the influence of identity when attempting to understand state's foreign policy. It is also this thesis' aim to highlight the non-physical Iranian influence in Syria, which does not solely focus on the state's motivations.

1.4 Regional transformation and the relationship between Iran and Syria

In order to understand the Syrian conflict it is necessary to place the conflict within a context of the broader regional developments that happened in the Middle East and Northern Africa (MENA) from late 2010 into early 2011. Although the demonstrations and uprising in Syria were both instigated by a particular domestic situation, treating it as a completely separate case and development would not be adequate in order to study the Iranian response. It is therefore necessary to elaborate on the regional developments, which influenced the conflict in Syria – in order to study the Iranian response. This section will give a brief description of the events that precluded the demonstrations in Syria and shed light on the close relationship between Iran and Syria. By presenting the developments that precluded the Syrian conflict, and the relationship between the two states, this section will have established context in order to present which developments this thesis will address in the analysis.

What started as demonstrations addressing local grievances in Tunisia worked as a catalyst for uprisings in several Arab countries across the MENA region in early 2011. The region and the rest of the world were witnesses to how great masses of people took to the streets, demonstrating against their regimes, and demanding change political, social and economic change.

Western media and politicians were eager to praise the uprising, framing the demonstrations within a Western understanding. This narrative described the demonstrations as demands for liberal democracy, economic development and human rights. By terming the protests as ‘the Arab Spring’ it became associated with a new beginning – a fresh start – which initially focused on the non-religious elements of the demonstrations, and call to address social grievances (Mohseni, 2013). Similarly, Iran was supporting of the regional developments; framing the demonstrations as part of an ‘Islamic Awakening’. It was described as a development away from oppressive illegitimate pro-Western regimes (Mohseni, 2013). But when the uprisings reached Syria, it was not included into this particular narrative. Without understanding the close relationship between the Islamic Republic of Iran and Syria, it would be expected that Iran would extend the same support to the demonstrations against the al-Assad regime a couple of months later.

In order to understand this different response, it is necessary to understand the relationship between Tehran and Damascus. On the face of it, the alliance between Syria and Iran is rather

baffling. While Iran defines itself as an Islamic republic, a religious society with a Shia majority population, and rich Persian heritage, Syria on the other hand, is Arab and ruled by an Alawite regime in a relatively secular state (Ansari and Tabrizi, 2016, p.1). The close relationship between the Iranian regime and the al-Assad regime in Syria has gone on for decades. Syria has been the Islamic Republic's only Arab ally, despite its different religious mix-up. Ever since the Islamic Revolution in 1979, the Syrian regime has held a special position in Tehran. Not only as the single regional supporter during the Iran-Iraq war, but also because of important link between Iran and Hezbollah in Lebanon, and as a territorial connection between Iran and the Mediterranean Sea. Today, Iran is al-Assad's key supporter to the regime in Damascus, in addition to the Russians and Hezbollah (Ansari and Tabrizi, 2016, p.1).

It is a common analysis (from a Western perspective) that a potential fall of the Syrian regime would be catastrophic for Iran, and would therefore be the single most important regional geo-strategical setback for the Islamic Republic (Rafati, 2012, p.52; Ansari and Tabrizi, 2016). Not only would it mean Iran would lose its closest, and possibly only Arab ally, it also means that the connection to Hezbollah and Hamas would be diminished. Therefore, it is assumed that the Iranian regime is willing to go far in order to secure al-Assad's position (Ansani and Tabrizi, 2016). Hence, when the Syrian uprisings broke out in March 2011, the Iranians were one of the first to support the Syrian regime, and have served as a key supporter to President Bashar al-Assad ever since. By maintaining this support, Iran has been able to maintain influence over the developments (Ansani and Tabriszi, 2016).

Following the developments in the region, there are three particular changes in the Iranian official discourse that will be examined more closely, and will serve as the analytical focus of this thesis. First the study will examine the Iranian support for the 'Islamic Awakening' (Khamenei, 2011c) that was accompanied with official silence about the developments in Syria. Second, the study will analyse how the developments in Syria became co-opted into an already established anti-western discourse; a narrative that blames the West for instigating domestic uprising and supporting terrorism. Finally, this study will focus on the interesting development of the Iranian international advocacy for a 'World Against Violence and Extremism' (WAVE) a policy, which projects international cooperation against terrorism.

In order to limit the scope of the research the empirical case is set to a five-year timeframe from the outbreak of the uprisings in early 2011 until the end of 2016. By analysing this

particular case the thesis aims to analyse how official Iran has attempted to create a particular discourse about the Syrian conflict.

The conclusions drawn from this thesis might serve as an indication about the (future) direction of Iranian foreign policy towards Syria, as well as the relationship between Iranian identity and official foreign policy discourse. Analysing the language used to develop and present a particular discourse towards the international community will give an indication of how Iran wants to present itself externally. Understanding this language could also increase the possibilities for constructive dialogue.

1.5 Iranian and international involvement in Syria

Exactly how involved Iran has been in the Syrian conflict is difficult to assess, and Iranian officials have continuously claimed that they have not provided the Syrian regime with military support beyond an advisory role (Ansani and Tabrizi, 2016; Black, 2012). Despite not *officially* admitting military presence, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) has admitted their commitment to Syria on several occasions, though later retracted (Akbarzadeha and Dara, 2016). Despite the difficulty tracing the Iranian involvement and role in the Syrian conflict, there are reports that have attempted to quantify the level of Iranian engagement. In addition, the media has continued to re-post from international sources that there is evidence of extensive Iranian presence in Syria, supporting al-Assad against opposition groups (Black, 2012; BBC, 2015). It has therefore become increasingly challenging for Iran to deny presence in Syria beyond an advisory role. This section will attempt to present some of the reported Iranian activity in Syria, in order to illustrate the status of the situation, in relation to Iran.

The Iranian involvement in Syria became clearer after Russia decided to intervene in late 2015. This strategic partnership permitted Russia to use Iranian airbases for strategic bombing in Syria (a rare instance in the history of the Islamic Republic) (Geranmayeh and Liik, 2016, p.1). Iran's role as one of the key facilitator for the 2016 Astana peace talks also illustrates their important role in the conflict and possibility for cease-fire (Iltis, 2017).

Prior to the conflict in Syria, reports show an estimate of 2,000-3,000 Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) officers stationed in Syria. As the conflict developed there are observations that suggested the number of Iranian forces reached a total of over 10,000 in the second half of 2013 (Royal United Service Institute, 2016). When Russia decided to intervene in late 2015 this number decreased, but did not eliminate Iranian ground presence in Syria. Despite observations and estimates, there is still uncertainty as to how many forces Iran has in Syria, as the regime does not acknowledge any involvement beyond advisory capabilities (Ansani and Tabrizi, 2016, p.1).

When the demonstrations and uprisings in Syria broke out in March 2011, Iran sent special snipers, law enforcement and teargas to help the Syrian regime repress the protestors (Royal United Service Institute, 2016). In the second half of 2012 reports show that Hezbollah entered the conflict in Syria, and as Iran is perceived to be Hezbollah's biggest and most powerful supporter, this development has been used as evidence to support the claim that Iran also are involved in Syria by proxy (Goodarzi, 2013). Later reports show that Iran has been

supporting Shia militias against Sunni oppositional groups, supporting the argument that the war in Syria has evolved into a sectarian conflict (Hokayem, 2014). There are also reports that the Iranian Quds force and IRGC have been instrumental in the creation and training of the Syrian National Defence Forces (Royal United Service Institute, 2016).

From a Western position, the conflict in Syria has created many challenges and dilemmas. In the beginning, the West observed the spread of the ‘Arab Spring’ to Syria, and the media covered the developments with the same optimism that they had shown towards the rest of the region (Seeberg and Shteivi, n.d.). In the months that followed, the violence grew, but little action was taken by the West, even after reports of the use of chemical weapons in 2013. The use of chemical weapons were claimed to be a ‘red line’, but limited military action was taken. Instead agreements were made with the Syrian regime to remove Syria’s chemical weapons stockpile (BBC, 2014). With the emergence and increased strength of the terrorist group Daesh, it became more difficult for the West to balance how to fight a brutal terrorist group while supporting so-called “moderate” opposition groups against al-Assad. Tactical bombing of Daesh bastions have been conducted by United States and European air forces over the last couple of years, and periodically intensified as a reaction to terrorist attacks in Europe (Irish and Vidalon, 2015).

The situation has given room for non-Western players to enter the game without much resistance; this means that there has both emerged and opened up a political and military space for Iran to pursue its interests in Syria. This room for political and military manoeuvre has strengthened after the Russians entered the game (Roth, Murphy and Ryan, 2015).

Since the fall of Saddam Hussain’s Iraq, the balance of power in the region has shifted, which has meant that Iran has been able to increase its influence in the region, but also increase its regional rivalry with Saudi Arabia (Adami and Pouresmaeili, 2013). Iran’s increased regional position and the lack of Western engagement in Syria, combined with the strong political, economic, and military ties Iran has had to the Syrian regime over decades, means that there is a small prospect that the conflict in Syria can be solved without including Iran in negotiations (ECFR, 2017).

It is therefore vital to attempt to understand not only Iranian motivations, but also how its political establishment develops and establishes foreign policies. A key challenge in previous dialogue between Iran and the West has been how both sides have entered into negotiations with a preconceived notion and bias towards the counterpart. The challenge for Western

policy makers is to distinguish how to separate Iranian official propaganda from statements that reflect official policy, while avoiding the pitfalls of preconceived bias or narratives towards Iran.

1.6 Introduction summary

This first part presented the study's problem statement and research question, while also giving a brief introduction to the situation in Syria, the MENA region, and how Iran and the West have responded to these developments and challenges. The aim has been to show the complexity and the uncertainty of the situation, while also presenting what is known about the case. In addition, this section has briefly presented how Iranian foreign policy has previously been studied and explained, in order to show how this study differs from previous work. The aim has been to illustrate that there is a research gap between studies that seek to identify Iranian physical involvement in Syria, and the studies that attempt to understand less case-specific Iranian foreign policy towards the West or the region. This introduction to Iranian foreign policy, the Syrian conflict and the relation between the two countries serves as the context for the second part of the thesis, which will analyse the relationship between the official Iranian foreign policy and Iranian national identity, on this particular case.

2 Methodology

2.1 Lene Hansen's analysis framework

The aim of qualitative research is to answer questions that ask *how*, *what* or *why*, rather than measuring *how many* or *how much*. Qualitative data collection and analysis is not about gathering and analysing quantifiable data, but rather about increasing the understanding of the data through thorough analysis, generated by words, ideas and perceptions (Bryman, 2012). Located within such an epistemological understanding of knowledge, a poststructuralist discourse approach attempts to explain the process of *how* the thing has come to be understood in a particular way, rather than explain *what* has caused it. Rejecting the notion of causality, this approach is more interested in the *process* than the *outcome*.

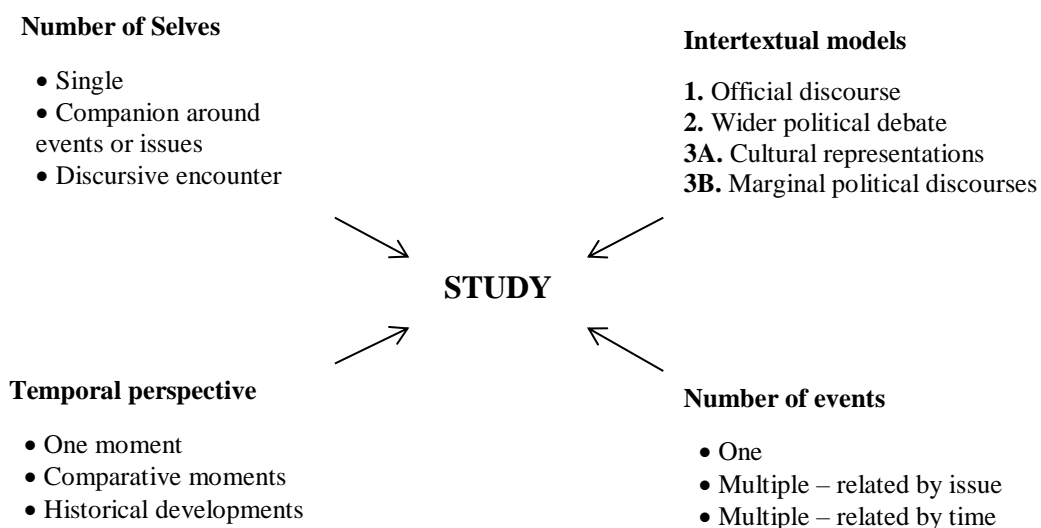
This study is largely based on the methodological framework that Lene Hansen (2016) developed to analyse the Western foreign policy discourse of the Bosnian War. Hansen's work has been chosen as the theoretical and methodological framework for this thesis, as Hansen's work is perceived to be of the most central in the 'new' approach to International Relations (IR). This approach gained particularly attention since the end of the Cold War, as it placed identity as the ontological and epistemological centre for analysis (Hansen, 2006, p.37).

