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State Subjectivity, Ontological (In)Security, and Iranian Foreign Policy

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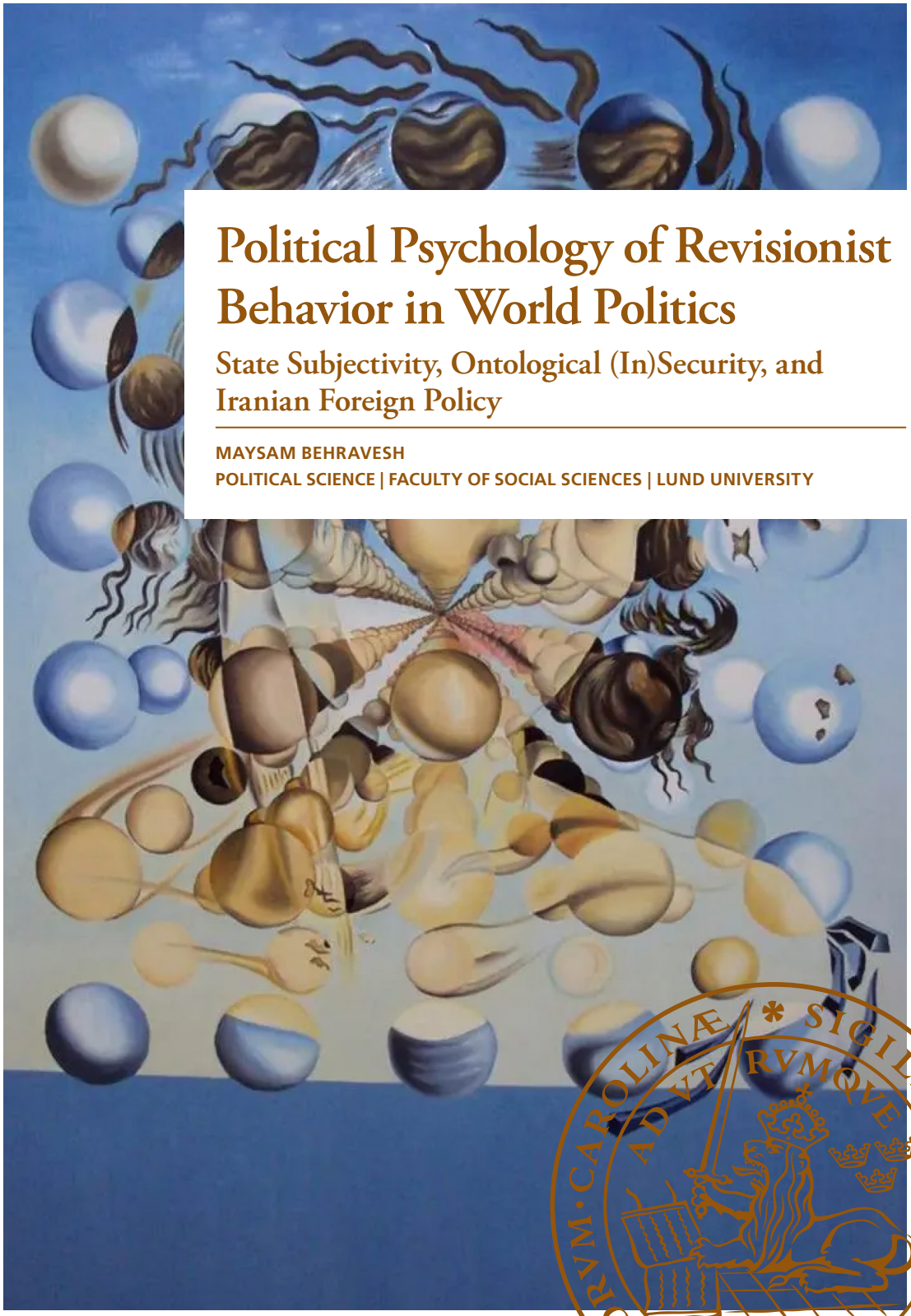

Political Psychology of Revisionist Behavior in World Politics

State Subjectivity, Ontological (In)Security, and Iranian Foreign Policy

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POLITICAL SCIENCE | FACULTY OF SOCIAL SCIENCES | LUND UNIVERSITY

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State Subjectivity, Ontological (In)Security, and Iranian Foreign Policy

Maysam Behravesh

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UNIVERSITY

DOCTORAL DISSERTATION

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Abstract:

Driven by a core curiosity about the political psychology of change and change-seeking as opposed to continuity and status quo-keeping in world politics, this thesis undertakes to investigate the ontological dynamics and psychic drivers of revisionist behavior in International Relations (IR). Identifying with a constructivist tendency for "constitutive theorizing," it deploys—and in so doing, theoretically develops—ontological security studies (OSS) to explore a number of significant identity dimensions like gender, and foreign policy practices such as strategic ambivalence in relation to state self-concept, collective psyche/subjectivity and (in)security of being/becoming-in-the-world. These theory development and application endeavors are all undertaken with special reference to the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) whose selection as the study's empirical case is guided by its characteristic strand of revisionism and ideological-geopolitical alignment with other revisionist powers such as China and Russia. Within this broad framework, *Article I*, titled "State Revisionism and Ontological (In)Security in International Politics: The Complicated Case of Iran and Its Nuclear Behavior," concentrates on how a revisionist foreign policy may provide an actor with a sense of ontological security, problematizing the controversial Iranian nuclear program as an instance of state self-identity augmentation despite its attenuating material costs and consequences. Labeled "State Gender and Ontological Dislocation: Gendering Iran's Revolutionary Identity and Nuclear Behavior," *Article II* draws on Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity as well as post-structuralist critiques of masculinism and phallocentrism by feminist philosophers Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous to theorize state gender and ontological consequences of gender identity destabilization at the collective level before employing these propositions in a critical analysis of Iran's masculine revisionist Self and masculinist reaction to the 2015 nuclear accord. *Article III* is named "Self-Harm as Desire for Ontological Security: The Lack, Trauma and Iran's Shootdown of Civilian Flight PS752" and aspires to theorize state self-harm into the ontological (in)security framework as sacrificing the flesh to salvage a fantasized sovereign Self by invoking insights on trauma from Freudian psychoanalysis of trauma and especially Lacan's theory of subjectivity, all of which theoretical arguments are then instantiated in the case of Iran's deliberate downing of passenger flight PS752 in January 2022. Entitled "Strategic Ambivalence as Ontological Security: Iran and the Russia-Ukraine War," *Article IV* as the final chapter of this compilation thesis delves into the sociological theory of Zygmunt Bauman as well as Kleinian-Lacanian psychoanalysis to distinguish between different types of ambivalence and to subsequently theorize strategic ambivalence as discursive strategization of affective ambivalence about a deed or event for ontological security purposes, a theoretical configuration that Iran's engagement in the Russia-Ukraine war helps illustrate empirically. Lastly, the conceptual-theoretical thread that runs through all these works and unifies them into a coherent body of scholarship is ontological (in)security studies, theoretically developed here with a view to state revisionism and empirically demonstrated with respect to a classic and quintessential revisionist actor.

Key words: Political Psychology; International Relations (IR); Psychoanalysis; Ontological (In)Security; Revisionism; Foreign Policy; Iran

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To Allah,
For everything

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Introduction

Shortly after Sweden's accession to the North Atlantic Treaty Organization (NATO) as its 32nd member, in an interview marking the 75th anniversary of the military organization, former NATO chief Jens Stoltenberg warned of increasing cooperation by a "stronger alliance of authoritarian powers" against Western democracies. Consisting of Russia, China, Iran and North Korea, this authoritarian alliance has rendered the world, in his words, "much more dangerous, much more unpredictable" and "much more violent" (BBC 2024). While authoritarianism of varying types and degrees is demonstrably a common feature of these powers that are prone to contest the established norms of the liberal international order (Gat 2007; Von Soest 2015; Betizza and Lewis 2023; Draper and Haggard 2023), perhaps what aligns them strategically is far more their foreign policy orientations, opposition to the Western-dominated status quo, and tendency to revise the prevailing international system than their domestic politics and authoritarian modes of governance. After all, there is no shortage of authoritarian regimes, not least in the Middle East, that maintain alliances with Western democracies and support their promotion of a "rules-based" liberal-democratic order in the international society while sustaining autocratic rule at home (See Mattes and Rodríguez 2014; Risse and Babayan 2015; Stravers and El Kurd 2020). Thus, external revisionism rather than internal authoritarianism is also what renders nondemocratic powers like China, Russia and Iran a threat to the Western-dominated international order, even though the possibility of a meaningful relationship between the two political phenomena cannot be dismissed out of hand.

The gradual rise of China over the past two decades as a global challenger to the United States, Russia's war against Ukraine commencing with the forceful annexation of the Crimean Peninsula in 2014, and Iran's contentious struggles for nuclearization have brought debates on state revisionism to the fore of IR scholarship. These debates have gained further traction in studies of international politics with the concurrent ascent of developing nations more generally, like India and Brazil, as a result in important part of economic development, highlighting such concepts as "complex multipolarity,"

"multipolar world order," and the necessity of "multilateralism" (Posen 2009; Cooper and Flemes 2013). The growing perception that the West is losing its erstwhile preeminent standing in world politics, particularly on display during the "unipolar" moment of American paramountcy after the Cold War, does not necessarily mean a positive decline of Western power, but in fact the "rise of the rest" represents a shift of geostrategic gravity away from the former and towards a multipolar international system. In this context, especially within the broad camp of Realism in IR, various definitions and conceptions of revisionism have been proposed at different levels of analysis. In contrast to conventional theories of IR and their conceptions of revisionism, which will be briefly reviewed below for a more clear understanding of the concept, the present study espouses an alternative political psychology approach to revisionist behavior in international politics by deploying ontological security studies (OSS) as its chief framework for analysis and theorizing significant facets of state behavior mainly from psychoanalytic—that is, Freudian, Kleinian and Lacanian—perspectives within that broad framework.

Classical Realists who gravitate towards explaining change in international politics in terms of individual- and unit-level factors, not least natural human appetite for power and state goals and interests, often define revisionism on the basis of a distinction between desire for security and aspiration for power. The Classical Realist understanding of the power-security tension closely corresponds to the English School's differentiation between "power struggle" and "security struggle" whose inevitable interaction, according to Buzan (1983: 157, 175), generates the "power-security dilemma" as a critical component of the national security problematic in the state of international anarchy. For Realists, a status quo state is one that seeks only to maintain its current resources whereas a revisionist actor not only wants to maintain its existing resources, but also aspires to acquire more than it enjoys via altering the prevailing distribution of power. Notably, Classical Realists employ various terms to describe these ideal types of states while sharing the basic definition. Morgenthau (1978: 46) contrasts "status quo" with "imperialist" actors, with the former aiming "at the maintenance of the distribution of power as it exists at a particular moment in history," and the latter aspiring to reverse it, while Carr (1946) refers to "satisfied" versus "dissatisfied" powers. Alternatively, Kissinger (1957) uses the epithets "revolutionary" and "status quo" while Schuman (1948) adopts the terms "satiated" and "unsatiated," delineating revisionists as those states that "feel humiliated, hampered, and oppressed by the *status quo*" and therefore "demand changes, rectifications of frontiers, a revision of treaties, a redistribution of territory and power" (378,

cited in Schweller 1993: 76; See also Schweller 1994: 85). In a similar vein, Wolfers (1962) defines revisionism as "expressing a demand for values not already enjoyed, and thus a demand for a change of the status quo" (91-92).

These Classical Realist designations bear resemblance to notions of revisionism and status quo seeking promoted by Neoclassical Realists who emphasize the function of agency-level variables like decision-maker psychology, leadership perceptions, and domestic politics as mediating the workings of structural or systemic-level factors (Brooks 1997; Rose 1998; Schweller 2003; Wivel 2005). As Schweller puts it in his formulation of the "balance of interest" theory—as opposed to Kenneth Waltz's "balance of power" (1979) and Stephen Walt's "balance of threat" theories (1985, 1987)—revisionist states are those which "value what they covet more than what they currently possess," willing to deploy "military force" for purposes of status quo-alteration and self-extension; for them, according to him, "the gains from nonsecurity expansion exceed the costs of war" (Schweller 1994: 105). Schweller also divides revisionists into two groups of "jackals" and "wolves," with the former harboring "limited aims" and keen to "pay high costs to defend their possessions but even greater costs to extend their values" and the latter entertaining "unlimited aims" and ready to take huge risks in a "predatory" fashion to achieve them "even if losing the gamble means extinction..." (Ibid: 100-104). The Neoclassical Realist characterizations stand, however, in sharp contrast to Neorealist, or Structural Realist, views of state types according to which all states in the international system are either revisionist or status quo: for Defensive Neorealists, the logic of survival in conditions of anarchy requires that states become security-maximizers and thus act as "defensive positionalists," hence status quo (Waltz 1979; Posen 1984; Van Evera 1990; Kupchan 1994) while for Offensive Neorealists, the same logic drives states towards maximizing their power—rather than security—and act as "offensive positionalists," hence revisionist (Zakaria 1998; Mearsheimer 2001; Snyder 1997). In fact, the first camp depicts the international system as a "world of all cops and no robbers" (Schweller 1996: 91) whereas the second camp portrays it as one of all robbers and no cops.

Finally, Gilpin (1981) adds further nuance to the classification, formulating revisionist and status quo tendencies around three explanatory variables, namely distribution of material power, allocation of status among states, and the rules and institutions of the international system, all of which, he argues, revisionists strive to change fundamentally. The "values" or "goods" whose redistribution is sought in this respect can comprise "territory, status, markets,

expansion of ideology, and the creation and change of international law and institutions" (Davidson 2006: 14). In this broad conception, identification of states as revisionist is predicated on their a) articulated goals rather than implemented actions, b) willingness to incur costs in the course of attaining those goals, and c) pursuit of those goals as the "primary focus" of their foreign policy, not as a secondary activity incorporated in it in one way or another.

Research Puzzles and Problems

Even though this theoretical literature has been taken onboard as a point of departure in the thesis, the present research intends to move beyond conventional categorizations and conceptions, and instead delve into the political psychology of revisionism by investigating its relationship with the state Self-concept and how revisionist behavior may inform a desire to pursue security of that imagined Self. As the above introduction suggests, revisionist foreign policy may have many manifestations, from the use of military force to redraw territorial borders (Russia) to acquisition of nuclear weapons to upend the regional distribution or balance of power (Iran) to institutional interventions to rewrite international rules (China). Yet, what do these change-seeking policies and nonconformist measures tell us about the collective Self-concept and subjectivity of the revisionist state in question in general and its ontological (in)security in particular? A significant underlying suggestion here is that revisionism as a generally costly pursuit could not be adequately theorized if we assume, as Realists of various persuasions usually do, that they are ultimately aimed at maximizing the revisionist actor's material interests. Ontological security studies as a sociologically and psychologically oriented research program fundamentally questions such assumptions, opening up a new avenue of inquiry that allows us to unpack the black box of the state and account for outcomes that conventional IR theories are ill equipped to explain or dismiss altogether as irrational, anecdotal or exceptional (See Mitzen 2006; Steele 2005; Ejdus 2018).

The overarching question, thus, of the study at hand is how we can understand (revisionist) state subjectivity and behavior through the lenses of political psychology and psychoanalysis, and more specifically how an ontology of revisionism characterized by change-seeking behavior in international relations may be explicated within the framework of ontological security studies (OSS). This is a theoretically interesting puzzle not only because revisionist practices are usually materially costly but also because they can endanger the very survival of its practitioner or, in other words, its physical security and territorial integrity (Steele 2008: 94-113; See also Rumelili 2015a;

Krickel-Choi 2022). Given the distinct design of the present research as a compilation thesis consisting of four related yet discrete journal articles, it addresses a set of questions that fall within the same broad subject matter. Laying the groundwork for the whole project, ***Article I***, titled "**State Revisionism and Ontological (In)Security in International Politics: The Complicated Case of Iran and Its Nuclear Behavior**," generally explores revisionism from the standpoint of ontological security studies and tries to show how it can be driven by states' ontological security needs but also become a source of ontological insecurity at the same time. Labelled "**State Gender and Ontological Dislocation: Gendering Iran's Revolutionary Identity and Nuclear Behavior**," ***Article II*** concerns itself with the question of state gender and the ontological consequences of gender identity destabilization at the collective level of analysis. What happens when states' gender identity is endangered? How may a state actor's gender identity be conceived of and (de)stabilized in the first place? What are the ontological effects of such destabilizations and disruptions? And how do states respond to ruptures in their gender identities or perceived Selves? The principal query that ***Article III***, named "**Self-Harm as Desire for Ontological Security: The Lack, Trauma and Iran's Shootdown of Civilian Flight PS752**," puts forward pertains to "state self-injury" and ontological drivers of sacrificial self-harming behavior where a given state chooses to turn on its own nationals/citizens under certain circumstances and therefore sacrifices rather than secures them. In other words, how can an ontological desire to salvage a fantasized Self prompt and motivate "sacrifices of flesh"? Lastly, entitled "**Strategic Ambivalence as Ontological Security: Iran and the Russia-Ukraine War**," ***Article IV*** hones in on the practice of strategic ambivalence, wondering how discursive strategization of affective ambivalence may operate, counterintuitively, as a vehicle for pursuit of ontological security in contrast to the extant literature which deems ambivalence as a source of anxiety and vulnerability.

What connects these research puzzles and problems are their common theoretical thrust and anchorage in ontological security studies on the one hand and their instantiation with special empirical reference to Iran, a characteristically revisionist actor as articulated at length in ***Article I***. While the questions raised are mainly of a theoretical nature and the explanations provided may travel across cases and apply to other settings, Iran has been used as an empirical case in all Articles to instantiate the theoretical propositions.

Conceptual and Theoretical Framework

As indicated earlier, ontological security studies (OSS) constitutes the theoretical foundation of this thesis and the broad framework within which the study of revisionist behavior is situated. In the following subsections, first an examination of the theoretical schema will be provided and then I will address the original contributions of the project and lay out the research design in terms of the separate Articles, their linkages, the case study and case selection rationale. Before doing so, however, a discussion of my overall approach to theorization and theory development—of ontological (in)security dynamics here—is warranted. Unlike some suggestions to the effect that ontological security research is a fully fledged "theory" (Delehanty and Steele 2009; Ejdus 2018) by virtue of heralding novel ways to understand and explain international phenomena, the present inquiry is premised on the notion that it is still very much at the "theorization" stage where theoretical ideas grounded in structuralist and poststructuralist sociology, existentialist philosophy and different strands of psychoanalysis are applied to political developments and empirically illustrated. An outstanding instance of such an analytic provocation—that we are deeply engaged in "theorization" and far from the final stages of a finished "theory"—is the formidable and enduring problematic of "state as person" analogy deployed by much OSS literature to import concepts from sociology and psychology and then extrapolate individual human attributes to the state level. The discussion on general ways of theory development here, therefore, will be followed by a critical problematization of the person-to-state aggregation, suggesting alternative pathways for scaling up emotions, affects and feelings in OSS without essentializing neither the person nor the state.