The theoretical and methodological framework, which Hansen has developed, is built on the theoretical work of Foucault, Derrida, Kristeva, and Laclau and Mouffe. Hansen's contribution to the field stands as the most comprehensive methodological framework for discourse analysis, especially since the poststructuralist canon has had little focus on presenting or discussing principles of methodology. Hansen's framework is therefore considered the most complete framework which has formulated clear principles on how to build a research project around foreign policy discourse analysis. In addition to Hansen's framework, this thesis will base its analysis on the material that has been gathered from official publications and interviews, in order to increase the understanding and the substance of the Iranian discourse on Syria.

The aim of the Hansen's framework is to challenge positivist arguments that poststructuralism cannot be used sufficiently as an analytical approach because of its rejection of positivist epistemology, arguably making it impossible to repeat the exact same study to test reliability. Acknowledging the critique, Hansen has attempted to demonstrate how it is possible to combine poststructuralist epistemology with a methodological framework in order to analyse foreign policy discourse. Hansen argues that it is possible to develop a poststructuralist

methodology by loosening the link between positivist epistemology and methodology, since essentially the point of methodology is to clarify the “procedures and choices by which theory becomes analysis” (Hansen, 2006, p.2). By clarifying what choices are made along different dimensions, it is possible to develop a concrete study incorporating the methodology of reading and textual selection. In this way, the research designs the focus of the study.

In order to sufficiently conduct a study of political discourse using a poststructuralist approach, Hansen (2016, p.81) has divided the framework into four dimensions, which all must be clarified before the analysis. First it requires an explanation of how many ‘Selves’ will be included in the study. What is meant by this is what number of subjects will be examined. Second it calls for a clarification of what intertextual model will be used in the study. This explains what kind of sources have been included in the study, and if there is more than one kind of source. Third is the clarification of the temporal perspective, which explains what kind of timeline the study has; if it is studying one moment, or a longer development. Last, the study needs to elaborate on how many events it will study, and if they are related by time, or by issue. Combining the four dimensions it is possible to build a research project around any given topic:

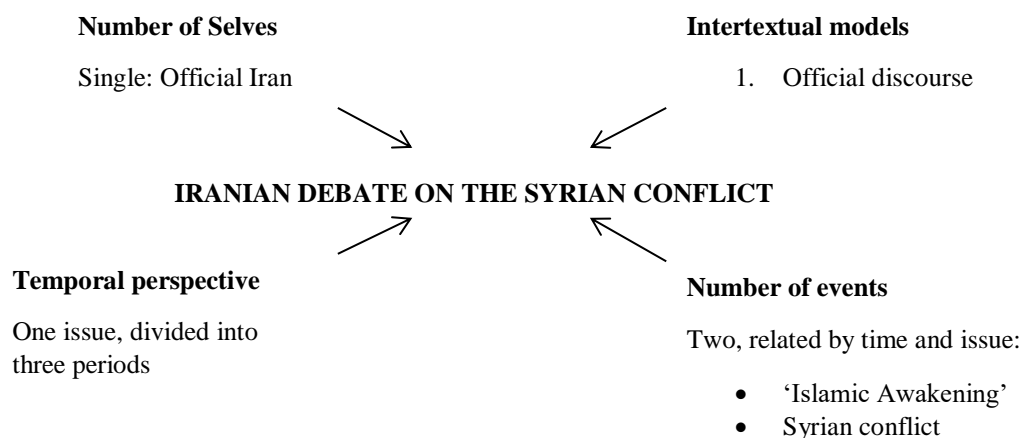


An important part of any research, and particularly poststructuralist and non-positivist research, is to make methodological choices that can narrow down the scope, while still maintaining the focus of what it aims to investigate. In order to answer the research question

at hand, it has been important to clarify a series of choices when selecting material. These choices relate to both analytical and practical considerations. The qualitative research aspect is that it is the substance of analysis that is essential. Extensive reading and research on the subject gives authoritative knowledge to the analyst, which justifies which texts should be included in the research (Hansen, 2006).

When choosing the scope of this study, it is important to recognise what is political and analytically possible, especially with regards to language and access to material. This is important as language is not merely “a linguistic capability, but also social epistemology composed by a set of linked codes” (Hansen, 2006, p.84). This means that particular political meanings of concepts and words are constructed and contextualised. Knowledge of the language that is to be analysed is therefore important in order to grasp the exact meaning.

The next section will present and reflect on the methodological choices which this study is based on:



2.1.1 Number of Selves

In this study of foreign policy discourse, the aim is to analyse the official Iranian discourse on Syria and will therefore have a research focus of one Self. This Self has not developed independently in relation to this one specific case, but has developed over time through linking and differentiating the Self against its own definitions and perception of an ‘Other’. It is thus shaped through interactions, defined relationally and not pre-discursively decided.

This study aims to analyse the official foreign policy of Iran, excluding other opposing discourses that are not included in the official narrative. In contrast to other political system, Iran has a selected Supreme Leader above the elected President, who holds much of the political power in Iran. At times, there has been political disagreement between the Supreme Leader and the President over specific cases, but generally they tend to be more or less in agreement on issues of foreign policy. While there might be internal policy disagreements between the Supreme Leader and the President, it is recognised that the Supreme Leader has the final say on any policy in Iran; therefore this study is based on the assumption that the Iranian foreign policy is one Self. The one Self is thus relationally against multiple ‘Others’, which serves as reference points in which the Iranian Self is developed and maintained.

2.1.2 Number of events

As stated in the research question, this study will examine the Iranian perspective on the Syrian conflict. However, in order to fully be able to analyse the development of the Iranian foreign policy discourse, the study will also include the official Iranian foreign policy perspective of the ‘Islamic Awakening’, which happened just before and during the event in Syria. Hence, the study will include two events, related by both time and issue. The argument for analysing these two events combined is that the developments in Syria should not be isolated from the similar developments that happened in the region at the same time, and that the Iranian response to the Syrian demonstrations should be understood in connection with the Iranian response to the ‘Islamic Awakening’. From an outside perspective the events which constitute the ‘Islamic Awakening’ and the event in Syria look almost identical; popular uprisings against undemocratic regimes, which demanded more social, economic and democratic rights. But also included an Islamic element, that advocated for increased emphasis on religion; a criticism of the secular developments in some of the countries. Because these demonstrations and uprisings had so much in common, and sparked at the same time, it is especially interesting to examine how Iranian discourse framed these events so differently, while still managing to relate them to the same projection of national identity. By including comparative moments, the thesis will also have the possibility to focus on discursive changes, or repetition.

The first section of the analysis will be focused on how Iran has constructed a narrative of an ‘Islamic Awakening’, in order to explain the regional demonstrations and uprisings against the regimes in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya, and Yemen. This narrative will be examined in order to understand how a particular Iranian identity has formed the official foreign policy. This first

part of the analysis will contribute to the understanding of Iranian foreign policy in Syria, and demonstrate how these two events are connected, while at the same time also separated.

2.1.3 Temporal perspective

A series of demonstrations were held in Syria in March 2011, which continued to develop into violent uprisings, and civil war. The situation today is still an ongoing conflict; hence the temporal perspective is set to exclude any developments after 2016. This choice was made in order to manage the developments and amount of sources without having to constantly include new material in the analysis phase.

As the conflict in Syria is very much still in active development it was necessary to set an end date for gathering and analysing material that was not the natural end of the conflict.

Including the end of 2016, but not 2017, was a practical choice that needed to be made on the basis of how much time was needed to analyse the existing material compared to the time spent on adding new material published during the research period.

In order to understand the development of the Iranian narratives, it became evident that it was necessary to set the time frame from the beginning of the conflict in 2011. As laid out in the previous section, it became clear as the research developed that the regional demonstrations and developments prior to the Syrian case needed to be included in the analysis, as the Iranian understanding of itself, and its position in relation to its neighbours, developed through speeches and statements in response to the uprisings in the wider Middle East region before Iran responded to the Syrian developments.

The temporal perspective of this study will therefore be focused on one issue developed over time, divided into three periods. The first period will examine the short period before the Syrian uprisings broke out, in order to understand the projected Iranian foreign policy discourse of the region at the time when the demonstrations started in Syria. It is important to grasp the full context of how the discourses developed. The second period examines the discourse that was developed and delivered several months after the Syrian conflict broke out, and was mainly projected by the Supreme Leader and President Ahmadinejad, but later also President Rouhani. This period extends until the end of the study in 2016.

The third period included in this study will examine the parallel foreign policy discourse that was started by President Rouhani at the United Nations General Assembly September 2013. This period will also extend until the end of the study. Thus, in sum the thesis deals with the period starting in 2011 until the end of 2016.

In order to better identify and analyse the relation between the Iranian official foreign policy and identity, the three periods of the temporal perspective have become three separate chapters in the analysis. This choice was made as the analysis developed and it became evident that there were three main developments in the Iranian discourse over the five-year period between 2011 and 2016.

Despite narrowing the timeframe to six years, there are several challenges in selecting material over such a long time. Between the beginning of 2011 and the end of 2016 there are *hundreds* of accounts (of all sizes) from Iran about the ‘Islamic Awakening’ and the Syrian conflict. After reading through much of the material, it becomes possible to recognise a pattern of repeated statements and similar arguments, and by choosing to emphasise on three main developments in the Iranian foreign policy discourse, the study is able to narrow the scope, while still remaining focused in order to answer the research questions.

2.1.4 Intertextual model

The methodological framework describes four different intertextual models which if combined will increase the “likelihood that the analysis will be able to capture discourses that contest and challenge official foreign policy” (Hansen, 2016, p.74). What this means is that the more intertextual models that are included, the stronger the foundation to assess the stability and hegemony of an official discourse. While this is a valid point, and should be carefully considered when applying a discourse approach, this thesis will be less focused on analysing the stability of the Iranian foreign policy, placing more analytical focus on the development of foreign policy over the case and selected timeframe.

This thesis will therefore be based on intertextual model 1, which means it will focus on officially published material, and material which project the official policy discourse. This includes material such as official speeches, statements, official documents, interviews and material published by Iranian media with connections to the regime. The choice of model 1 was made in order to understand the logic of the official discourse, and to trace the developments of the policy over time, as well as how it connects to particular projections of national identity.

By clarifying these analytical choices, the thesis has developed a research design that demonstrates how this study has collected, organised and analysed the selected material in order to answer the research question. Applying this approach, this thesis will provide insight to how national identity and foreign policy are interconnected in Iranian official discourse,

and how this has developed during the time of the Syrian conflict. The study is based on the assumption that a discourse approach is the most appropriate way to close the research gap between studies on Iranian practical policy and ideological analyses.

Nevertheless, there are several challenges with this approach that need to be addressed. The first challenge in studying foreign policy discourse of a foreign country is the challenge of not being able to study material in the native language. Not only does language limit the type of material that can be analysed, but it also limits the number of available material to choose from. Because discourse analysis emphasises the importance of language, knowledge of that particular language becomes necessary. What this thesis has done to avoid this problem, is focus on analysing texts that are aimed at an international audience.

The research question clearly states that this thesis will study the official foreign policy that is projected internationally, meaning that the material that will be examined will be in English, for an international audience. Some of the material, particularly speeches, will have been initially presented to a domestic audience, but later published by the Iranian regime itself on their English language website for a non-Persian audience. Analysing translated material comes with certain challenges, as concepts and words might lose their original meaning (Hansen, 2016, p. 83). This is an important factor to be aware of when including translated material. Since most of the material used in this thesis will have been translated officially by the Iranian regime – who have decided what to publish and how to translate it – there is less concern about mistranslation, as it is assumed that the Iranian regime is aware of what they are publishing.

The texts that have been included in this research have been selected by substantial reading to determine how the particular discourses have emerged from them. In order for the official Iranian discourse to ‘speak for itself’, significant statements and quotes have been included in order to illustrate the argument presented. The material that has been selected has been chosen because of its significance to the discourse, and the timing of the speeches. In the first period, most of the written sources included are selected from speeches made by the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei. This choice was made because the Iranian official support for the ‘Islamic Awakening’ was not only legitimised politically, but also religiously. Research also shows that the discourse was mainly developed and projected by the Supreme Leader; hence Supreme Leader is the analytical focus of the first period. The key text from this period is Khamenei’s first Friday prayer in February 2011, which clearly states how the regime interprets the ‘Islamic Awakening’.

The analysis will further include speeches, statements and interviews by the Supreme Leader, President Ahmadinejad, President Rouhani, and their foreign ministers. Because of the lack of published written material from Ahmadinejad, the study will rely on video interviews and addresses to the United Nations General Assembly. Video interviews with Rouhani and his foreign minister Mohammad Javad Zarif are also included in the second period of the analysis. The third period, which examines the WAVE initiative, will focus on President Rouhani's addresses to the United Nations General Assembly, and the Iranian draft resolution. In periods where there were limited publications from official Iran, a decision was made to include accounts from Iranian media with close ties to the regime that publish regime supportive material. The arguments being that these channels of information are well connected to the political and religious elites, and therefore portray the views of the regime when the regime is unable or unwilling to do so.

In regards to the number of sources needed in order to conduct a sufficient discourse analysis, poststructuralist methodology does not outline a specific number, as it does not follow "a quantitative methodology and hence cannot resort to statistical significance as a measure for how many texts should be selected" (Hansen, 2006, p.86). The main sources will be selected from within the time frame of the study, in addition to some historical sources, for a better understanding of the background of the particular discourse. Key texts will include statements, speeches and interviews by the Supreme Leader and Presidents, as "poststructuralist discourse analysis gives epistemological and methodological priority to the study of primary texts" (Hansen, 2006, p.82).