Overall Approach to Theorizing

Taking cues from sociologist Richard Swedberg (2012, 2014, 2016, 2017, 2020) and inspired by his emphasis on the theoretically minded effort that precedes the proposition of a sound "theory" in the form of testable and tested hypotheses, this thesis embarks on an endeavor to carry out "theorizing" work. Such an enterprise takes place in the so called "context of discovery" as opposed to the "context of justification," terms Swedberg borrows from philosophers of science Hans Reichenbach (1938, 1951) and Karl Popper (1959) to spell out a significant distinction between "theorizing" and "theory." While the domain of discovery refers to "thinking processes" that are subjectively created and personally performed by the inquirer with the purpose of discovering an interesting idea or insight about the object of inquiry, the sphere of justification concerns the intellectual ways in which these processes are justified, verified and communicated to the scholarly community (Swedberg 2012: 3-4). To put it succinctly, theorization work in social science, in his words, means an attempt to understand and explain something that happens in society; and it includes everything that precedes the final formulation that is set down on paper or fixed in some other way ("theory"). This means interaction with people and texts such as books and articles, among other things. What is called theory is essentially the end product of the process of theorizing, the final formulation of an attempt to understand and to explain something that happens (Ibid: 14-15; See also Swedberg 2017: 191-92).

The first step or point of departure in the theorization journey is observation, which needs to be of as broad a nature as relevant and tap a vast array of sources like conversations with people of interest, news segments and newspaper articles, movies and anything else that may help the researcher discover something new. In other words, the net of exploration needs to be thrown as wide as possible in search of novel ideas and insights about the phenomenon under study. This is how I started to approach the case of Iran in the present thesis, trying to figure out if something interesting could be said about its foreign policy or if its international behavior could be understood and explained in novel ways. The art of perception deployed here comes from what Swedberg describes as "observation on the hoof" (2012: 11), citing Everett C. Hughes (1984), that is the kind of scouring that happens fluidly as a natural part of everyday life of an explorer and is particularly attuned to sociopolitical patterns. The most outstanding aspect of Iranian foreign policy that thus came to capture my attention was its unmistakable against-the-grain nature, which in turn led to an initial interest in theorizing revisionism.

My own positionality as a researcher born and raised in Iran, a country with substantially different religious beliefs, cultural values and ideological persuasions than the Swedish society where I was located to conduct the research, had to be considered and reflected upon in the observational process as well (Rowe 2014; Holmes 2020). The consequent reflexivity about the scholarly position being adopted to push the inquiry forward in a sound manner meant taking conscious heed, first and foremost, of the preconceptions that could color and skew my understanding of the subject at hand. In the context of Iran's post-revolutionary foreign policy, for instance, the widespread popular belief that one side is right and the other wrong needed to steered clear of while acknowledging that no knowledge production enterprise can ultimately claim to be disinterested and value-neutral (Proctor 1991; Douglas 2007; Doppelt 2007; See also Gross and Robertson 2020). It also meant taking into account potential security risks involved in doing research of politically sensitive nature and the limitations of access to the field that ensued as a consequence. Indeed, my field work for collection of primary material was limited to only one occasion, after which it became too risky and hazardous to go back for further first-hand exploration, not least following the publication of ***Article I*** on revisionism and ontological (in)security where the gathered field material and face-to-face interviews were substantially utilized in the empirical section.

Yet, observation, imagination and intuition for purposes of theorizing may not yield desirable results unless it is grounded in a tradition of knowledge provided by the discipline within which theory development is supposed to take place, that is in this case, IR theory in general and ontological security studies (OSS) in particular. More specifically, the theory-minded inquirer needs to operate within a wider theoretical framework and think in terms of it while immersed in the act of observing the phenomena in question (Swedberg 2016). Ontological security research has been of special interest here because on the one hand unlike (neo)realist thought, as touched upon earlier, it does not overemphasize material interests and *realpolitik* power maximization motives in making sense of state behavior but in fact moves beyond them into the realm of identity and self-concept. And on the other, unlike mainstream constructivism, which does take identity seriously, it does not underemphasize psychological drivers of behavior such as emotions, affects and feelings but in fact accords them center stage in unpacking international political and security developments. In sum, OSS offers one of the fittest frames of analysis within which to explore Iran, our empirical object of research, and to theorize thence. In part, this suggests a theory-driven attempt at "exploratory studies" whose

chief aims are to advance our knowledge of an issue that "needs to be better known" and/or developing novel insights and "hypotheses" about an already known one, thus shedding light on its other dimensions and dynamics (Swedberg 2020: 27-28).

The reader may wonder why in the first place I have picked such discrete subjects as "state gender" (***Article II***) "state self-harm" (***Article III***) and "strategic ambivalence" (***Article IV***) to interrogate and theorize, and not other facets of state behavior. My answer to that query is threefold. First, these are among the issue-areas where ontological security dynamics stand out and lend themselves fruitfully to original psychopolitical analysis in important part owing to their profound relationship with actor subjectivity and "self-concept." Speaking of which, there is, moreover, a notable dearth of theoretical engagement with them in the OSS body of scholarship and it is hoped that the present exploration will help redress that gap. Second, the choice of gender, self-harm, and ambivalence for theoretical investigation have been triggered by particular characteristics of the empirical case at hand and thus to some extent represents the "deeply personal" nature of theorizing as stated above, in the sense that one can only "theorize well" by doing it oneself and by employing one's "own experiences and resources" (Swedberg 2012: 2). Other researchers may choose to focus on other aspects of Iran—or other cases for that matter—for extraction of insights to further theorizing work in ontological security studies. The bottom line, however, is to make an original contribution to OSS in the hope of deepening and broadening it into a full-fledged theory. Third and finally, even though the project departs from a curiosity about revisionism as its entry point and a correspondent endeavor to investigate it from an OSS perspective (***Article I***), the above subjects have been deliberately selected to enhance the generalizability potential of its theoretical propositions and to enable their application to non-revisionist cases as well, thus contributing theoretically to IR on the whole. While the connection to revisionism has been maintained empirically in all Articles by virtue of instantiating the theoretical insights in the case of Iran as a revisionist state, the theory building work itself that has gone into each Article could be deployed for OSS analysis of any other actor including non-revisionist ones as long, of course, as the empirical evidence is there to substantiate the theorization. By this token, that is theoretically speaking, the thesis claims to have transcended revisionism and furthered IR theory in general by improving our theorization of OSS as a growing part of that discipline.

Ontological (In)Security through Laing and Giddens

Introduced by Scottish psychiatrist R. D. Laing in his "existential" inquiry into severe mental illnesses, "*primary ontological security*" relates to a person's sense of Self, basic personal identity and "integral selfhood" with respect to both time and space factors (1960: 39). An actor with a "firm core of ontological security" is, accordingly, one who experiences their own "being as real, live, whole" with an "inner consistency" and substance. Such an ontologically secure subject feels temporally continuous and "spatially coextensive with the body," as "having begun in or around birth and liable to extinction with death" (Ibid: 41-42). In these circumstances, the ordinary uncertainties and anxieties of everyday life are not expected to pose a serious and destabilizing threat to one's existence. On the contrary, when ontological security does not obtain, the subject may feel "more unreal than real," with a questionable sense of identity characterized by an experience of temporal discontinuity on the one hand and a feeling of disconnect between her Self, or being-in-the-world, and her body or physique on the other. The agent, in this case, is believed to be bedeviled by ontological insecurity, to lack an actionable sense of agency and to feel continually threatened by ordinary circumstances of quotidian life (Ibid).

The concept of ontological (in)security thus initiated was later picked up and developed by British sociologist Anthony Giddens in his widely cited work on modernity to illustrate the affcetive pressures and ontological or "self-identity" challenges individuals may face as a consequence of living a life largely bereft of its traditional moorings and certainties. While Giddens adopts the concept from Laing, his rendition of ontological security is significantly influenced by the object relations theories of Erik Erikson and Donald Winnicott, in particular by their emphasis on the notion of "basic trust" rooted in the early-childhood relationship between the infant and the primary caregivers. For him, it "forms the original nexus from which a combined emotive-cognitive orientation towards others, the object-world, and self-identity, emerges" (Giddens 1991: 39). Forged through the temporal-spatial phenomenon of "potential space" whereby the infant learns to accept the absence of the mother and come to terms with the reality principle, basic trust plays a critical role in the creation of "I" as a distinct identity and is thus "at origin of what [Paul] Tillich calls 'the courage to be'" (Ibid). Proceeding from this conception of primary trust, Giddens defines ontological security as an "emotional" rather than a cognitive state which entails a sense of "confidence," originating in the unconscious, that agents have both in the "continuity" of their inner self-

identity and in the "constancy" of their outer environment (1990: 92-96; 1991: 6, 243). He further contends that confidence in the external world, including in the return and reliability of primary caregivers during infancy, takes shape in close concert with "an inner sense of trustworthiness," which furnishes the foundation for a stable self-identity and ontological security in adulthood (1990: 94, 1984: 50). In sum, in order to attain a feeling of ontological security, one needs to "possess, on the level of the unconscious and practical consciousness, 'answers' to fundamental existential questions which all human life in some way addresses" (1991: 47).

Notably, the Giddensian formulation of ontological security relies, in practice, on two intertwined elements, namely "biographical continuity" in the form of reflexive narratives and stories actors tell about themselves, and "habits and routines" that facilitate that kind of continuity and predictability over time. In the post-traditional order of modernity, according to him, the self-identity project, "which consists in the sustaining of coherent, yet continuously revised, biographical narratives," turns into a "reflexively organized endeavour" in the face of manifold possibilities and multiple choices the modern social life presents, conferring special significance on the question of "lifestyle," "ways of life" or "How shall I live?" in the constitution of self-identity (1991: 6, 15). In this sense, self-identity refers to "the self as *reflexively understood by the person in terms of her or his biography*" and requires a concept of personhood in relation both to oneself and others (Ibid: 54, emphasis in original). An ontologically secure person therefore is assumed to have a stable sense of self-identity and a coherent feeling of biographical continuity that comes, in Giddens' words, with a "protective cocoon" which "filters out" the paralyzing momentary consciousness of hazards and unpredictabilities that may imperil her self-integrity in the practical conduct of everyday life and which enables her to go on (Ibid: 55). Some sort of critical "*emotional inoculation* against existential anxieties" and situational vulnerabilities is the most decisive function of this protective shell or "defensive carapace" which primarily develops from basic trust relations of infancy and allows the adult individual to preserve hope and courage in the face of despair and fear and "get on" with the daily affairs of social life (Ibid: 40-41, emphasis in original).

Even though the capacity to bracket out constant anxieties and unpredictable menaces that lurk around the corner in everyday life stems from sound object relations in early childhood—without which the infant, according to Winnicott, fails to build up "*a continuity of being*" and therefore "does not really come into existence" (1994 [1965]: 54, emphasis in original)—it is

sustained by a constellation of routines and habits at the level of practical consciousness. From a Giddensian perspective, the maintenance of routine activities coupled with their disciplinary effect is a "crucial bulwark against threatening anxieties" and contributes to the creation of a "'formed framework' for existence" by fostering "a sense of 'being'" as differentiated from "non-being" and essential to the attainment of ontological security (Giddens 1991: 40). This does not mean, however, that the more strictly one adheres to habit, the higher degree of ontological security will ensue. On the contrary, for Giddens, "blind commitment" to entrenched routines without leaving much space for creativity and flexibility signifies "neurotic compulsion" born out of "unmastered anxiety" simply because basic trust as a foundation of ontological security implies readiness for a "leap into the unknown" and a preparedness to embrace the unpredictable (Ibid: 41-42). Pertinently, routines usually feature "normal appearances" in the context of social interaction, a term Giddens borrows from Erving Goffman and describes as "bodily mannerisms" through which the protective cocoon so central to "filtering out" processes of everyday life is reproduced. Yet it bears noting that the extent to which external appearances are kept up and social routines are abided by has profound implications for feelings of ontological security as tortured performances and "staged routines" out of congruence with autobiographical narratives could culminate in dissociation from the body or disembodiment, an unembodied "false self" in which "the body appears as an object or instrument manipulated by the self from behind the scenes" (Ibid: 59-60; See also Krickel-Choi 2022).

Ontological (In)Security beyond Laing and Giddens

A major criticism leveled at OSS in IR pertains to the very concept of ontological security as defined by Laing and developed by Giddens. As pointed out above, Giddens borrows the concept from Laing and presents it mostly in terms of *continuity of being*, under the influence of object relations theory, with special emphasis on the significance of basic trust and contextual familiarity, consistent autobiographical narratives about the Self, and temporal routines for attainment of ontological security. This structuralist continuity-centered approach places the analytical weight on stability, integration, and unity of the Self, and in so doing downplays its incompleteness, "fragility and fragmentation" as highlighted by Lacanian psychoanalysis (See Giddens: 1990: 96). Citing endeavors to ensure ontological security such as "securitization of subjectivity"—which refers to building walls of closure,

protection and purity around the (collective) Self to shield it against perceived threats from a Stranger-Other (Kinnvall 2004: 749-50, 2006: 35-37)—critics have suggested that aspirations for stable identities and narratives of selfhood, hence ontological closure as a desirable end result, may not only obscure the political contingency of such narratives and the power relations informing them but can also suppress and exclude different modes of subjectivity and possibilities of the Self including the transformative potential of anxiety. They "enact significant limitations on political critique and possibility, insofar as they close down the question of the subject," Rossdale (2015: 369) contends, adding that ordering political subjectivity within an ontological (in)security epistemic framework "forecloses important spaces of resistance, alterity, and ethical deliberation" (See also Rix 2021: 13-15).

This line of contestation has, in response, prompted a theoretical move beyond Giddens and more towards a Lacanian conception of ontological security among some OSS theorists in IR. They have proposed that the solution to the Giddensian "status quo bias" and "tilt toward conservatism" may rest within the ontological security framework itself, broadened as it should be by theoretical insights from Lacanian psychoanalysis and existentialist philosophy. According to these scholars, embracing the constancy of existential anxiety as "part of the human condition" and an omnipresent feature of daily life, as well as the inevitably abortive hence never-ending struggle of the lacking-desiring subject for fullness would open up sociopolitical space and spawn new possibilities for alternative thought and creative action (Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020: 245-247). Thus it would be analytically more accurate and appropriate to think about ontological (in)security in terms of (in)security of "becoming" rather than only of "being," recognizing the ultimate "lack" of a kernel of unity and identity which infinitely propels the subject's evolutionary journey in search for self-certainty, wholeness and *jouissance*. A similar conclusion, albeit with some qualifications, could be seen in other existentialist approaches that instead concentrate on the multimodality of anxiety, classifying it into "normal" and "neurotic," with the former viewed as promising and potentially conducive to creativity and the latter equated with ontological insecurity and considered "highly pathological and debilitating" (Gustafsson and Crickel-Choi 2020). The thesis sympathizes with these critical interventions and has accordingly taken them onboard in its effort to engage with new concepts from an ontological security perspective and make original theoretical contributions to OSS in IR. More specifically, as will be elaborated to some extent later, the Lacanian theory of the subject has been deployed in

Articles III and ***IV*** to conceptualize state self-harm and strategic ambivalence respectively and theorize them through ontological security lenses.

Ontological (In)Security in IR

The first theoretical applications in IR theory of ontological (in)security, as briefly laid out above, may be traced back to late 1990s when the term was employed to conceptualize security as a "thick signifier" as well as to theorize its function in relation to "collective identity" discourses in sociological accounts of international relations. Converging with a Giddensian view, McSweeney, for one, conceives of the state, ontologically speaking, as a collective "instrument of security" rather than its subject or primary referent, and proceeds to define ontological security as "confidence in the actor's capacity to manage relations with others" (1999: 85, 157). The confidence in interaction management is in important part made possible by "reflexivity" of social action as "the unconscious and taken-for-granted skill" which produces routines that render action comprehensible, much like the function of the "protective cocoon," highlighted by Giddens, which keeps at bay swarming anxieties of the moment. "Social life," in McSweeney's words, "is only practically possible because we are *not* normally reflective, not normally aware of our monitoring of how to do it" (Ibid: 40-41, emphasis in original). Ontological security is thus seen as a "central condition for action" based on the consistency of individual "expectations and skills" with the social order that governs everyday life (Ibid: 156).

In relative contrast, Huysmans (1998) diverges from the Giddensian understanding and, apparently influenced by Zygmunt Bauman's theory of ambivalence (1990; 1991) and its relationship with modernity or the modern state, places the theoretical premium on the notion of determinability as the principal basis of security of being-in-the-world in his seminal conceptualization of the term as a thick signifier. Along these lines, he relates ontological security to the mediation of order and chaos, the need to manage "the very activity of ordering itself" in the face of indeterminability, ambivalence, and fear of the unknown—"death as the undetermined" rather than a concretized threat—which transforms daily security questions into an "ontological security problematic" (1998: 228, 242-245). He draws attention to the "hermeneutic problem" posed by the failure of the act of ordering itself when we face "undecidables" in the social world such as "strangers" who are

neither friends nor enemies, neither insiders nor outsiders, but in fact somehow both. "They articulate ambivalence and therefore challenge the (modern) ordering activity which relies on reducing ambiguity and uncertainty by categorizing elements" (241). Such inherently ambivalent forces that resist discursive determinability and defy symbolic categorization are thus a source of ontological insecurity *par excellence*, exposing the limits of reflexivity and intelligibility as they do (Ibid: 242-243). They threaten a stable, continuous and bounded sense of Self as distinct from the Other and "differentiated from the rest of the world" yet "coextensive with the body," factors which Laing (1960: 41) assume to be core requirements of ontological security.