Understanding the political institutions in Iran and the power dynamics between them can be a challenge. The political differences, factional challenges, religious pressures, and personalised politics all play a part in how Iranian politics develop (Moslem, 2002). In essence, there are two main institutions; the elected politicians and the religious leadership. Both constitute official Iran, though in theory the Supreme Leader is the final decision maker of both domestic and international policy (Akbarzadeh and Barry, 2016, p.614). Although the domestic political landscape in Iran constitutes of multiple factions and internal power struggles, a choice was made to limit the scope, to emphasise on material published and presented by the Supreme Leader and his office, and the two Presidents and their foreign ministers. The choice was made despite accounts that argue that the Iranian involvement in Syria has been heavily guided and influenced by the IRGC (Akbarzadeh and Conduit, 2016). But, as mentioned earlier, it is also argued that Iranian foreign policy is rarely developed or

implemented without either political or religious approval (Akbarzadeh and Barry, 2016, p.614).

In regards to language challenges, both the Supreme Leader and President Rouhani have published many of their speeches and statements on their English speaking websites. In cases where the material is not published in the original language, it strengthens the analysis that Iranian officials have officially translated the material. This means that Iran themselves have made sure that the message they wish to present comes across as they intend. This type of material has been included as much as possible. However, the media themselves has translated some of the interview material, in cases where the subject has not been willing or able to answer the questions in English. Including such material does not only risk the possibility of inaccurate translation, but by including interviews there is also a risk of including material that has been conducted with a particular agenda. Taking this into account, the thesis has focused on how the Iranian officials have projected a particular narrative and national identity when talking about the regional developments, instead of possible inconsistencies when answering the reporter's (at time confronting) questions.

The official material published by Iranian officials has mainly been gathered from three official websites; the Office of the Supreme Leader, the official website of Supreme Leader Khamanei, and the official website of the Iranian President (Rouhani). United Nations documents have been sourced from official channels, and videos are available from PressTV and YouTube. All material is clearly referenced, and accessed from open channels, in order for others to later trace the analysis, or conduct similar studies.

This section has presented the methodological framework which this thesis is based on. The analysis is based on Hansen's framework because of its analytical comprehensiveness and thoroughly formulated principles of how to build a research project and conduct a satisfactory foreign policy discourse analysis. Furthermore, this chapter has clarified the methodological choices this thesis is based on, in order to demonstrate how the analysis has come to draw its conclusions.

3 Theory

3.1 Theoretical Framework

A theoretical framework in academic research serves as a basis for the particular analysis, or a case to be measured up against. Academic research, both social sciences and natural sciences, are often based on particular assumptions of the world they are describing. These assumptions derive from certain theoretical paradigms and their understanding of the world. The use of social theory as a framework to link and connect specific cases and phenomenon means that an analysis does not merely become a descriptive exercise (Bryman, 2012). The importance of a theoretical framework is apparent in the differentiation between pure descriptive work, and analysis' that seek to explain phenomenon that are not merely linked to the specific case. Nevertheless, it is important to bear in mind, that theoretical paradigms and frameworks encompasses particular conceptual understandings of the social world, which can become deterministic and understood as unchangeable 'truths'.

This study is based on the theoretical framework of poststructuralism, in order to explain the developments of Iranian foreign policy and how it constitutes a relationship with representations of Iranian identity. The theoretical framework will be used as the reference point for the concepts used in the analysis, as well as the particular understanding of the social world it is based on. What distinguishes this particular theoretical framework from other International Relations paradigms is that it does not seek to explain the *why*, but instead focuses on the *how*. Instead of a descriptive theory which seeks to explain the cause or motivation behind state behaviour, poststructuralism attempts to understand how it is what it is, and the historical developments of how it has become (Bryman, 2012).

The aim of this research is not to prove or explain poststructuralist theory by analysing a specific case, but to analyse official Iranian foreign policy through a poststructuralist framework. This section will explain the theoretical assumptions this framework is based on, and the important concepts within the paradigm that underpin the assumptions used in the analysis.

3.2 Poststructuralism

All theories are based on ontological assumptions of what constitutes reality, as well as make epistemological choices for how this reality should be studied for the most accurate explanation. The consequence is that multiple perspectives have emerged on how questions should be asked in order to understand international relations.

Poststructuralist theory emerged as a counter to the conventional theories that dominated the field of International Relations for most of its existence. It differs from the previous theories as it argues that non-material factors are ontologically significant in order to understand the social world, and that social phenomenon and behaviour cannot merely be explained through rationalist epistemology (Hansen, 2006, p.17). The theoretical assumption is that language is the ontologically significant “backbone” of the social world; this because it is through language that material and ideological phenomenon are created, maintained and developed. Without language, the social world would not exist, and explaining the surroundings would not be possible.

Much of the debate surrounding poststructuralist theory in the field of International Relations has centred around the epistemological assumptions of what is to be conceived as knowledge, and how we can come to know what we know. The criticism from positivist theories is that it is not sufficient to explain social phenomenon merely through language. The argument is that language and discourses are not sufficient sources of data as they cannot measure ‘objective truths’, and that studies of the ‘real world’ should “construct verified scientific explanations” (King et al. in Hansen, 2006, p.9). Instead, studying discourse can serve as subjective additions in order to understand particular cases, as theory should be concerned with explanations that can be generalised over time and space.

What distinguishes a poststructuralist approach from other theoretical frameworks is the notion that a social theory is not merely a *tool of analysis*, but that the theory itself should be an *object of analysis* (Campbell and Bleiker, 2016). In other words, a theory is not merely an instrument that explains and describes the social world; the theory itself is constituted through language, which also prescribes meaning to the object of analysis. According to this perspective there cannot exist any ‘objective truths’ that are external to cognitive interpretation, since meaning is developed through interpretation of concepts and categories in language.

Such an approach emphasises and seeks to reveal “the importance of representation, the relationship of power and knowledge, and the politics of identity” (Campbell and Bleiker, 2016, p.198), which means that utilising a poststructuralist framework entails the importance of first identifying who is speaking, in what context, and to whom. This approach will point out the significant relationship between; who holds the words, who creates the narratives and controls the discourse, and who receives or engages with the message. Language, therefore, serves as a powerful instrument. It can define what exists and what does not, who is included or excluded, who ‘we’ are and who the ‘enemy’ is. Language also serves as an instrument to strengthen, develop and maintain certain images of identity. Not only do they define who is ‘inside’ or ‘outside’, but also what it entails to be included as part of the ‘Self’ or excluded to the ‘Other’. It is through concepts and representations that the Self and the Other can constitute mutual interpretation. By prescribing a particular meaning over time, it strengthens the mutual interpretation of that concept until it no longer requires interpretation, but instead is understood as a social truth. When these constructed representations are related to identities, they come to “establish a discourse of identity politics as the frame of reference for world politics” (Campbell and Bleiker, 2016, p.197).

It is therefore important to understand the significance of language in international relation; how language gives meaning, how language is created, how it is shaped and maintain, particular in discourses – which again can lead to actions. As such, taking a poststructuralist approach is not merely prescribing a theory to explain a particular case, rather an approach that can help to interpreting the social world by focusing on the ontological building block; language (Campbell and Bleiker, 2016).

By including and excluding particular views and representations, foreign policy serves as a way to ‘write security’; defining what is and what is not a security threat and national interest (Holland, 2013, p.3). Thus, poststructuralism is concerned with the consequences of one representation over other, and “identifying and explaining how actors, events and issues are problematised” (Campbell and Bleiker, 2016, p.212). In other words, *how* the discourse came to be, and *how* it has built an understanding of a problem and its solutions.

Poststructuralism is not necessarily concerned with the motivations of states – and their perceived interests – but merely seek to understand the way in which international relations is conducted, and the constitutive development of foreign policy discourse and identity maintenance and construction (Campbell, 2013). With this understanding, state motivations and goals are not something that is static and non-changeable, but instead are the product of

language and discourse. Poststructuralism hence does not seek to explain *why* states act as they do, but instead *how* states have come to the point of acting a certain way.

3.2.1 Significance of language

The theoretical assumptions of poststructuralism are based on a particular understanding of the relationship between knowledge and power. According to this understanding power is exercised relational (Foucault, 1981). In other words, it is through the use of language that power is increased and maintained. It builds on the claim that language is the ontological building block the social phenomenon, but goes further than understanding language as merely an instrument or a tool for expression and interpretation (Hansen, 2006).

Language is the building block of the social world, as it is difficult to explain anything in the physical or social world without the use of words. The physical would still exist, but it would be impossible to explain its form or purpose. As for social phenomenon, – which is unobservable – they would not exist without the language to describe or interpret them. Acknowledging the position of language in how we understand the world around us. It is therefore interesting that much of the early work in the field of International Relations was less interested on the importance of language in how states interact, or how power is transferred through language, compared to material variables (Holland, 2012).

Not only is language social; it is a system of communication, which employs collective codes and meaning which “constitutive for what is brought into being” (Hansen, 2006). It constructs the meaning and identity of things, and is therefore inclined to interpretation. Following this interpretation, concepts do not possess any essential qualities external to language; as the qualities and representations are socially constructed. Hence, language cannot be objective; it is political and constitutive. Meaning it is constructed through linking similar interpretations and differentiating definitions (Holland, 2013).

When studying social phenomenon researchers are dependent on using concepts and categories to explain and analyse. Part of a poststructuralist analysis is recognising that these concepts and categories are not objective descriptions, but have value and meaning ascribed to them as language has developed. These concepts and categories are used to build particular narratives – understandings of the world, – which, over time, can become the dominant understanding and stabilised as a discourse (Holland, 2012, p.10).

It is through discourse that meaning is generated. A discourse is a “series of representations and practices through which meaning is produced, identities constituted, social relations

established” (Campbell and Bleiker, 2016, p.208), it regulates “which meanings are produced by legitimising or discrediting statements in a comparatively systematic way” (Holland, 2013, p.12). Thus, discourse analysis is about analysing the mutual constitutive construction, reconstruction and maintenance of identities and foreign policy (Hansen, 2006). Narratives of the Self are created through particular discourses, which becomes a dichotomy for the ‘Other’. It is an intertwined process where foreign policy discourse reproduces the distinction between ‘outside’ and ‘inside’, while also being influenced by the same identities. The dualism of the mutual constitutive entities is a continuous process, and poststructuralism emphasises language as the constructing mechanism, constantly changing or maintaining identities and foreign policy.

Hansen (2006, p.211) argues that, “the ontological starting point for poststructuralist discourse analysis is a conceptualization of policy as always dependent upon the articulation of identity, while identity is simultaneously produced and reproduced through the formulation and legitimation of policy”. This understanding of foreign policy makes it both dependent and constitutive of identity – it removes foreign policy as a property of states, or independent action, and instead defines it as “discursive and political practice” (Hansen, 2006, p.211). In this way, since foreign policy is presented on behalf of a constructed ‘We’, it is important to understand how it includes and excludes what is understood as ‘We’, who is addressed, and which voices will be heard.

Investigating foreign policy discourse enables this thesis to explore how Iran is attempting to frame and construct a particular narrative about the Syrian conflict and the Iranian involvement. It is more common in mainstream approaches to ask *why* something happened instead of *how* it came about. ‘How’ questions do not take the world as given and questions the process of how particular conditions came about in order for decisions to be made; “the process through which threats come to be thought and spoken as ‘threats’, rather than skipping to ‘why’ they were dealt with” (Holland, 2013, p.4). Poststructuralism claims that, “foreign policy discourses articulate and intertwine material factors and ideas to such an extent that the two cannot be separated from another” (Hansen, 2006, p.1). Hence the focus of discourse analysis, as identity cannot be separated from the discourses that produce and implement foreign policy.

3.2.2 Discourse, ideology and power

As explained earlier, language is the essential building block of the poststructuralist understanding of the world around us – it is the ontological building block of the social world. It defines what exists, and can therefore be used as a powerful instrument. The connection between language and discourse is essential for poststructuralist ontology. Not only is discourse and language intertwined in constitution for what is brought into being, through discourse, language also becomes social and political; “an unstable system of signs that generate meaning through a simultaneous construction of identity and difference” (Hansen, 2006, p.17). Discourse is therefore more than just language and communication. Discourse is a collection of narratives with similar values. In other words, it can be explained as the “means of which ideology [...] is transferred, articulated or communicated (Holliday, 2016, p.12).

However, since discourse is a way of transmitting language and ideas, it also becomes a vessel to transfer, maintain and strengthen ideology. Whereas ideology is the system that surrounds a set of beliefs, discourse is the means in which ideas are transferred. What this means is that ideology is both “constructed and recognized in discourse” (Holliday, 2016, p.12). This is how established ideologies turn in to ‘social truths’ and ‘common sense’ when discourses are stabilised, by limiting, or eliminating competing ideologies.

However, discourse is not merely an instrument or a way of transmitting messages of power and resistance. Instead, the discourse itself becomes “that thing for which and by which there is a struggle, [as] discourse is the power which is to be seized” (Foucault, 1981, p.53). Silencing competing discourses to project power can become an end in itself, not merely a means in which to create, maintain and expand the dominant ideology.