Yet, as Ejdus (2018: 884-85) aptly contends, none of the "first generation" of IR theorists who imported ontological security from psychology and sociology into the discipline—including also Wendt (1994), Manners (2002) and Zaretsky (2002)—undertook to build a new theoretical scaffolding or empirically illustrate its explanatory purchase and conceptual potential. It did not take long, however, before a rapidly expanding camp of scholars, mostly with constructivist and poststructuralist persuasions, noticed this potential and unpacked the concept—and along with it, various facets of the phenomenon—of ontological (in)security to theorize about a diverse range of issue-areas in IR. These include, but are not limited to, anxieties of globalization and recourse to nationalism, populism and far-right extremism (Kinnvall 2004, 2006, 2019; Kinnvall and Svensson 2018, 2022; Homolar and Scholz 2019; Agius et al 2020; Kinnvall and Kisic Merino 2023; Kisic Merino and Kinnvall 2023), migration, ethnicity and belonging (Noble 2006; Skey 2010; Innes 2017; Mitzen 2018), propensity for routinized conflicts and collaborations (Mitzen 2006a, 2006b; Gustafsson 2016; Curtis 2016), state biographical narratives, self-identity and sense of shame (Steele 2005, 2008; Delehanty and Steele 2009; Berenskoetter 2014; Subotić 2016; Hom and Steele 2020), state denials of historical crimes and international stigmatization (Zarakol 2010, 2011), terrorism and terror management perspectives (Van Marle and Maruna 2010; Combes 2017; Chan 2020), strategic friendship, alienation and adjustment (Berenskoetter and Giegerich 2010; Berenskötter and Nymalm 2021), clashing state identities and contradictory practices (Lupovici 2012), challenges and potentialities of conflict resolution and peacebuilding (Kay 2012; Rumelili 2015b), securitization of Islam and Muslims (Croft 2012a, 2012b), collective memory, trauma and bordering practices (Kinnvall 2012, 2015, 2017; Innes and Steele 2013; Gustafsson 2014; Cash and Kinnvall 2017; Bachleitner 2021, 2023; Agius 2022; Kinnvall and Svensson 2023), emotions, affect and subjectivity (Solomon 2013, 2015, 2018; Vieira 2018; Gustafsson and Krickel-

Choi 2020; Rumelili 2020; Bolton 2023; Bilgic and Pilcher 2023; Untalan 2023), transnational media and communications (Georgiou 2013), great power politics, power transitions and special relationships (Chacko 2014; Hagström 2021), problems and promises of agency, change and desecuritization (Rumelili 2015a; Flockhart 2016; Browning and Joenniemi 2017), political authority, governance and state sovereignty (Zarakol 2017; Krolokowski 2018; Krickel-Choi 2024), national and international crises (Kinnvall and Mitzen 2018; Ejdus 2018; Deacon 2023), ideological narratives and fantasies (Eberle 2019; Gellwitzki and Houde 2023), and even political science research, problem formulation and theory development (Gustafsson and Hagström 2023).

Clearly, an adequate discussion of this vast and growing body of scholarship is not within the scope of this text, but foregrounding the major points of contention in OSS literature will help further clarify the theoretical and methodological contours of the thesis.

The Level of Analysis or "State as Person" Problematique in OSS

A major disciplinary controversy surrounding ontological security studies concerns what has come to be known as the "level of analysis" or "unit of analysis" quandary—also labeled the "problem of aggregation"—which arises when individual human qualities and emotions such as anxiety, shame and pride are "scaled up" and extrapolated to corporate entities and collectivities like states as if they are persons and have a Self too (Kinnvall 2004: 41-42; Mitzen 2006a; Steele 2008; Mitzen and Larson 2017). The question that state personification or anthropomorphization provokes in this respect is not only whether individual psychological needs like ontological security may be legitimately ascribed to states but also whether states are to be seen as purveyors of ontological security for their nationals or seekers of it themselves or both. Krolikowski (2008: 111), for instance, seeks to demonstrate the inadequacy of state-as-person extrapolations by testing the Giddensian notion of "basic trust" as a prerequisite for ontological security in the case of Chinese foreign policy and international behavior, arguing ultimately that "the assumption of state personhood obscures important aspects of how the state, as an evolving institution, affects individuals' sense of ontological security" and "impoverishes the concept." In a similar vein, Abulof (2009) takes issue

with both Steele's attribution of emotions like shame to states (2005) and Mitzen's framing of ontological security as "a basic need, and as such a constant that cannot explain variation" (2006: 343), contending that this explanatory deficiency results from extrapolating individual attributes to collective entities. "In times of normative crisis," according to Abulof (2009: 233), "those community members who are ashamed of events in time and/or of groups in space, may well exhibit a 'variation,' reframing their collective identity, or even renouncing it in favor of other, contesting collective identities." Other scholars have lent support to this critique of corporate as opposed to individual actors as the primary referent object of ontological security on similar analytical as well as normative grounds (Roe 2008; Epstein 2011), with some suggesting that the collective-level application of psychological needs to states represents a deviation from the theoretical origins of ontological security in psychology and sociology (Croft 2012b).

In sum, most OSS works concerned with the state level of analysis take a metatheoretical shortcut by treating "states as persons" (Wendt 1999, 2004) and then attributing to the resultant "state person" human feelings, affects and emotions such as those of ontological (in)security. Correspondingly, the scaling up from the individual to the state level, which enables the assumption of a state Self, aligns with—and perhaps also inclines those works to embrace—a Laingian-Giddensian understanding of self-identity and "integral selfhood" where contextual predictability in the form of "basic trust" in the constancy of the social world, consistent autobiographical narratives, and temporal routines ensure a *continuity* of being-in-the-world, that is ontological security (Laing 1960: 39-41; Giddens 1990: 92-96; 1991: 6, 243). "In international relations," Bartelson (2015: 81-82) points out, echoing Wendt, "states are assumed to be persons by virtue of their capacity to act intentionally…and possessing something akin to a collective consciousness." Proponents of this aggregate-level extrapolation model may propose a number of arguments in its defense. First, despite the flaws of state personhood analogy, they may contend, its merits in advancing our understanding of collective psychopolitical dynamics far outweigh its demerits, and as such dismissing it out of hand would risk undermining the interdisciplinary openness and potential of IR as a dynamic field of inquiry. Pertinently, from a state-as-person perspective, exactly because states, nations and societies are imagined heterogeneous collectivities, relying on the "as if" equivalency for their analysis could yield better *systemic* insights than a sheer focus on their leaderships or ruling elite—who *are* persons—would. Second, proponents might highlight the policy and practice of international relations in the real

world where persons are normally dealt with as state-affiliated "nationals" rather than state-free "individuals" and ultimately based on the "nation-state" from which they hail and how, in ideal-typical terms, friendly or hostile those nation-states are. If a given state is to be penalized through economic sanctions or other legal or diplomatic measures, or so the argument may proceed, it is the treatment of "states as persons" that theoretically justifies application and extension of those measures to its nationals, regardless of its normative implications. "So although the person of the state may be fictitious, looping effects have allowed it to become an indisputable part of political reality," Bartelson asserts, eventually defending state personhood as "a social fact in its own right" (Ibid: 83).

Yet to function, state personification has to gloss over a metatheoretical fallacy underpinning it, which incidentally dovetails well with a Giddensian reading of ontological (in)security but which sticks out when the assumption of a Self for the person and accordingly an ontological status for the state is questioned, as in Lacanian approaches to OSS. An OSS framework thus conceived relies on two presuppositions as it takes for granted the Self of the person, *à la* Laing and Giddens, and thence that of the state, *à la* Wendt, as givens waiting to be secured by the agent in question. The notion of a fixed essential Self is implied in Giddens's assertion that in order to attain ontological security, one needs to "possess, on the level of the unconscious and practical consciousness, 'answers' to fundamental existential questions which all human life in some way addresses" (1991: 47), as if having ready answers at any given time suffices to resolve ontological tensions inherent to the human subject.

Taking cues from Epstein (2011), this inquiry aspires to steer clear as much as possible of the Giddensian-Wendtian view, which she dismisses as "IR's fallacy of composition," (p. 330) for a number of reasons. First, as Epstein makes it abundantly clear, the Wendtian "state as person" analogy is grounded in biological essentialist thinking that relegates a "pre-social 'rump materialist' self" to the human body as a premise to postulate that the state unit too is similarly pre-social with an essential identity, a move Wendt deems necessary for his "systemic" social theory of international politics (Ibid: 331-332). Her poststructuralist discourse-oriented critique of Wendtian constructivism ties in neatly with a performative conception of the state as an entity that has "no ontological status apart from the claims, representations, assumptions and routines performing it in political and legal practices" (Grzybowski and Koskenniemi 2015: 29). In contrast to Wendt's pre-given "essential state" as the main point of departure for his systemic constructivist analysis, the

performative state has no "a priori existence" but in fact comes into being through discursive performances (Vulović 2020: 329-330). Second, by reifying continuity of being in persons and, by extension, in states as a requirement for ontological security, Giddensian-Wendtian renditions restrict the theoretical potential of OSS in analyzing sociopolitical practices and behavioral patterns characterized by discontinuity and disruption such as sacrificial self-harm (as theorized in ***Article III***).

For Lacan, in contrast to Giddens, primal anxiety—and with it desire—is associated with the subject's "lack" of an essential core of identity, unity or fullness which stems from an inner split caused by its entry into a pre-existing Symbolic order that is the locus of language, discourse, signifiers and values. The "constitutive lack" at the heart of the inherently divided subject suggests two crucial points. First, ontology is constructed around an unrepresentable negativity. In fact, the existence of the lack is the very "condition of possibility" of search for ontology in identification processes (Solomon 2015: 42; Mandelbaum 2023; Epstein 2011). Put otherwise, it is this ontological lack that renders ontological quest relevant in the first place. And second, there is no end to ontological search and no final destination of subjective development as the lacking subject is a "*manque-à-être"* ('want-to-be,' 'want of being' or 'lack of being') invariably involved in the process of becoming through the workings of desire and fantasy (Lacan 1998 [1978]: 29-30, emphasis in original; Green and Vanheule 2023: 2-3; Mandelbaum 2020: 51-52).

Now the question that begs answering is, how can one apply, theoretically and methodologically, non-Giddensian or more specifically Lacanian, ontological security dynamics to a collective actor like the state without the essentialist reduction of the social to the individual (See Stavrakakis 1999: 3)? Put differently, how may the concept and its attendant emotions and affects travel across different levels of analysis? The way forward is to be sought in the realm of political subjectivity, marked by the "hyper-individualized" category of desire on the one hand and the social category of discourse—which mediates desire and thus splits the subject—on the other (Epstein 2011: 335-336). It is within the Symbolic order, the sphere of the Other, of discourse and language, that the subject constitutes her (perpetually unfulfilled) Self through speaking, signification and symbolization (Stavrakakis 1999: 29). Considering the pivotal role of "speaking" in the formation of Self, Epstein (2011) relies on "discourse theory" to appraise state agency and identity, posing the question of "who speaks?" and distinguishing between "subject-positions" and "subjectivities" to answer it. Since "talking" is so central to what states do and

who they are, a focus on discursively produced subject-positions, "the I/we of a discourse," allows for a non-reductionist analysis of state identity "while bracketing issues of subjectivity" which is "a much more extensive, and consequently unwieldy, category where all the hyper-individualized characteristics of identity are relegated" including affects and emotions; in sum, in Epstein's words, "subject-positions constitute identities *minus* subjectivities" (Ibid: 343).

While Epstein's emphasis on discursive subject-positions or "who speaks" is undoubtedly useful in enabling us to analyze identity at the state level, it comes at the expense of leaving out the question of "who feels." It is indeed theoretically problematic to attribute "feelings" to states and claim that states "feel" in the same way as we attribute statements to them and claim that they "speak" by recourse to subject-positions, exactly because "social actors, that is, political *subjectivities* cannot be reduced to being discursive phenomena" (Ibid: p. 343, emphasis in original). In fact, feelings, emotions and affects are an inherent part of any political subjectivity and ultimately manifest themselves in subject-positions. Metaphorically speaking, political subjectivity may be envisaged as an iceberg of which subject-position is the tip, and it is the tip that alerts us to the workings of what is underneath. We might not be able to determine "who feels" as clearly as we are able to determine "who speaks" at the state level, but since emotions are clearly implicated in the articulation of subject-positions, representations, practices and performances that constitute the state, the latter hold the key to appraising those emotions and, by extension, its political subjectivity. When Britain says it is "alarmed," "appalled" or "outraged" at a development, all those representing the British state are taken to espouse the feelings of alarm or outrage at that development regardless of how they might individually feel, and the audience realizes by observing the connection between Britain as a state and the discursively expressed emotions that if a certain policy decision or course of action ensues with respect to that development, those emotions are part of what has induced it. By the same token, an inquiry into ontological (in)security at the state level needs to draw out the emotions and affects that inform the political subjectivity and Self-concept of a given state actor in order to make sense of related practices and what drives them. Such a non-essentialist approach to state-level OSS theorizing proceeds from the fundamental proposition that the performative practices and meaning-making processes that constitute a state are imbued with emotions and affects which may prove, empirically speaking, to be those of humiliation, shame, pride and so on inferred from the discursive positions reflecting them.

Theory Development, Case Study and Research Strategy

The chief theoretical contributions of the thesis consist in its development of ontological (in)security studies through articulating political-psychological dynamics of the fantasized (state) Self that stand out in revisionist behavior in international relations but are not exclusively limited to it. On a general level, Article subjects, which will be teased out separately below, have been picked with a view to exploring the dynamics of ontological (in)security in revolutionary actors as the empirical case study in each Article makes it pretty clear. This does not, however, mean that the theoretical propositions and insights on OSS presented in each Article are not applicable to other cases, i.e. non-revisionist states. Except for ***Article I***, which lays out the analytical contours of the whole project and thus directly addresses the relationship between revisionism and ontological (in)security, there is no special reference to revisionist behavior in the theory sections of ***Article II***, ***Article III*** and ***Article IV***, but in fact their theoretical contributions concern ontological (in)security more broadly and have the potential to shed light on different cases including status quo actors. From the early stages, it has been a deliberate intention and strategy of this research project to develop its theoretical arguments in ways that could be utilized openly in ontological security studies without a need to confine them to the study of revisionist states only. Yet, the revisionist element has been particularly reserved for empirical discussions in each Article—except ***Article I***—and therefore serves, clearly along with the OSS element, as a thematic bridge that connects all Articles together, helping ensure an adequate measure of cohesion and coherence for the whole thesis. In sum, OSS theorization is common to all Articles while exploration of revisionist behavior is present as part of the empirical analyses integrated into them.

Article I: OSS and Revisionism, Theoretical Contours and Case Selection

Entitled "State Revisionism and Ontological (In)Security in International Politics: The Complicated Case of Iran and Its Nuclear Behavior" (Behravesh 2018), ***Article I*** relies on a conventional reading of ontological security to interrogate its relationship with state revisionism and explain how the quest for security of/as being drives costly practices to cast and consolidate a revolutionary identity against the grain of the prevailing order. It defines revisionism as "activated dissatisfaction" which is then directed towards revising the existing pattern of structures and distribution of material and/or ideational resources in ways that involve conflict/war or are prone to cause it. In light of the "intersubjectively constituted structure of identities and interests in the [international] system" (Wendt 1999: 401), two modes of revolutionary behavior are identified, thick and thin, with the former committed to cause change through "redistribution by offense" such as the Nazi conquest of Poland or Russian invasion of Ukraine, and the latter via "redistribution by defiance" like the Iranian nuclear weapons pursuits. Given revisionists tend to define their relations with Others primarily on the basis of dissatisfaction and self-extending change, a twofold theoretical linkage with ontological security dynamics emerges. On the one hand, since they often find themselves in a minority of actors operating within a "Hobbesian culture of anarchy" (Wendt 1999), revisionists might derive a sense of ontological security from the status of singularity that ensues as it renders them prominently anti-establishment, unique and different. On the other, as a direct consequence of militating against the established order and its normative regimes of behavior, they might be subjected to a "geopolitics of exclusion" (Kupchan 2007: 87-88) by the majority in a rules-based system and thus experience relative international isolation fraught with sentiments of "strategic loneliness" (Mesbahi 2011). Prolonged exposure to these unfavorable circumstances where perceptions of threats from the outside world are strong and membership of "security communities" is difficult could engender a process of revisionist identity erosion and lead to strong feelings of ontological insecurity (See Greve 2018).

While the next three Articles are more theory-heavy with closer attention to theoretical questions, ***Article I*** is integral to the coherence of the whole project in that it elucidates the parameters of the empirical case, namely the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI), which is drawn upon for theory instantiation in *all* the following Articles. Introduced as a "thin revisionist" committed to

modification of ideational structures and redistribution of material resources through defiant—rather than offensive—measures, Iran has been selected for empirical case analysis throughout the thesis for two main reasons. First, revisionism or, more precisely, what amounts to revisionist behavior in foreign policy is unequivocally enshrined in the Constitution of the Islamic Republic. It has also been ideologically upheld ever since the 1979 Iranian revolution, not least by institutions like the "Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps" (IRGC) whose leaders occasionally go as far as to boast of the absence of the name of "Iran" in its official title, insisting that its "revolutionary" ideals transcend national boundaries and have a global scope. Principle 3 of the IRI Constitution stipulates that the Islamic Republic's foreign policy be based, *inter alia*, on "uninhibited support for the weakened of the world" while Principle 154 takes this ideological doctrine even further, accentuating that Iran will "back right-seeking struggles of the weakened against the arrogant anywhere in the world" (Hosseini-Nik 2006). The Iranian state's religious Shia self-identity and its sustained manifestation in the international relations of the Islamic Republic render it a classic case for exploration of revolutionary behavior through ontological (in)security lenses.

Speaking of which, and perhaps more significantly, the case selection has been informed by the theoretical framework of the study. Iran is not a "great power" by any measure, nor a member of such influential international bodies like the United Nations Security Council (UNSC), and is thus expected to incur relatively higher costs for pursuit of a revolutionary foreign policy and even fall prey to other more powerful revisionist actors such as Russia and China, as the history of unanimous UNSC sanctions against the IRI over its nuclear program clearly demonstrates. Pertinently, the mode of thin revisionism it is committed to steers clear of territorial conquest or offensive action altogether, implying that material considerations and gain maximization do not feature very centrally in the Iranian foreign policy vision but more often than not play second fiddle to ideational and ideological concerns. Based on these factors, the case is likely to be theoretically rewarding and lend itself more conveniently to ontological (in)security inquiries where material-physical interests are usually assumed to be sacrificed for ontological needs, not least if it is deemed necessary for securing the imagined Self. Yet it is worth reiterating that the selection of Iran here by no means limits the application of theoretical propositions in the thesis, particularly in ***Articles II***, ***III*** and ***IV***, to revisionist states only, as will be further clarified below.