Recognising the relationship between this power, knowledge and discourse is important in order to trace the origin of dominant ideologies and uncover their meaning. This is because once a discourse is stabilised, it comes to be recognised as a social truth, which makes it “virtually impossible to think outside them” (Young, cited in Holliday, 2016, p.12). A stabilised discourse is therefore connected to the exercise of power, as the stabilisation of discourses are “both constituted by, and ensure the reproduction of, the social system, though forms of selection, exclusion, and domination” (Young, cited in Holliday, 2016, p.12).

3.2.3 Foreign policy and identity

At the centre of poststructuralist argument is the claim that identity is the “ontological and epistemological centre of [...] discourse analysis” (Hansen, 2006, p.37), and the development of identity and foreign policy are mutually constitutive. States develop particular foreign policies according to a specific understanding of their own identities; how they define the ‘Self’. But the established discourse and understanding of the ‘Self’ is not a constant, it is continuously developed by including certain narratives that fit the perception of ‘Self’, while excluding other narratives in order to create a distinction between the ‘Self’ from the ‘Other’. This process of differentiation happens through intertextual linking similar narratives from different sources, and is therefore a relational construction, dependent on an ‘Other’ in order to establish a ‘Self’ (Hansen, 2006, p.17).

Studying identity re-emerged as a field in international relations after the Cold War. It became particularly important for scholars of constructivism in understanding elements of foreign policy that cannot be explained merely by rationalist explanations. But while constructivism considers ideological concepts such as identity, norms and values as significant factors, that influences and shapes states’ behaviour (Epstein, 2010, p.1). For them, these concepts are pre-given. Poststructuralism disagrees with this understanding, as they believe the ontology of language, which means that a particular identity, norm, or value cannot exist without the application of language. Therefore identities are not pre-given, but constantly need to be developed and maintained. The claim that identity is not a constant, but instead in constant development, is one of the key differentiations between poststructuralism and constructivism and their understanding of the significance of identity in international relations (Epstein, 2010).

By utilising a discourse approach to study identity, research might be able to steer “clear of some important pitfalls that have taken shape around the way in which the concept has become entrenched in the discipline” (Epstein, 2010, p.2). The argument is that although the constructivist paradigm introduced identity into International Relations, their understanding of identity “has [become] entrenched [on] a fixed, essentialized understanding” (Epstein, 2010, p.8). This understanding also assumes that how we understand identity can be transferred from the individual level to state level, meaning that states may develop feelings of identity in contrast to perception of identity (Epstein, 2010). The discourse approach on the other hand, “does not begin by presuming a self”, but instead asks *who speaks*, to *whom*, and *how*. The discourse is central to what states do and who they are, and their changing forces of identity.

The discourses states create and maintain, not only determine their position in relation to other states, but also work as maintaining functions for statehood (Epstein, 2010, p.15) through including particular discourses, while excluding others.

The relationship between language, identity and agency are key premises of the discourse approach, which argues that, “language is effective and that to speak is also to act. [...] Social actors are first and foremost speaking actors”, therefore “speaking is both key modality of their agency and of the way in which they position themselves in the world”. Lastly, “actor behavior is regulated by pre-existing discourses that structure the field of possible actions” (Epstein, 2010, p.17). Essentially, this means that not only do identity and foreign policy influence each other, and are projected to an audience, but that a state’s actions and behaviour will be influenced by dominant discourse. Studying the language of foreign policy and the development of discourses is therefore not merely an exercise in metalanguage, but is important in understanding international behaviour.

By basing this thesis on a poststructuralist framework, it builds on the assumption that it is not possible to prove a causal relationship between foreign policy discourse and identity. Instead, by refusing causal epistemology this study assumes that foreign policy’s goal “is to create a stable link between representations of identity and the proposed policy, [which] requires internal discourse stability between identity and policy as well as external constraints on the discourse to be addressed” (Hansen, 2006, p.17). This means that in order for a foreign policy discourse to become an unchallenged “truth”, it needs to stabilise the discourse by aligning its identity with its projected goals, while eliminating challenging narratives.

Political activity is centred around the construction of a stable connection between policy and identity, it is therefore important that the two are seen to be consistent. If there is an imbalance there will be effort to adapt or adjust the policy or identity in order to retain the balance for the political activity to be seen as legitimate (Hansen, 2016, p.28-29). This is because it is through particular constructions of identity that policy is legitimised.

For discourse analysis it is important to clarify how identity is understood and defined, before engaging in the particular case study. Hansen (2006) argues that political construction of identity should not be fixed to a distinction of the Self and the Other as merely radical dichotomies, as this might lead to a static view of foreign policy discourse, which not only could “prevent engagement with important parts of contemporary foreign policy” (Hansen, 2006, p.41), but also limits the policy’s possibility of change.

Instead of assuming that foreign policy is based on a 'Self' that is radically different from the 'Other', the construction of identity in foreign policy should be analysed through linking and differentiation by identifying how the Self-Other relationship is spatially, temporally and ethically situated within the discourse (Hansen, 2006, p.37). This means that the study must analyse how foreign policy discourse creates boundaries through delineation of space; how it incorporates transformation; and how it is legitimised through ethical and moral responsibilities (Hansen, 2006).

In this study of the Iranian foreign policy towards Syria, I will try to examine the development of the official foreign policy discourse over time, and how this relates to the Iranian understanding of national identity. What the study will be interested in is examining if there has been a modification of discourse over time, in order to accommodate for the perception of national identity, as the stability and legitimacy of the discourse is dependent on how identity and foreign policy are aligned. Since Iranian political power is separated between the President and the Supreme Leader, it will also be interesting to examine which of the two has the most power to adapt the political discourse, or who is forced to adjust their policy in order to accommodate the more powerful discourse.

It has been important for the Iranian regime to maintain a particular Iranian identity to legitimise the Islamic Revolution and maintain in political power. The state political system is built on the basis of a set of religious principles that have become the main narrative of official Iranian identity. This study will argue that the dominant discourse of the Iranian Self has developed by projecting a particular set of narratives, while excluding and suppressing opposing narratives and identities. This construction of the Iranian Self has developed through both inclusion and differentiation, which has been helped along by political suppression and restricted freedom of expression on competing discourses. The development and maintenance of national identity has formed through linking and separating the Iranian 'Self' in terms of spatial, temporal and ethical dimensions.

4 Analysis

4.1 The Iranian official foreign policy discourses

In order to do a comprehensive analysis of official Iranian foreign policy on the Syrian conflict, it is not merely adequate to isolate this case, but should attempt to analyse the particular foreign policy discourse within the regional context, and how it relates to a specific Iranian understanding of ‘Self’. How Iran portrays itself and its relations with the wider region, and the world, is rooted in a historical development of identity, which has changed over time (Nia, 2011). Parallel with the event that has happened in Syria, Iran has been involved in series of other domestic and international events, such as change of political leadership, regional political transformation and instability, as well as international negotiations on Iran’s nuclear programme. In addition, there are continuous domestic tensions between political factions (Moslum, 2002). Because policy is never developed in a political vacuum, this thesis has included two additional developments which will be perceived to have influence on the Iranian official policy in Syria. This has been assumed necessary to be able to understand *how* the particular Syrian discourse has developed.

This chapter is divided into four sections. The three first sections will examine three different periods, which are related to the Syrian discourse, while the last section will reflect on the developments between them, in order to recognise patterns or changes in national identity projection.

The first section will analyse how Iran framed the regional demonstrations that emerged in December 2010, and developed into violent uprisings against several regimes across the MENA region, in early 2011. The aim of the section is to establish the context of the regional developments of the time, to demonstrate that there was a change in Iranian foreign policy when the demonstrations reached Syria. The section will also reflect on the significance of discourse silence, as the Iranian regime avoided talking about the developments in Syria the first couple of months.

This section will examine key speeches and interviews, as well as selected official statements during the developments in the MENA region, before and during the initial outbreak of uprisings in Syria. Key texts will be speeches by the Supreme Leader in February 2011, as these texts demonstrate how national identity is related to how Iran presents the events and their role in it.

The second section will examine how the official Iranian narrative about the Syrian conflict has developed in the period between 2011 and 2016. By closely examining speeches,

statements and interviews of Iranian officials this section aims at explaining how the Syrian discourse developed differently than the 'Islamic Awakening' discourse, while still integrating similar projections of national identity. This section will demonstrate how Iran has attempted to frame the Syrian uprising as an external manipulation, which shifts the policy focus from support for the regional developments to condemning the protest against the Syrian regime.

This development and shift in discourse, attempts to disconnect what is happening in Syria, from the previous discourse of 'Islamic Awakening' that is projected to the rest of the region. Instead, the official Iranian discourse attempts to link the Syrian uprisings, Iranian involvement, and the international response, with the well-established anti-western discourse that has been projected by the Iranian regime since the revolution.

Section three will analyse a particular development after President Rouhani's inauguration in August 2013. Although not explicitly directed at Syria, President Rouhani addressed the United Nations General Assembly with a proposal to form a 'World Against Violence and Extremism' (WAVE). This shift in discourse is included in the study because it is understood as part of the wider foreign policy discourse on the developments in the region, particularly in Syria (and Iraq). By internationally promoting this initiative, Iran opened up a potential for a more diplomatic and reconciling foreign policy discourse that had the possibility of connecting global interest against violence and extremism. It also placed Iran in a leading role, and an opportunity for international reconciliation that could challenge the 'Iranophobia' in the international community. The WAVE initiative also gave Iran the opportunity to connect the 'World Against Violence and Extremism' with the Syrian conflict, as the uprisings in Syria at this point had turned into a civil war between the regime, opposition and terrorist groups. The WAVE initiative can therefore be incorporated as part of the Iranian foreign policy discourse towards Syria.

The final section of this chapter will reflect on the developments between the different phases, and how they relate to the projection of national identity. The aim is to demonstrate that despite discursive shifts in foreign policy, and the attempt to project as an advocate for a more peaceful and less violent world, the official Iranian foreign policy is still deeply influenced by a 'resistance' identity that was formed and developed as part of the core identity of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

4.1.1 'Islamic Awakening' and Syrian silence

This section will focus on the first period of 2011. This period is characterised by the uprisings in the MENA region and how Iran constructed a narrative to suit the situation, which they projected domestically, regionally and internationally. After a short time, the regional developments spread to Syria, and Iran consistently distinguished the two developments as separate issues. This study is based on the assumption that the Iranian reaction to the developments in Syria is related to how Iran responded to the developments in the region before the demonstrations in Syria started. The challenge being that the relationship between Iran and Syria meant that Iran could not support the anti-regime demonstrations without damaging its relationship with its closest regional ally. This shift in discourse between the two developments is therefore interesting when trying to understand how Iranian foreign policy discourse develops.

This section will mainly focus on speeches made by the Supreme Leader, as Ayatollah Khamenei has been the most essential supporter of 'the Islamic Awakening' a movement, which is claimed to include both political and religious elements. The Iranian support for the regional developments, and the framing of these developments as part of an 'Islamic Awakening' climaxed in February 2011 after the Supreme Leader delivered an extra-long Friday prayer in both Farsi and Arabic. This speech, as well as statements in the following weeks will serve as the key texts in which the 'Islamic Awakening' discourse analysis will be based on. Tracing the development of the 'Islamic Awakening' discourse and the Syrian conflict, there is limited mention of Syria in this phase. This discursive silence will be reflected on at the end of this section.

When the uprisings in the MENA region started in late 2010 and early 2011, the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei dominated the Iranian official response. Khamenei echoed former Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini, who predicted and advocated for the export of the Islamic Revolution beyond Iranian borders. Khamenei's message was that Iran had been waiting 30 years for an Islamic uprising against the West and their pro-Western allies, and now it was finally happening (Khomeini, 2002, p.24). Khamenei projected a narrative that labelled the Arab uprisings as part of the larger Islamic Awakening movement –which would unite the Muslim *Ummah* (Muslim community).

Countering the argument that the 'Arab Spring' was connected to the Iranian 'Green Movement' of 2009, Iranian's former foreign minister Salehi claimed in an interview that

these two events were conceptually different movements. Iran perceived the ‘Islamic Awakening’ as an “authentic event” that was instigated by “the will of the people” that have “risen to ask for rights”, in contrast to the Iranian demonstrations in 2009, that were “externally manipulated” (France24, 2011). It would also be impossible for such an ‘Awakening’ to spread to Iran, as Iran has already experienced this movement 32 years ago, the argument being that the “government in Iran has [already] emerged from the will of the people” (France24, 2011), and therefore such a movement is not necessary.

By connecting the current uprisings to a continuation of the Islamic Revolution, the Iranian regime not only enhanced their symbolic value as the first country to go through an Islamic transformation, but also legitimising the argument that the Iranian people would not need to demand a change which they had already achieved. Though this may only be one of the arguments for why the uprisings in the region did not spread to Iran, the connection made between Iran, the Islamic Revolution, and the regional uprisings is a significant element of the first part of the next section.