Article II: Gendering OSS and Theorizing Ontological Dislocation

The primary purpose of this Article, titled "State Gender and Ontological Dislocation: Gendering Iran's Revolutionary Identity and Nuclear Behavior," is to conceptualize "state gender" and theorize it into the ontological (in)security framework, an undertaking that has been largely neglected in the OSS scholarship despite growing attention to gender and gendered narratives of Self-Other relations. It seeks to show how state actors pursue ontological security through gendering themselves, and what transpires when that gendering endeavor undergoes disruptions and entrenched aspects of those gendered Selves, that is the state's gender identity, are dislocated. To this end, it introduces the concept of *ontological dislocation* as a horizontal-spatial rather than vertical-longitudinal phenomenon where the state Self's established multiplicitous relationship with significant gendered pairs arising from the phallocentric feminine/masculine dichotomy and constituting its identity—such as weak/strong, soft/hard, passive/active, peaceful/confrontational and so on—is destablized, making the actor feel it is on the wrong side of the dichotomy. On top of what some engagements with the nexus of gendered narratives and ontological (in)security in the literature suggest (Homolar and Scholz 2019; Kinnvall 2019; Agius et al 2020), this inquiry argues that gender is far more than a useful tool in state actors' identity toolkit or psycho-political repertoire that they pick up and utilize in their narrative constructions of Self, Other, "nationhood," "community" and so on to generate a certain ontological sense or outcome. More precisely, inseparable from the discursive system of signification within which identity takes shape, gender dynamics are part and parcel of that ontological sense in the first place and rather inherent to feelings of ontological (in)security. In sum, gender precedes ontological (in)security, it is contended, and in this sense functions as an *a priori* determinant of it, among other factors and determinants.

Along these lines, ***Article II*** draws on Judith Butler's theory of "gender performativity" (1999 [1990]) and post-Lacanian feminist theorists' critique of linguistic-discursive "phallocentrism" (Cixous, 1981; Cixous and Clément 2001 [1975]; Irigaray 1985 [1974], 1985 [1977]) to propose a theoretical foundation for understanding gender identity at the collective level and its implications for ontological security of the state Self. First, it critically engages with the ways in which gendering the Self-Other may be approached and explored in OSS, that is, "exogenously" (See Mitzen 2006a) or how gender

mediates the *choice* of significant Others and of attachment dynamics in relation to them, and "endogenously" (See Steele 2008) or how gender governs the consistency of actors' biographical self-narratives. It then proceeds to conceptualize *ontological dislocation* as a process instigated by the destabilization and disruption of state gender identity and how it may agitate the state actor into a restless scramble to repair and relocate the Self. Standing at the intersection of OSS and gender studies, ***Article II*** not only employes poststructuralist notions of masculinity/femininity to theorize state gender and consequences of its disruption through the novel concept of *ontological dislocation*, but it also takes a serious step towards gendering the OSS framework of analysis itself. This is an original interdisciplinary contribution that helps broaden the theoretical scope of ontological security studies, opening it up for further gender research especially at the level of collective discourses and narratives. Lastly, the revisionist linkage appears in the empirical section where Iran's manly revolutionary identity in general and corresponding nuclear behavior in particular are interrogated in light of the theoretical propositions about ontological dislocation. The empirical part revolves around the theoretically informed argument that a perception of state feminization and devalorization in the wake of the 2015 Iran nuclear accord with world powers prompted a dislocation of the state Self and led to a masculinist response to reclaim the revolutionary manliness of the Islamic Republic, evidenced above all by the launch of a highly securitizing "anti-infiltration project" against attempts to open up Iran to the outside world and thus soften the "character" of the state.

Article III: Lacanian OSS and Theorizing State Self-Harm

Labeled "Self-Harm as Desire for Ontological Security: The Lack, Trauma and Iran's Shootdown of Civilian Flight PS752," this Article embarks on a conceptual innovation in relation to ontological (in)security dynamics in IR by introducing the concept of "state self-harm" into the OSS theoretical framework. It departs from the premise that deliberate self-injurious behavior involving considerable sacrifice and loss of human life or "flesh" is not an uncommon phenomenon in world politics and international history, with examples ranging from Iranian "human wave" raids during the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) to the Russian "meat grinder" analogy in the context of the Russia-Ukraine war. What these violent practices have in common—and

matters most significantly for the purposes of ***Article III***—is a distinct sacrificial element which arises from a desire to mark and animate sovereignty of the state Self far more than a need to guard and insulate its survival. Pertinently, since sacrifice is ultimately about giving up something of one's own, it lays bare the boundaries of the self; indeed, as social theorist Paul W Kahn (2008: 109) puts it, the state "is sacrificing itself in the body of the citizen." The nexus of sovereignty and self-sacrifice thus paves the way for OSS interventions to explore the deep-seated psychopolitical factors and psychic processes at the root of self-injurious acts perpetrated by states against their own nationals or citizens. State-perpetrated acts of self-harm have to do with far more than individual leaders or decisionmakers, and are significantly marked by their historical continuity and repetition in the sociopolitical settings where they transpire. These historical patterns, for instance in the case of Russia or Iran, suggest above all that to make sense of state self-injury, perhaps the best place to explore for answers and explanations is state subjectivity and identity. Such analytic engagement is especially incumbent upon OSS given its powerful theoretical purchase in explicating collective behaviors that run counter to actors' physical security or material interests—hence self-damaging in a sense—and might thus appear readily irrational at face value. Yet, the extant ontological (in)security scholarship is almost entirely silent on those profound occasions when states sacrifice their own and barely for any material good.

Article III draws on Freudian psychoanalysis of trauma and especially on Lacan's theory of subjectivity to argue that self-harm on the collective/state level is primarily about sacrificing the flesh to salvage a fantasized Self and thus serves ontological security-seeking purposes through trauma management and fantasy reanimation. Underlying many instances of self-injury is what Csordas and Jenkins (2018: 208) describe as a "crisis of agency" enacted on the "terrain" of the flesh where injuring signifies various modes of agential engagement at the intersection of the body and the world. Even though a Giddensian understanding of ontological security as continuity of being may lend support to explicating certain facets of self-harm, it ultimately proves theoretically hamstrung by foreclosing the possibility of fragmentation, disruption or *discontinuity* so common to the dynamics of self-injurious behavior as the subject strives to demarcate a radically different space or order of security, a new normal as it were, where she might manage existential anxiety and feel ontologically secure.

This critical point paves the way for adoption of a Lacanian approach to ontological security as security of *becoming* in ***Article III*** and how self-harm represents a desire for it. Theoretical engagement with the security of becoming as an infinite process presupposes inescapability of existential anxiety and even relevance of the "death instinct" or "primary masochism" as a facticity of human psyche originating, from a psychoanalytic perspective, in the "*trauma of birth*" as the infant is separated from the caregiving mother's body before going through the "*trauma of weanin*g" (Lacan 2006: 152, emphasis in original). Yet, the highest form of existential anxiety transpires in encounter with or experience of "the Real," which Lacan describes as "the lack of the lack," a traumatic component that amounts to the very category of the "impossible" (Lacan 1998 [1978]: ix, 166-167; Botting 1994: 24, 29). It is "perhaps best understood as that which has not yet been symbolized, remains to be symbolized, or even resists symbolization" (Fink cited in Kinnvall and Svensson 2023: 3-4). A significant question that presents itself is therefore, how can we represent the unrepresentable and speak about the unspeakable? Self-injury, enacted on the plane of flesh, is one answer to this question, albeit ultimately abortive. In the face of the traumatic force of the Real and its resistance to iteration, representation and symbolization, the subject senses her ontological lack, which prompts her into a struggle to capture it, but precisely because the lack is lacking, nowhere to be found and fixed in psychic or social spheres, she turns back on her own body, as if to make a "cut" into the Real and inscribe it into the Symbolic. In this sense, self-injurious behavior provides the subject with a taste of *jouissance*, an uninhibited sense of enjoyment that the subject has had to renounce as a condition of entry into the Symbolic, as she is fantasizing her way out of a crisis of ontology at the intersection of the body and the sociosymbolic world of the Other. In other words, self-harm is fantasy (re)articulated and (re)inscribed on the body that helps maintain unconscious desire for a state or space of ontological security where fullness of identity is supposed to be achieved.

Again, as per the research strategy, the revisionist connection, which ties ***Article III*** thematically to the other Articles in the thesis, appears in the empirical section where Iran's deliberate shootdown in January 2020 of the Ukraine International Airlines Flight 752 (PS752) is interrogated as an instance of state self-injury through Lacanian OSS lenses. The essential argument here is twofold. First, the Iranian state's decision to shoot down PS752 must have been an act of "compulsion to repeat," elicited by the traumatic Soleimani assassination earlier and directed inwards, pretty much echoing the US shootdown of Iran Air passenger flight 655 in July 1988. The act of self-injury

perpetrated by the state was therefore a response to a traumatic experience and a way to manage the traumatic memories that the former evoked. Second, the bigger trauma for the Islamic Republic was not the unexpected humiliating loss of its most influential military commander to hostile action by an archenemy, but the realization of its "lack" in the wake of such action. Striking a military base, albeit "empty," as a potent signifier of the Other was the Iranian state subject's attempted employment of the Symbolic to avoid facing the Real, to "cancel [it] out" and create "reality" (Fink cited in Kinnvall and Svensson 2023: 4). Yet since this act of symbolization necessarily failed, the traumatic crisis of the Real endured. Faced with its ontological lack and subjective fragmentation, reflected and foregrounded by the specular image of a "hollow" base on the one hand and the inevitable failure to locate that lack in its subjectivity and thus escape the trauma of the Real on the other, Iran turned back on its own, sacrificing the flesh to salvage a fantasized Self: a civilian plane "full" of passengers passed unconsciously as a perfect substitute for an "empty" base whose successful targeting subsequently proved to the revolutionary subject as a matter of fantasy narrative that a full, unique and stable identity was within reach, *not just yet*.