The first Friday in February 2011, the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei spoke to the people of Iran about the regional developments that were happening in Tunisia, Egypt and Libya. The speech, which was partially presented in Arabic in order to address a larger international audience, claimed that the developments in the region were indeed the ‘Islamic Awakening’ they had been anticipating since the Islamic Revolution in 1979 (Khamenei, 2011c). In the same speech the Supreme Leader claimed that “the global arrogance” (a term that includes the United States, Israel, the west, and their allies) were distorting the truth by claiming that the regional demonstrations were a largely secular movement demanding democratic rights, social and economic equality. According to Iran, the western powers were attempting to distract from the fact that this was an Islamic movement, a call for repositioning Islam’s place in politics, and the people’s demonstration against pro-western leaders. This argument was strengthened by adding that “the awakening of the Islamic Egyptian people is an Islamic liberation movement and I, in the name of the Iranian government, salute the Egyptian people and the Tunisian people’ (Khamenei cited in Parchami, 2012, p.37). The Supreme Leader added that, the ‘Awakening’ is a clear indication that “the oppressive and humiliating balance that domineering westerners and their puppets had imposed on the regional nations over the past 150 years, has been upset and a new chapter has begun in the history of the region” (Khamenei, 2011b).

The narrative that was projected from Iran in the beginning of the uprisings in the Middle East and North Africa was fixed on Iran as a supporter and guider of the ‘Islamic Awakening’. The language that was used – the anti-American discourse – to describe the situations in Egypt and Tunisia strengthened the position of Iran as the frontrunner for anti-Western resistance. The regimes that the people were protesting against were not traditionally allies of the Islamic Republic, and therefore the support of the protestors fell in line with the Iranian official foreign policy towards their Arab neighbours (Parchami, 2012).

An Iranian identity of resistance against the “global hegemonic powers” has been projected ever since the Islamic Revolution, and is embedded in Iranian foreign policy and constitution through “the rejection of all forms of domination [...] with respect to the hegemonic superpowers” (IranOnline, 2016). This image of an Iranian opposition towards the western world has developed simultaneously with the attempts to establish Islamic unity across the Muslim *Ummah*, in the belief that unity among Muslims would support the Islamic Revolution to expand beyond Iranian borders (Khamenei, 1987).

Tracing the use of ‘Islamic Awakening’ reveals that term is not constructed explicitly for the developments in the region today, but has been used within Iranian discourse for decades (Mohseni, 2013, p.3). Already in 1987, when Khamenei was President of the Islamic Republic, he explained that an ‘Islamic Awakening’ is “not the child of the Islamic Revolution in Iran. Rather, it is the brother of the Islamic Revolution” (Khamenei, 1987), implying that future Islamic movements would not be identical to the Iranian experience, but be inspired by the achievements of the Islamic Revolution. Likewise there was a confidence that the shift towards a more Islamic identity in other Muslim countries would result in similar developments, as “we should expect [such] events in many other parts of the world” (Khamenei, 1987), the same mantra as Supreme Leader Khomeini preached, almost as a prophesy (Khomeini, 2002).

The use of the term increased from 2001 as a response to what was seen as an increased “Islamophobia” in the West, though cartoons and restrictions on Muslim practices, but nothing compared to how the term was used and projected from 2011. Not only was there already an established meaning behind the term as an expression of popular movement, but it also was a strong and obvious connection to Iranian revolutionary history. On the anniversary of the Islamic Revolution in February 2011, Khamenei declared at Friday prayer that; “today’s events in North Africa, the country of Egypt, the country of Tunisia, and other countries have another meaning, a special meaning, for the Iranian nation. This is what has

always been called the Islamic Awakening [...] Today it is showing itself” (Khamenei, 2011c).

In his first sermon addressing the uprisings in Tunisia and Egypt, Khamenei claimed that if the protestors were to succeed in Egypt, it would be a serious defeat of the United States in the region, and mark the end of the ‘global arrogance’ over the Islamic world. While prophesising the future, Khamenei also stressed that Iran would not interfere in other states domestic affairs – despite making the obvious connection that what was going on in Egypt and Tunisia was inspired by the Islamic Revolution in Iran (Khamenei, 2011c).

Projecting the Iranian narrative of an Islamic Awakening through religious and political channels does not only mean that Iran is able to define how the developments are understood and interpreted, but also works as an attempt to unify the Muslim world against a common enemy. By emphasising that the problems in the region are results of external interference, the aim of the resistance is to unify against the enemy that seeks to “eliminate national and religious identity in the world of Islam” (Khamenei, 2011d). The Supreme Leader has therefore advocated for the unity of the Islamic world in order to counter the western powers. This is possible through “further unity, further solidarity, adhering to Islam, promoting Islam and standing up against the greed of America and other arrogant powers” (Khamenei, 2011d), by strengthening a united Islamic identity.

Through the speeches of Supreme Leader Khamenei, Iran develops a narrative that not only attempts to unify the Muslim world under the leadership of the Islamic Republic, but it also excludes the elements of the demonstrations and uprisings that do not fit the anti-western discourse which Iran is projecting. The elements of the demonstrations that do not fit this particular narrative are therefore prescribed as enemy propaganda, or proof of external interference (Khamenei, 2011c). This particular narrative was mainly been presented and maintained by the religious section of the Iranian regime; the part of the political establishment that serves as the leader of the Revolution.

Khamenei adds to the unifying dimension of the narrative by not only legitimising the Islamic Awakening as a resistance against western-imperialism and its materialistic values, but also incorporates the baseline religious argument of good versus evil. Addressing government officials, the Supreme Leader warns against the arrogant powers and their demons, and the danger they pose by “mislead[ing] the people of the world by interfering in the personal life of people, their economy, their understanding and their ideologies, life enters a dark void”

(Khamenei, 2011b). Consequently the opposite of such evil is the awakening that leads to the right path of Islam. By claiming that the uprisings in the region are the start of this enlightenment and an “expression of the hatred towards the presence of the arrogant powers” (Khamenei, 2011b), Iran is attempting to unify the Islamic world behind its revolution and while projecting its identity of resistance. This religious dimension of Iranian foreign policy is possible because of the unique role of the Supreme Leader, who serves as both a political and religious authority, while also ensuring the position as leader of the Islamic Revolution.

The development of the narrative and discourse of the Islamic Awakening was as much about linking identities, as differentiation. By projecting a particular narrative of what is happening in the surrounding region, the Iranian regime could link their revolutionary identity and history as a country of western opposition, to the anti-western and Islamist elements of the current uprisings. By focusing on a united Muslim *Ummah* rather than differentiating on sectarian or national identity, the narrative has the possibility of accommodating the whole Islamic world against the ‘Other’.

The problem with projecting this particular narrative became evident when the anti-regime protests reached Syria, and came into conflict with Iranian national interests (Parchami, 2012). Supreme Leader Khamenei continued to give speeches on the ‘Islamic Awakening’ throughout 2011, and Tehran hosted international conferences on the subject in 2012 and 2013 (Khamenei, 2012; Khamenei, 2013a), but excluded to include Syria in the ‘Awakening discourse’. The first couple of month after the outbreak in Damascus, the Supreme Leader and the rest of the Iranian political establishment were reluctant to talk about the situation in Syria, and consistently excluded Syria when talking about the positive developments of the ‘Awakening’. Following the speeches made by the Supreme Leader in the first half of 2011, there is no mention of Syria before late June that year (Khamenei, 2011c), over three months after the demonstrations in Syria started.

After experiencing success of the ‘Islamic Awakening’, which allowed Iran to create a stable and strong foreign policy discourse that accommodated for their understanding and projection of national identity, Iran was forced to acknowledge the situation in the neighbouring country Syria. The likely choice of action from an outside perspective would be to think that Iran would include the developments in Syria in the highly successful ‘Islamic Awakening’. This did not happen. Because of the highly important alliance between Iran and Syria, supporting the uprisings against the Syrian regime was not an option (Ansani and Tabrizi, 2016).

A second option would be to radically change their policy-identity construction in order to accommodate for developments in Syria with the regional developments, while still protecting national interests. This would mean that Iran would have to disconnect the regional developments with the Islamic identity and revolutionary resistance, in order to claim that all the regional developments were illegitimate, un-Islamic, and instigated by foreigners. This seemed very unlikely as the 'Islamic Awakening' was highly praised and fronted by the Supreme Leader himself.

Instead the Iranian regime went for the option of silence. Though this option is considered a difficult to exercise in an environment with mass media and oppositional criticism (Hansen, 2016, p.33), it was less challenging for a state like Iran, which obtains a high level of media and oppositional control. Although remaining silence could potentially lead to pressure from international media or from other states, Iran avoided domestic media pressure, as the Iranian silence was accompanied by limited domestic media reports on the developments in Syria (Shuster, 2011). According to Hansen (2006, p.33), silence is applied as a discursive instrument when it becomes challenging to manoeuvre policy in order to include new developments with the current discourse, or come up with a new policy.

The first period of the Syrian conflict there is limited mentioning of Syria from Iran. And the few times where Syria is mentioned, it is never related to the other developments in the region, but presented as a separate case detached from the uprisings happening in other Arab countries in the same period (Khamenei, 2011c). Furthermore, the Supreme Leader continued to speak regularly of the 'Islamic Awakening' throughout 2011 and into 2012, though consequently without including anything on Syria.

Rhetorically it is possible to consider this silence as an instrument of discourse, which means it can be assigned meaning in particular contexts. The reason behind the Iranian silence about Syria can be considered deliberate or necessary in order to maintain security in a situation where the subject believes that vocalising opinions or resistance would jeopardise their own security. Lene Hansen (2000, p.297) terms this the 'Security of Silence', which "occurs when insecurity cannot be voiced, when raising something as a security problem is impossible or might even aggravate the threat being faced". In other words, in some cases silence is in fact the more secure option in cases where the subject is either unable to speak or speaking could increase the potential threat. Although Hansen uses this term to explain how silence can be understood rhetorically in situations of gender and securitisation, it is still possible to argue that it also can apply to cases of 'State Security of Silence'.

There are lines to be drawn to other situations where the subject either cannot speak, or is unwilling to speak because of the anticipated consequences of speaking may increase the threat to own security. In this case, it could be argued that Iran decided not to talk about the developments in Syria or include them in the ‘Islamic Awakening’ discourse because Iran believed that its strategic relationship with Syria would be jeopardised; losing its only regional ally, its access to the Mediterranean, its connection to Hezbollah; and placing Iran in a potentially less secure position regionally and globally.

The Iranian regime’s silence demonstrates the challenge to come up with a narrative that would both suit national interest, and still project and support the projected national identity. The significance of silence, or “non-speak”, in foreign policy discourse can be considered part of a rhetorical repertoire that a state can utilise to project or protect their national interests. ‘Absence’ in this sense, does not necessarily mean that there is no information, therefore it is important to question and reflect on the meaning of this absence, and how it relates to the specific context.

The challenge of implementing Syria into the ‘Islamic Awakening’ discourse left the Iranian regime with the option of silence. But as the uprisings continued, this silence could not last forever. After a period of not mentioning Syria at all, the Iranian regime decided to incorporate Syria into an already established anti-western narrative, where Iran could claim, that the instability in their neighbouring country was caused by the West intervening in Syrian domestic politics. But this narrative meant that Iran would have to claim that the demonstrations and conflict in Syria was ontologically different than the uprisings in the other Arab countries.

In short, this section has argued that the Iranian official foreign policy discourse advocated for the uprisings and developments in the Middle East, while simultaneously avoiding to implement Syria into the well-established ‘Islamic Awakening’ discourse. Instead of engaging with the Syrian conflict, Iran focused on strengthening the narrative of the ‘Awakening’, connecting their Revolutionary foreign policy with a central role in the “revolting” Middle East. The silence on Syria did not last, and the next section will examine how the further developments in Syria were framed differently from the ‘Islamic Awakening’.

4.1.2 Syria and foreign intervention

The second section of this analysis moves beyond the initial stage, in order to examine how official Iran has portrayed the developments in Syria, after the regime's initial silence. It seeks to answer the question of how the Iranian regime managed to develop a narrative of official foreign policy towards Syria, which would accommodate both national identity and regime interests.

Although official Iran started opening up on talking about the developments in Syria, it has continued to be relatively restricted on the amount of official statements beyond commenting on ongoing developments, and responding to questions during international interviews. In contrast to the 'Islamic Awakening' discourse, which was framed 'spectacularly' in an unusual long sermon on the anniversary of the Islamic Revolution, the 'Syria discourse' has developed more subtly through smaller statements, passages in speeches, and interviews. This has influenced the choice and inclusion of material, as there is no one *key text*, but instead this section aims at analysing the discourse that has developed through the many smaller contributions to the Syria debate.

This section argues that the escalated situation in Syria, which included increased capabilities of Syrian opposition groups, called for the development of an official Iranian narrative. External pressure made it difficult for Iran not to comment on the ongoing situation in their neighbouring country. This section will argue that the same anti-Western discourse which was used to support and rally for the 'Islamic Awakening' was turned around and extended in order to encapsulate the new threats towards the Syrian regime, and to Iranian borders. In this narrative Iran is portrayed as stable and constant, the protector of Islamic values, the opposition against the hegemonic powers, and a victim of Western imperialism. Not only is Iran the source of stability in the region, but also a supporter of international law and national sovereignty, against the Western hegemonic powers that act according to their agenda to destabilise the Middle East.

Over time, and as the conflict in Syria escalated, Iran slowly opened up for officially commenting on the developments in the neighbouring country. Not only was there pressure from the Iranian public for more information about what was going on across the border in Syria (Shuster, 2011), but there was also pressure from international media when officials from the regime travelled abroad. The media would repeat questioning how Iran could stay silent and support the brutality of the al-Assad regime (SBS Dateline, 2012).

Faced with the facts of what was happening in Syria, the Iranian regime needed to develop a new policy that could explain the situation, while at the same time gave accommodated for national interests and would be possible to justify though the projection of national identity. The option was to shift the discursive emphasis; by creating a link between Syria and a discursive framework that already existed. The response was to frame Syria within the Iranian revolutionary discourse, arguing that the demonstrations in Syria were part of a Western intervention against the 'Axis of resistance'. Khamenei stated that Iran strongly opposes foreign intervention in Syria, and that the Syrian support for the resistance movement is the main reason to U.S. hostilities in the country. He also added that any comprehensive analysis of the situation in Syria would be able to identify the "US project" (FARS News, 2012). The problem with this discourse shift was that it did not conform to the current discourse of 'Islamic Awakening', meaning that Iran needed to argue that the uprisings in Syria were categorically different from the uprisings in the rest of the region.

Following such as strategy, Iran's foreign minister at the time Ali Akbar Salehi, claimed that Iran was "a strong ally of the people of Syria", explaining that the Iranian regime is a strong supporter of every persons right to enjoy democracy and elections. But, as he further explained, this was not what was going on in Syria. While expressing deep concerns for what was happening, he claimed that the demonstrations in Syria were instigated by outside interference; by powers that dictated what the Syrian people should believe about their own government (SBS Dateline, 2012). While the Iranian regime recognised that there also were endogenously initiated demonstrations – Iran believed that it is the responsibility of the Syrian government to meet the demands of the people, but that outside powers should not facilitate for such change, and should instead focus on supporting reconciliation between the government and the opposition (SBS Dateline, 2012).

The narrative of the Syrian developments that Iran is projecting reflects the official position of the Iranian regime, which strongly condemns outside interference into states internal affairs. This position put forth in international relations has been the official narrative since the Islamic Revolution in response to what they believed to be Western interference in Iranian domestic politics (Khamenei, 2016a).

The claim of the Islamic Revolution of imperialist domination in the region is echoed through the narrative of Western interference in Syria. This narrative is projected more broadly through Iranian media channels that specifically target an international audience. PressTV, an Iranian news channel with close ties to the regime, have published documentaries that claim

to investigate the real story behind the Syrian civil war. Through the use of images and interviews, PressTV presents a narrative that blames America for the uprisings in the country (PressTV, 2012¹). This accusation is backed by the argument that the results in the 2012 referendum and parliamentary elections prove that the majority of the Syrian people support their current regime; therefore the uprisings must be instigated and supported externally (PressTV, 2012).

In contrast to the Iranian support for the other regional uprisings, there has been no support for the uprisings in Syria, due to the fact that the Syrian developments were blamed on foreign manipulation. This does not mean that the Iranian regime has not expressed deep concern for the situation, and the Syrian people. This has been especially emphasised since President Rouhani, and Iran has reassured that it would maintain its support to the Syrian people; repeating that Iran has always supported the people of Syria against abuse and terrorism, in addition to the continued support for the Syrian government against terrorist groups and foreign interference (President.ir, 2013). It demonstrated Iran's wish to continue the strong relationship between Damascus and Tehran.

After months of silence, the Supreme Leader started mentioning Syria in his speeches to domestic and international audiences. The first time Khamenei mentioned Syria in one of his speeches was almost four months after the demonstrations and uprisings broke out in March 2011. The message was short; acknowledging the situation in the neighbouring country, while avoiding mentioning the Iranian position or reactions. In the brief acknowledgement of the situation, Khamenei stated that "America is clearly involved in Syria" (Khamenei, 2011a), since the United States realised it could take advantage of, and simulate the type of uprisings seen in Egypt, Tunisia, Yemen, and Libya – to cause problems in Syria. But these regional developments have been anti-American and anti-Zionist movements, which is not the case for Syria (Khamenei, 2011a). The argument projected by the Iranian regime was that what is happening in Syria was fundamentally different than what was happening in the rest of the region.

After this there is no mention of Syria from the Supreme Leader (in English published sources) until his speech at the International Conference on Islamic Awakening in December 2012; almost two years after the conflict started. Again, the United States was blamed for intervening and supporting violent opposition in Syria, in order to defeat the 'resistance',

¹ The original video published on <http://presstvdoc.com/Default/Detail/10139> does not have a publishing date, but the same video has been uploaded on www.youtube.com in the period July-August 2012

making a reference to the recent anti-Western Islamic Awakening, and the continuous resistance of the Islamic Revolution (Khamanei, 2012).

After the Islamic Awakening conference a pattern emerges of how Khamanei talks about the Syrian developments. This becomes clear after reading through large amounts of the published speeches and statements. After the period of silence, the Supreme Leader embeds the developments in Syria into the already established ‘anti-Western discourse’. This discourse has developed in parallel with the ‘Islamic Civilisation’ narrative.

This narrative, with the aim of creating an Islamic civilisation, has been projected since the establishment of the Islamic Republic. The concept has been constructed and developed as a dichotomy “in relation to ‘Western Civilization’” (Holliday, 2016, p.21). By framing foreign policy in terms of civilisation, politicians and powerful leaders are able to “arouse their constituents against some demonised enemy” (Cox, 2000, p.217). For the Iranian regime this demonised enemy is the “Western Civilization”, constructed as an opposite against the Revolutionary Iranian identity. The official narrative is that this countering civilisation’s main characteristic is ‘hegemonic’, materialistic and capitalistic; values that are not to be aspired by the Iranian regime, therefore making the Islamic civilization morally superior to the Western (Holliday, 2016, p.22).

This anti-Western narrative blames Western civilization for the troubles of the Middle East; claiming that the regional problems of instability are caused by foreigners, and the years of foreign intervention in the region. According to the same narrative the “the only cure for the events that occur in the region today” is to let the nations make their own decisions, as “nations can find the way out of such conditions with the wisdom of their own outstanding personalities and with the guidance of their own leaders and wise personalities” (Khamanei, 9 August 2013). In contrast, “the people of Iran has managed to thread this path with divine blessings and power and with the spirit of faith, unity and solidarity which is available to them in the shade of religion” (Khamanei, 2013c).

Situating the Islamic republic as the pioneer of Islamic religious faith creates not only a spatial separation against the non-Muslim world, but also separates Iran from other Muslim countries that have not based their politics on the ‘right Islamic system’. This narrative does not only place Iran in a superior position, but also works as an explanation for why the Islamic Republic has experienced stability while the rest of the region are experiencing decades of troubles. In this lies the notion that by following the right path of religion, and

basing society on these principles, it is possible to establish stability and peace in a region of turmoil.

The Supreme Leader continued projecting this narrative to domestic and international audiences throughout the rest of 2013, arguing that ‘the arrogant hegemonic powers’ created and support violence in Syria. They encourage “a group of people to kill other groups of people”, portraying the conflict as a war between Shia and Sunni, instead of what it really is; the supporters and opponents of the anti-Zionist resistance (Khamenei, 2013d). In order to separate the Muslim community, the *arrogant* powers have used colonial and imperialistic methods “so they can divert attention of the two sides from the main enemy [the West]” (Khamenei, 2014), but “the only achievements of the plotters of this calamitous scenario is that they [the West] have managed to make use of religious statements of simple minded people to kindle this deadly fire” (Khamenei, 2013a). The presence of such “global arrogance in Syria” demonstrates their transgression, oppression and greed, which they use to “destroy every resistance which is put up against arrogant powers”. In this global environment it is the responsibility of the Islamic Republic to “create an Islamic Civilization” that “relies on Islam” in order to “not become an oppressor or oppressed” (Khamenei, 2013d). These speeches uphold the creation of a radical ‘Other’ which resembles the old colonial powers. This enemy’s main aim is to defeat ‘the resistance’, dominate the region, and establish dependent states (as Iran once was), and the only way to avoid this through religion.

As the conflict continued, the Iranian regime needed to adapt the discourse to include new developments. Taking into account the emerged and increased presence of terrorist groups in the Syrian civil war, Iran added *takfiri* (professed Muslims who are considered unbelievers) terrorism into the discourse by claiming that Al-Qaida and Daesh were instruments that the enemy used to “confront the Islamic Republic and the movement of the Islamic Awakening” (Khamenei, 2014). Iran claims that the Western supported terrorist groups not only aims at confronting ‘the resistance’ physically in Syria, but also aims at damaging the reputation of Islam.

Chanting the same narrative in late 2016, the Supreme Leader continued to express deep concern for the Syrian people who are suffering from a great disaster that has been imposed on them by *arrogance* (Khamenei, 2016a), and he calls for an united *Ummah* to stand up and fight these forces. At the same time, he reminds us that it is this fight [increased Islamic politics] that causes America to intervene in the Middle East and create instability. Therefore the *Ummah* must not surrender and becomes dependent on the West (Khamenei, 2016c).

The Supreme Leader's projection of Iranian identity is very much portrayed as an Islamic identity. Although Khamanei sees Iran as a pioneer and separated from the other Muslim countries in the region, this separation is not created by projecting a pre-Islamic identity. Instead, the separation from the other regional states is based on the notion that Iran is the only truly 'Islamic Republic', the frontrunner in the Islamic Revolution and the first to go through the 'Islamic Awakening', while other Muslim countries are ruled by leaders that do the bidding of the West. This projection of Islamic identity has been the core of the Islamic Revolution, but highlighted regionally and internationally during the Arab uprisings from 2011.

By placing the conflict in Syria within this anti-Western discourse the regime is able to strengthen the resistance narrative and the importance of the Revolution, while avoiding to talking about Iranian involvement in Syria. By presenting examples and explanations for how the Syrian conflict has been part of a 'western conspiracy', Iran also avoids having to address how the popular demonstrations in Syria differed from the 'Islamic Awakening'. While the Supreme Leader continues to present a narrative that describes the World as a great battle between the *arrogance* and the *resistance*, there is no mention of the Iranian role in the Syrian conflict, except for repeating the argument that stability and independence is achieved through following the Iranian example. The responsibility to develop more practical policy in regards to Syria is therefore placed on the elected politicians.

While the Supreme Leader balanced the act of maintaining support for the 'Islamic Awakening' while blaming Syrian uprisings on Western intervention, Iran's President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad was still reluctant to talk about the development in Syria. The Iranian President acknowledges the democratic rights of the people, but maintains that democracy does not and should not be promoted by intervention. No country has the right to intervene in another country's domestic issues (Charlie Rose, 2011). Interviewed by the same channel one year later, the President denied that Iran was supplying Syria with weapons. Acknowledging that Iran and Syria have a long-standing relationship, the President rejected the claim that Iran was in any way involved in Syria (Charlie Rose, 2012).

Following the developments in Syria, the Supreme Leader's emphasis on Islamic identity was conceptualised by the shift from Islamic Awakening to focusing on the anti-Western discourse. An interesting observation is that although President Ahmadinejad utilised the same anti-Western discourse in his foreign policy, the President was more open to combine the Islamic identity with a pre-Islamic Persian identity. The Iranian culture, the Persian

culture, he says, dates back several thousand years and cannot be isolated or detained by the West. In his view, what is happening in Syria is the West's attempt to target this culture, and target Iran (RT, September 2012). By targeting Syria, the West is targeting Iran, by pushing the outer border of the 'resistance'.

The President explains the conflict in similar terms to the Supreme Leader, as part of the Western-Zionist conspiracy, which aims at maintaining instability and insecurity in the region. This argument is based on the notion that "Western governments from the beginning of the victory of the Islamic Revolution, have opposed [Iran]" (RT, September 2012), and attempted to dominate Iran. The kind of power they had over Iran before the revolution does not exist anymore, and despite multiple efforts to gain this power back [through sanctions], it has not worked. Hence, these same powers are now attempting to challenge Iran by creating instability in Syria. The confrontational language mirrors speeches of the Supreme Leader, which combined presented a very confrontational Iranian foreign policy discourse during the years between 2011 and 2013.

As the conflict developed, Iran was again faced with new facts of the conflict that they needed to accommodate to their particular narrative of the situation. After being confronted by the reality of the use of chemical weapons in Syria, the Iranian regime again faced international pressure for their support to the Syrian government. Investigations reported that it was the al-Assad regime that had used chemical weapons on its own population (BBC, 2013).

Responding to this development, Iran did not only need to justify its policy in Syria internationally, but because of its own history, also needed to justify its support for the al-Assad regime domestically. Although international reports concluded that it was most likely the Syrian regime that had used the weapons (BBC, 2013), Iran took advantage of the minor amount of doubt to justify its continued support for al-Assad. Claiming that, "evidence shows that terrorist groups have used them" (Khamenei, 2013b; PressTV, 2013). While emphasising that Iran supported the removal of chemical weapons from Syria, the regime also took advantage of the new situation to project its own historic memory as a victim of chemical weapons to further emphasise its support for the people of Syria (President.ir, 2013).

The chemical weapons attack became a way for the Iranian regime to continue its anti-western discourse, claiming that the United States were taking advantage of the Syrian situation to justify an intervention (Khamenei, 2013b). What could have been a development that challenged the Iranian discourse was instead co-opted into Iranian policy, strengthening their resistance identification and victim narrative.

Days after the chemical attack, President Rouhani tweeted that “Iran gives notice to international community to use all its might to prevent use of chemical weapons anywhere in the world, esp. in #Syria” (Rouhani, 2013), urging the international community to take action. Placing this statement in a wider context, including the accusations that, the chemical attack was performed by *takfiri* terrorists, the statement from Rouhani accommodates well with the WAVE initiative he presented to the United Nations one month later.

Rouhani’s Presidential period has softened the confrontational discourse of President Ahmadinejad. Although Rouhani and his political establishment continued to place much of the blame of the regional instability and the situation in Syria on external interference, there was also more emphasis on talking about a *solution*, not only identifying the *problem*. Rouhani expressed that Iran were willing to help improve the situation, and cooperate with other states to achieve this, as long as there were no preconditions such a collaboration (CNN, 2013). The official Iranian position was still that the key issue of the conflict was terrorism, which “is a concern for everyone” (CNN, 2013), emphasising that as a “for-runner country for fighting extremism in [the] region”, Iran would “welcome any other country that has a commitment to fight terror” (CGTN, 2015). Placing more emphasis on concepts such as *global, cooperation, everyone, peace* and *stability*, Iranian officials kept on advocating for political solution to the conflict (France 24, 2016; MSNBC, 2016; Council of Foreign Relations, 2016). Since President Rouhani there has been a gradual shift of enemy focus, from Western manipulation and support to a violent uprising, to a global interest and responsibility to defeat terrorism. At the same time, Iran has been clear that for them, a political solution in Syria needs to entail that the “territorial integrity [of Syria] is maintained”, the terrorists must be “driven out”, and that the Syrian people should have the right to decide on their own future (MSNBC, 2016).

4.1.3 A World Against Violence and Extremism

The final phase of this analysis will examine how official Iran and President Rouhani has tried to develop a parallel discourse to accompany the Syrian discourse, which aims at uniting a “World Against Violence and Extremism” through international diplomacy. The section will examine this shift in discourse, and how it relates to the Syrian discourse, in addition to how it might relate to the projection of Iranian national identity.

This section will argue that the election and instatement of President Rouhani created a political opportunity for Iran to shift its foreign policy towards more pragmatic and diplomatic relations with the international community, compared to previous, more confrontational narratives. This has also affected the Iranian foreign policy towards Syria. This shift in discourse was first presented in Rouhani’s first speech at the United Nations General Assembly in September 2013, when the Iranian President addressed the international community to join Iran in a ‘World Against Violence and Extremism’. This initiative was later adopted into a United Nations draft resolution. This section will focus on Rouhani’s speeches to the United Nations General Assembly, and the Iranian UN draft resolution as the key texts that will demonstrate a shift in Iranian official discourse.

Rouhani was elected President of the Islamic Republic of Iran in 2013, on a more pragmatic political programme than his predecessor Ahmadinejad. In regards to foreign policy, the President has advocated for the improvement and normalisation of relations with the international community and the West. There were even speculations that he might be interested in international cooperation in order to solve the situation in Syria. Even questioned if Iran now might consider a Syrian future without President al-Assad (Akbarzadeh and Conduit, 2016). This optimism continued as President Rouhani travelled to New York and the Sixty-eight Session of the United Nations General Assembly in September 2013. At the General Assembly, he addressed the international community with the initiative for a ‘World against Violence and Extremism’ (WAVE), a proposal Iran advocated to implement as a UN resolution.

Addressing the United Nations and the international community, Iran stated that in today’s shifting global order, where “a few actors rely on archaic and deeply ineffective ways and means to preserve their old superiority and domination”, there is an environment where “governmental and non-governmental, religious, ethnic and even racial violence has increased” (Rouhani, 2013, p.2). In such an environment, the Islamic Republic of Iran

proposes the starting step for WAVE. This initiative should inspire the international community to “start thinking about “Coalition for Enduring Peace” all across the globe instead of the ineffective “Coalition for War” in various parts of the world” (Rouhani, 2013, p.6).

While the statement projects grand ideas of hope, the President simultaneously accuses Western powers of strategic violence, linking future hopes with the Iranian experience of an imperialistic past. In the speech, Rouhani address what Iran believes to be the Norths creation of “illusory identity distinctions” between *the civilised world* and the *uncivilised*. This distinction is related to what Iran believes to be propagandistic and “Iran-phobic discourses” maintained by the West, and that this Western propaganda “represent serious threats against world peace and human security” (Rouhani, 2013, p.2). Before the speech presents the opportunity for the world to come together for a more optimistic future, Rouhani also presents examples of how the MENA region is affected by “deadly and destructive violence” which has led to the situation observed today. The speech presents a bridge between historical wars in the region, “the brutal repression of the Palestinian people”, to the “human tragedy in Syria [which] represents a catastrophic spread of violence and extremism in our region” (Rouhani, 2013, p.3). By linking the regional developments with the Palestinian struggle, Iran is able to connect the WAVE initiative to their historic support for the Palestinian cause.

The Iranian support for the Palestinian cause has been embedded in the projection of Iranian revolutionary and resistance identity since the revolution and by connecting this struggle to the Syrian war and the proposed UN resolution, Iran is able to justify the diplomatic shift in foreign policy within the rhetoric of the Islamic Revolution.

The speech addresses Syria as a human tragedy, and the most evident current example of the spread of violence and extremism. It manages to do this, without mentioning or reflecting on the domestic political dimension of the conflict. Presenting the conflict as a *human tragedy*, which has developed though regional and international *militarisation*, Iran avoids the risk of having to justify its support for the Syrian regime in the fight against terrorism. This narrative, which portrays the conflict in Syria as externally militarised also mirrors the parallel Iranian discourse that blames international manipulation of a Syrian opposition for the initial uprising and the creation of terrorist groups. Despite these serious accusations, Iran claims that the violence that the region is experiencing today cannot be solved by the threat, or use of force, as this “will only lead to further exacerbation of violence and crisis in the region” (Rouhani, 2013, p.3). The Iranian message is clear; “the military option is not on the table” (ibid, p.6).

What Iran proposes is that all states should join Iran in “open[ing] a new horizon in which peace will prevail over war, tolerance over violence, progress over bloodletting, justice over discrimination, prosperity over poverty, and freedom over despotism” (Rouhani, 2013, p.6).

In December the following year, the United Nations adopts the Iranian draft resolution which firmly reaffirms the encouragement of “respect for human rights and for fundamental freedoms for all” (United Nations, 2013, p.1), while also highlighting the United Nations obligations of refraining from the “threat or use of force against territorial integrity or political independence of any State” (United Nations, 2013, p.1.). The resolution’s emphasis on territorial and political sovereignty coincides with the Iranian strong opposition to external intervention (MSNBC, 2016). The high emphasis on national sovereignty and state supremacy over internal issues can be traced back to its experience of the western backed coup in 1953 and the fear of American intervention during the Islamic Revolution (Khamenei, 2008b). These experiences have become embedded in Iranian projection of foreign policy, but also formed the justification for international resistance and scepticism of the “arrogant powers”. The strong focus on Iran as a state that opposes and resists Western imperialism has become an identity of Iranian foreign policy.

Signed by Iran, this proposed resolution shows an attempted shift to a more diplomatic foreign policy. The message is a rejection of all acts of intolerance, violent extremism and the use of violence, regardless of motivation. It also claims that war and armed conflict can lead to radicalisation and spread of violent extremism, and that the spread of such violent extremism is a common problem and concern for *all Member States* – which threatens “the security and well-being of human societies” (United Nations, 2013 p.2), confirming that this is a *global* problem and the *responsibility* of all Member States. The Iranian proposal therefore stresses the need for a comprehensive approach to counter such violent extremism, which also needs to address the underlying conditions that facilitate for this kind of violence to spread.

Although the Iranian proposal emphasises that “States must ensure that any measure taken to combat violent extremism complies with their obligations under international law” (United Nations, 2013 p.2), it simultaneously states that counter-terrorism measures do not pose conflicting goals with fundamental freedoms, but that such considerations are complementary elements to combat violent extremism. Adding a passage on “the commitment of all religions to peace” (United Nations, 2013 p.2) while extremism spreads hate; the resolution creates a separation between religion and extremism, through a dichotomy of peace and war. It further

affirms that violent extremism “cannot and should not be associated with any religion” (United Nations, 2013, p.2).

Implemented in practice, this implies that since religion is fundamentally peaceful, the violent terrorists cannot claim religious justification, as they “spread hate and threaten lives” (United Nations, 2013). Through self-proclamation as an Islamic Republic, and true follower of Islam, this also *de facto* places Iran on the right side of the dichotomy.

This Iranian initiative not only presents Iran as a promoter of fundamental freedoms, but works as an instrument to place Iran as a central state in the fight against terrorism. This initiative, and document therefore becomes both a legitimation for fighting terrorism in Syria, it also justifies any measures that Iran may use in combatting extremism.

A year later, President Rouhani addressed the United Nations General Assembly again, still emphasising Iran’s commitment to dialogue, while stressing that “those who have played a role in founding and supporting these terror groups [in the Middle East] must acknowledge their errors that have led to extremism” (Rouhani, 2014, p.2). The President diplomatically acknowledged that the problems in the Middle East are not only caused by the legacy of colonialism, but also the shortcomings of their leaders in addressing the causes of violence and extremism. A Syria combating violence and extremism needs to attract the confidence of its own people, and establish national and international coalitions against violence to solve its internal struggles and foreign terrorism. It is the countries in the region themselves that know and suffer from the pain of extremism, they should be the ones that form coalitions, while other nations “wish[ing] to take action against terrorism [should] come to their support” (Rouhani, 2014 p.3). With this Rouhani explains Iran believed that the Syrian conflict is an issue that must be handles internally, with “regional provided solution[s] with international support and not from outside the region” (Rouhani, 2014, p.4). This is the only way forward in order to support the “true voices of moderation in the Islamic world” (Rouhani, 2014, p.3).

This passage places Iran in a position as a leading, stable, calm, and secure state in a region of chaos and turmoil. While Rouhani is still hesitant in elaborating on what kind of support Iran could provide to regional actors facing violence and extremism, he is able to direct the focus on who Iran believes to be the true enemy in the region; terrorism.

While the Supreme Leader uses the narrative of a *leading* and *stable* Iran to emphasised Iran’s political and religious role as a the pioneer of the Islamic Awakening, President Rouhani uses the same image of a stable state as proof that Iran can, and is “prepared to play [a] permanent

constructive and positive role” in order to “combat extremism, threats, and aggression” (Rouhani, 2014, p.4).

As President, Rouhani has continuously needed to balance the Iranian resistance narrative and anti-imperialist rhetoric, with developing a narrative which presents Iran as less confronting and more moderate international player. Through the WAVE initiative he has attempted to present Iran as a real alternative in combating violence and extremism, placing Iran in a “pioneering role in fighting terrorism” (Embassy of the Islamic Republic in Astana, 2014).

Following the implementation of the UN resolution, Iran hosted the first International Conference on Violence and Extremism, in Tehran in December 2014. The ‘WAVE conference’ gathered representatives from over 40 different countries to discuss the “brutal acts of violence carried out in the name of religion in the Muslim world, which have spread terror and fear in the Middle East”. For the Iranians it has been important to create a clear distinction between the “horrendous crimes perpetrated by [takfiri terrorists] in the name of Islam” and the *true path of religion*, as this false image projected by the terrorists have led to a “brutal image of Islam in the West, which links Islam with violence and fundamentalism” (The Embassy of Islamic Republic of Iran in Astana, 2014). By emphasising that the terrorists that claim to follow Islam are *takfiri* – essentially unbelievers – the Islamic Republic is attempting to differentiate its Islamic identity with the brutal violence perpetrated in the name of Islam. Instead, by stressing that the violence in Syria and regions is conducted by (unbelieving) terrorists. Iran can maintain its moral superiority as a for-runner for fighting extremism (CGNT, 2015).

Continuing to promote the diplomatic approach to defeat violence and extremism, Rouhani addressed the United Nations General Assembly in 2015 and 2016 with the same message of global, *consolidating peace and constructive engagement*. Addressing the global community in 2015, Iran expressed great optimism for the future, and proposed the *whole world* and especially the *region* to join Iran in forming a “‘Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action’ to create a ‘United Front Against Extremism and Violence’” (Rouhani, 2015, p.5). This should be a “global and collective movement” which tackle the regional problems through dialogue, but should be in “cooperation with established central governments”. Once again Iran is able to balance its role as for-runner for fighting extremism, while protecting the sovereignty of territorial boundaries and domestic regimes; a principle that has been maintained by the Iranian regime since the Revolution.

Following the development of Rouhani's WAVE discourse it is possible to later detect a slight shift in rhetoric, placing more blame on regional and international interference. This blame has been especially directed at Saudi Arabia. Not only did Rouhani specifically mention Saudi Arabia as a supporter of *takfiri* terrorism in Iran's address to the United Nations in 2016 (Rouhani, 2016), but also foreign minister Zarif published an opinion piece in the New York Times earlier the same year, blaming Saudi Arabia for current regional instability. In the article Zarif writes; "Virtually every terrorist group abusing the name of Islam – from Al-Qaeda and its offshoots in Syria to Boko Haram in Nigeria – has been inspired by this death cult [Saudi Wahhabism]" (Zarif, 2016). Despite this harsh rhetoric, Zarif continues by inviting Saudi Arabia to join the rest of the global community in eliminating terrorism. This shows how important it is for the Iranian foreign policy discourse to maintain the conception of a reconciling Iran, while also separating the Iranian Islamic identity from the regional violence.

Although the Iranian WAVE initiative opened up the potential for dialogue on issues of global security, Iran seems to be less interested in practicing this new opportunity, than connecting its new position to the old resistance narrative. Despite the political rhetoric still chants the message of diplomacy and dialogue, the political discourse has moved closer to the rhetoric of the Supreme Leader, who continues to emphasise the message that the *takfiri* terrorists are part of a foreign intervention. This narrative is often repeated by Rouhani and the Iranian foreign minister when they are interviewed abroad (France24, 2016; Council of Foreign Relations, 2016), while also repeating the same mantra that Iran supports the Syrian people; they are against all use of violence and extremism; and support the Syrian people's right to choose their own future, without foreign intervention.

The WAVE initiative has opened up an international opportunity for Iran to place itself in the centre of the fight against violence and extremism, which benefits their physical presence in both Syria and Iraq. Although the regime has spoken highly of the achieving such goals through diplomacy and dialogue, the Iranian drafted UN resolution states that violence and extremism should be fought by all means, as long as it does not breach international law (United Nations, 2013). This gives Iran the opportunity to support Syria (and Iraq) with military capacities against terrorist groups, without straying from what they have proposed in the WAVE resolution.

4.2 Iranian foreign policy developments and identity projection

While the last section has tried to explain how official Iranian foreign policy has developed in accordance with the regional developments, this next section will take a more holistic approach, and reflect on some of the developments that have happened between 2011 and 2016. The section will also examine how these policy discourses might be related to the understanding and projection of Iranian national identity. Following the findings above, this section will examine the developments as a whole, in an attempt to recognise overall trend and how the national perception of identity relates to the shift in discourse on Syria.

First of all it is important to highlight that in the course of the time frame that has been studied, there is a lack of statements from the Iranian regime about Iran's physical and military presence in Syria and support to the al-Assad regime. Other studies have pointed to similar findings, which show that most officials continue to officially deny any Iranian military presence in Syria beyond an 'advisory' role (Ansani and Tabrizi, 2016). However, sources claim that the IRGC has countered the regime's narrative, by publishing statements about military presence in Syria, but that these have been deleted from their websites soon after (Akbarzadeh and Conuit, 2016).

Studies of Iranian foreign policy and decision making processes have claimed that this trend shows that despite the Supreme Leader's ultimate authority in Iranian politics, the IRGC has since the presidency of Ahmadinejad been transferred increased power for practical decision making in foreign policy (Akbarzadeh and Conuit, 2016). However, the fact that the Syria supportive statements were deleted shortly supports the claim that there has been internal disagreement about how to talk about Syria outside of Iran.

Instead of engaging in discussions on how involved Iran is in Syria, the regime's official narrative has instead focused on balancing between political support for the Syrian regime and the Syrian people, while criticising external intervention in Syria that support and drive what they claim to be an exogenous uprising against a democratically elected government.

Avoiding talking about Iranian military involvement, means that Iran has had the possibility to combine these narratives without being too dependent on the future of the al-Assad regime. Thus Iran has enabled themselves room to manoeuvre should future developments require a different approach. What this thesis has found, is that Iranian foreign policy discourse has a great ability to adapt to new events. This thesis will argue that this is because of its deep sense of resistance identity, combined with a perception of Iranian exceptionalism.

For a foreign policy discourse to become stable and hegemonic, it is believed that the discourse must challenge opposing discourses by projecting the discourse that is most in line with the perception of national identity. Internationally this means that a foreign policy will be able to maintain its stability when opposed by other states if there is a strong connection between the projected policy and the sense of national identity. What this thesis claims is that since Iranian national identity is so embedded in a state of resistance, it not only legitimises Iran's anti-western foreign policy, it also means that Iranian foreign policy discourse has a relatively large room of adaptability, since it is less dependent on limiting international opposition. Second, Iran's own sense of greatness and superiority in its position and relation with the Islamic *Ummah*, and as a the front runner for the hegemonic resistance, means that its foreign policy is above criticism from states that part of the *global arrogance*.

The sense of Iranian greatness and exceptionalism is projected through Khamenei's emphasis on the distinctiveness and uniqueness of the Islamic Revolution as a domestic uprising that was achieved without external support or foreign inference. Not only were the uprisings against the Shah accomplished without outside support, it was a revolution specifically *against* external control and intervention. The core identity of the Islamic Republic is therefore one of rejection and resistance. However, although the regime legitimises its power through resisting the West and imperialism, this does not mean that Iranian Revolutionary identity must be the opposite of westernisation or modernisation. On the contrary, Imam Khomeini claimed that an alternative revolutionary and Islamic path was possible, and that this would be "a middle ground between westoxication and backwardness" (Khamenei, 2008a). According to the regime, pre-revolutionary Iran was bound by a humiliating dependency, which stripped Iranians of their national self-belief (Khamenei, 2016b). Therefore national independence and resistance of foreign domination has become key aspects of Iranian foreign policy.

An important point remark when analysing Iranian foreign policy discourse is how this distinction between the Iran of today, compared to the Iran before the revolution is constantly recycled in order to legitimise and justify Iran's current policy. This temporal identity differentiation has essentially turned into a Self-Other dichotomy, which the regime utilises in order to warn against falling into the traps of the past, as well as supporting the revolutionary path for the future.

Since 1979, the main project of the Iranian regime has been to protect the Islamic Revolution (Holliday, 2016), which they continue to do by projecting this particular understanding of the

‘Self’ in contrast to the external ‘Other’. This differentiation constitutes for the understanding of how Iran sees itself in relation to the rest of the world and how this influences their relations with others. In addition to protecting the Revolution, the ultimate goal of the Islamic republic is to reach an “Islamic Civilisation” (Khamenei, 2016a), which means creating an alternative to western modernisation, based on Islamic values and identity. Despite Supreme Leader’s effort in claiming that Iran now longer is defined by their inferiority to Western development, Khamenei still defines Iran, and the notion of Islamic Civilisation, in relation to the West. The difference is that compared to before the revolution, this relational definition is from a superior position of independence, rather than at the dependency of *the arrogance* (Khamenei, 2016b). This thesis shows that Iran has not only maintained a spatial identity which differentiates between the Iranian perception of the ‘Self’ and the *arrogance*, but that Iran has attempted to incorporate *takfiri* terrorism into a similar perception of an existential enemy. Statements from the regime show that in order for Iran to justify itself, it has created an enemy image of what it is not. In this way Iranian national identity is dependent on an enemy, an ‘Other’, for differentiating and conception of own existence.

Statements of the Iranian regime, particularly the Supreme Leader, show that the Iranian foreign policy discourse is shaped on the basis of both an Islamic and revolutionary identity, which are not exclusive, as the revolutionary ideology is based on Islam (Khamenei, 2013c). This ethical religious identity means that Iran has been able to develop a foreign policy discourse that can be lifted above “selfish national interests”. The ‘Islamic Awakening’ discourse bears traces of this kind of religious responsibility when Iran supported the regional uprisings, on the grounds of a religious duty towards the Muslim *Ummah*.

Despite shift in how Iran has talked about the situation in their neighbouring country, there this study shows that there are certain elements that have not changed. The most noticeable would be the projection of national identity, as the bastion of resistance against the ‘hegemonic arrogance’. While the resistance identity seems to be the one that has had the most influence on all the phases of foreign policy, the study shows that the Iranian perception of the ‘Self’ is more complex than merely a projection of resistance.

What this study illustrates is that despite changing circumstances that call for adaption of official foreign policy, the notion of national identity has been persistent. Although the development of the WAVE initiative (in combination with the negotiations of the nuclear deal) did milden the rhetoric from Tehran, and create an opportunity for increasing diplomacy and dialogue, the WAVE discourse has not been able to facilitate for more cooperation.

Instead Iran is projecting a narrative of Iranian diplomacy while also blaming others for the unstable situation in the Middle East. Hence, the WAVE discourse has become co-opted to accommodate the Iranian foreign policy on Syria.

In addition, by persisting on the connection between external support for Syrian opposition and takfiri terrorists, Iran is able to maintain the argument that the Syrian people does not support the uprising and conflict. Communicating this narrative internationally, Iran is arguing that the countries that are responsible for this regional insecurity has a responsibility to compensate the Syrian people, and support the government in eliminating violence and extremism. This illustrates how Iran's initiative for collective action to fight violence and extremism has shifted closer to the anti-imperialist resistance policy that understands the conflict in Syria as battle on the border of the 'Axis of resistance'.

The relatively mute response from Tehran on Syria after Rouhani was elected, in addition to the Iranian effort to advocate for a global initiative against terrorism, reflects other studies that argue that Iran is attempting to "placate the international community while simultaneously preserving Iran's most reliable regional alliance" (Akbarzadeh and Conduit, 2016, p.133). By attempting to balance the WAVE discourse with the Supreme Leader's 'foreign intervention' discourse, while also attempting to restrain statements from the IRGC, Rouhani reveals how the Syrian conflict has had a polarising impact in the Iranian political elite. It also demonstrates the complexity of power within the Iranian regime, and the limits of Presidential power.

At the time of his election, there were also speculations that Rouhani might tamper Iran's support for President al-Assad (Akbarzadeh and Conduit, 2016), although this has not been the case. Instead the response for Tehran has been relatively muted. In fact, it is only recently that Iran has been more willing to open up on talking about their involvement in Syria. Nevertheless it is possible to identify a slight shift in the Iranian foreign policy towards Syria after Rouhani came to power, as part of his more moderate general foreign policy. Through the WAVE initiative Rouhani has projected a different and more diplomatic Iran that sees itself as an important contributor in defeating violence and extremism, and a state of stability against a region in chaos. In addition, the WAVE initiative has influenced and increased Iran's perception of its own ethical identity. By placing Iran at the centre of a global initiative against violence and extremism, Iran can claim moral responsibility in its foreign policy discourse.

Overall it is possible to argue that despite the initial problems with adapting to the Syrian developments, and shifting from the 'Islamic Awakening' discourse, back to the already established discourse of Iranian resistance against imperialism, there has been a relatively consistent Iranian official foreign policy on Syria. This discourse was stabilised with the Iranian perception of national identity before President Rouhani came into power, and analysis of the Supreme Leader's publications and most of the official statements and interviews since then have followed the same narrative. The exception has been President Rouhani's WAVE initiative and the attempt to develop a more diplomatic and cooperative Iran. Although this shift has fallen back on some of its more confrontational rhetoric, it seems like it has been successful in opening up for international dialogue. The question is if this success is due to developments in national identity or if this diplomatic approach is merely connected to Rouhani himself.

Conclusion

5.1 Conclusion

In this thesis, I have investigated the research question: *How is the Syrian conflict represented and framed in official Iranian foreign policy discourse between 2011 and 2016, and how is Iranian involvement justified internationally?* Using Lene Hansen's (2006) theoretical and methodological framework, I have conducted a poststructuralist discourse analysis of the Iranian regime's official Syria policy between 2011 and 2016, in order to trace patterns and developments in the Iranian foreign policy discourse.

The research purpose has been to examine the developments in the foreign policy discourse, and how this might be related to Iranian perception of national identity. The thesis has also aimed to narrow the research gap which has been identified between studies that seek to identify Iranian physical involvement in Syria, and the studies that attempt to understand less case-specific Iranian foreign policy towards the West or the region.

Through a poststructuralist discourse analysis, this thesis has studied the relationship between Iranian official foreign policy discourse and identity, and how this is foreign policy has been projected in order to justify the Iranian response to Syria. The analysis of the developments has made several discoveries about Iran's Syria discourse.

At the time when the Syrian demonstrations started, the Iranian regime was already supporting similar demonstrations and uprisings in region, framing them within a discourse of 'Islamic Awakening'. This discourse was never extended to Syria. The thesis shows that there was no official Iranian foreign policy discourse on Syria at the beginning of the conflict. This is argued to be because of the close ties between Tehran and Damascus, and the notion that Iranian strategic interests could be jeopardised if Iran supported regime change in Syria.

Instead, the Syrian uprisings were characterised as categorically different from the rest of the region, as Iran claimed they were part of the frontline of the fight between 'the Axis of resistance' and the *global arrogance*. The conflict in Syria accommodated into the already well established anti-imperialistic discourse, claiming that the conflict was externally manipulated. The research also shows how Iran has developed and maintained spatial, temporal and ethical identity connections in order to project a particular foreign policy influenced by its revolutionary ideology.

The thesis finds that the anti-Western discourse was experienced limited stability challenged, but had to expand its enemy perception in order to accommodate for the increased threat from

terrorist groups in the region. During this time, President Rouhani has attempted to approach the international community with a more diplomatic foreign policy, an initiative for dialogue and cooperation, and an opportunity for the rest of the world to join Iran in a ‘World against violence and extremism’. Although there is evidence of a continued emphasis from the Iranian regime to this approach, it has not significantly affected the Syrian discourse.

Last, the thesis finds that the Iranian foreign policy discourse has a great ability to adapt to new events, because of its relationship with a particular perception and projection of national identity. It is argued that the foreign policy’s relative international stability and adaptability is due to the revolutionary resistance identity, combined with a perception of Iranian exceptionalism.

The conclusions drawn from this thesis might serve as an indication about the direction of Iranian foreign policy towards Syria, as well as the relationship between Iranian identity and official foreign policy discourse. Analysing the language used to develop and present a particular discourse towards the international community can give an indication of how Iran will continue to present itself in the future.

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