Article IV: Kleinian-Lacanian OSS and Theorizing Strategic Ambivalence

Titled "Strategic Ambivalence as Ontological Security: Iran and the Russia-Ukraine War," the last Article of the thesis mounts a counterintuitive argument: that ambivalence, despite its close associations with uncertainty, undecidability, indeterminacy and "strangeness," could become a source of ontological security rather than insecurity. It differentiates between two types of often interconnected ambivalence for purposes of better analytical clarity: *epistemic* and *affective*. While the OSS literature has usefully engaged with the concept of epistemic ambivalence and its manifestations in international politics such as the position occupied by "strangers" (Berenskötter and Nymalm 2021), almost no attention has been paid to affective ambivalence and deliberate instrumentalization or strategization of it by state actors in the form of narratives and narrative representations for ideational and ontological ends. *Epistemic* (or epistemological) ambivalence is the kind of knowledge-related ambivalence encountered in the social world where attempts at categorizing, ordering and determining an entity falter. The OSS approach to ambivalence as a categorically "disordering," hence psychologically unsettling,

phenomenon derives for the most part from the sociological theory of modernity developed by Zygmunt Bauman (1990, 1991) who defines it primarily in terms of an intrinsic and natural linguistic (mal)function. This theoretical background is appraised at appropriate length in the Article, along with some of the prominent works in IR that have undertaken to explore the phenomenon from various perspectives including that of ontological (in)security (See Huysmans 1998; Zarakol 2011; Mälksoo 2012; Rumelili 2012; Combes 2016; Rumford 2016; Vieira 2018). Of notable relevance to the investigation of epistemic ambivalence and strangeness here are Ulrich Beck's recommendation to embrace the "art of [reflexive] doubt" as a force that "breaks the energy of truth" (1997: 166) and eventually Julia Kristeva's (1982; 1991) psychoanalytic propositions on "abject" and "abjection," that the stranger or foreigner, indeed the ambivalent Other, needs to be recognized as an element that resides within us in the first place and is already part of our unconscious Selves.

Affective ambivalence, in contrast, is emotionally based and pertains to a feeling of concurrent positivity and negativity which the subject might experience upon encountering an object, as a "battle between love and hate," to quote Freud (1909 [1955]: 191). With this distinction in mind, *strategic* ambivalence, ***Article IV*** postulates, is an agent's narrative renditions and discursive strategization of affective ambivalence at the service of ontological security aims. It is a strategy of "discursive damage control" that relies in important part on "framing and rhetorical packaging" of Self-damaging commissions (Hatakka et al 2017: 263-264) and involves "doublespeak" (Feldman and Jackson 2014) to project ambiguity about an agent's actual involvement in morally reprehensible or ontologically disruptive deeds. In strategic ambivalence as conceptualized in the framework of ontological security dynamics, however, the emphasis falls on the instrumentalization of affective ambivalence for ontological ends. Inspired by Melanie Klein's psychoanalytic notion of subjective "splitting" in schizoid mechanisms (1996 [1946]; 1975 [1952]) and Jacques Lacan's theorization of Self-Other relations in the dialectic of desire (1988, 1998 [1978], 2006), the Article argues that strategic ambivalence, represented by simultaneous narrative confirmation/approval and rejection/denial of a certain deed or course of action, constitutes a double-sided quest for self-identity affirmation. It comprises, on the one hand, positive (and conscious) furtherance of an identity which aligns with the deed through "introjection" by the Self and, on the other, negative (and unconscious) defense of an identity that collides with the deed through pursuit of its "recognition" by the Other. Strategic ambivalence thus

allows actors to accommodate self-contradictory patterns of behavior and uphold conflicting self-identities while mitigating anxieties and insecurities arising from ontological shame, autobiographical dissonance and behavioral self-contradiction (See Steele 2005, 2008 and Lupovici 2012).

In the empirical section of ***Article IV***, the Islamic Republic of Iran's controversial involvement in in the Russia-Ukraine War on behalf of the Russian aggressor, which it has *both* confirmed *and* denied, is scrutinized with respect to the concept of strategic ambivalence and its theorization from an OSS viewpoint. The main point of departure in this context is that such an engagement helped confirm the anti-Western revolutionary self-identity of the IRI as a revisionist state while at the same time it clearly undercut the state's anti-aggression self-concept. Iranian attitude towards the Russian invasion of a Western ally was thus one of affective ambivalence, with Tehran drawing satisfaction from seeing the West, its adversarial Other, paying a price for its presumably imperial advances and taking a beating in Ukraine, but simultaneously feeling unsettled by the notion that it was siding with the aggressor in the war. This affective sense of ambivalence had to be discursively strategized in the form of simultaneous narrative confirmation/approval and denial/dismissal of involvement in the Ukraine war when Tehran indulged Russian outreach for military help after Moscow's initial offensive to capture Kiev and conquer the entire Ukrainian territory failed. This is how, ***Article IV*** contends, Iran's strategic ambivalence towards the Russia-Ukraine war emerges, as the state moves, from a Kleinian perspective, to introject the "satisfying" facet of engagement in the conflict as a consolidation of its independent revolutionary Self and projects the "persecuting" part of it as expansionism onto the imperial Western Other. Intervention in the Ukraine war on behalf of the aggressor-occupier and against the West operates, in this sense, as a vehicle for attainment of ontological security for the Iranian state subject. Yet, the Iranian government has also kept denying extension of military support to Russia or any involvement in the Ukraine theater for that matter by recourse to a number of overlapping narratives. Based on a Lacanian reading, these repeated denials of wrongdoing lay bare the ontological lack and split in Iran's revolutionary Self on the one hand and further signify an unconscious desire of the Self for the symbolic international Other to provide it with what it lacks, recognizing and validating the anti-aggression and anti-imperial identities that its backing of aggression and conquest negates and nullifies.

Material and Methodology

The thesis uses a variety of qualitative methods to collect the necessary empirical material and analyze them in light of the theoretical framework developed in each Article. Given the political sensitivity of the case under consideration and the security risks involved, especially concerning scholarly research on the Iranian nuclear program, field work for in-person interviews remained limited to ***Article I***, which explores the ontological (in)security dynamics of Iran's defiant nuclearization as an instance of thin revisionism in its empirical part. More specifically, it was not possible by any means to go back to the field due to personal security hazards after an initial visit for data collection, meaning that other types of material and methodology had to be employed at ***Articles II, III and IV***, that is, media content, digitally accessed official statements, and key documents for discourse analysis. These methodological details will be examined in the following subsections. It is lastly worth clarifying that except for ***Article I***, which devotes much attention and space to delineating revisionism—in relation to ontological (in)security—and setting out the contours of the empirical case study as discussed above, the latter three Articles are oriented more towards theoretical conceptualization and theory development than empirical analysis. Indeed, this aspect of the research strategy has been motivated in part by limitations of access to the field and thus explains the methodological choices in the aforementioned Articles.

Semi-Structured Interviews and Narrative Analysis

In keeping with the theoretical arguments about revisionism as a source of both ontological security and insecurity, a series of semi-structured interviews were designed about Iran's nuclear program and conducted in three different settings, involving a total of 75 respondents of miscellaneous demographics. This was an ethnographically informed endeavor aimed at appraising the public sentiments on the ground about a significant policy-behavior pursued by the state, capturing diverse voices, and ascertaining the ways in which

"nationals" or members of "the body national/social" made sense of it (Rabionet 2011; See Mandelbaum 2016). We converse with others, as Danish psychologist Svend Brinkmann elucidates it in simple terms, "to learn about how they experience the world and how they think, act, feel, and develop as individuals and in groups" (2020: 524). For a research project primarily concerned with (collective) subjectivity and (in)security of being-becoming, qualitative interviewing as a set of "knowledge-producing conversations" and "a fundamental ontology of persons" seems the most natural way to go about establishing the trustworthiness of its theoretical claims and indeed "the most *objective* method of inquiry when one is interested in qualitative features of human experience" (Ibid: 525-526, emphasis in original).

In this specific case, perhaps arrangement of "focus group" interviews involving group interaction, discussion and moderation in line with the requirements and recommendations of "discursive psychology" (Morgan 2001; Edwards and Stokoe 2004; See also Nesbitt-Larking and Kinnvall 2012) would have been a more effective method of data collection about various perceptions of the Iranian nuclear program, but it was shelved to safeguard interviewee privacy, maximize trust between the interviewer and the interviewees and also to eschew the pitfalls of "social desirability bias" (Nederhof 1985; See also Singh and Tir 2023). With these factors in mind, the interviews were conducted in a semi-structured format with each individual to allow for a comfortable exchange of views, as the term "inter-view" literally indicates, and co-construction of knowledge "with the purpose of obtaining descriptions of the life world of the interviewee in order to interpret the meaning of the described phenomena" (Brinkmann and Kvale 2015: 6). Given the collective or aggregate level of analysis the study has generally been situated at, it was necessary to identify the main "national narratives" resulting from the dialogues that informed the interviewees' perception of reality and thus helped shape their political behavior. This is because collective identities, as Auerbach (2009: 294-295) points out, are "founded upon and nourished by national narratives," in the sense that such collectively held narratives about past and present glories and traumas—which are themselves located within "metanarratives" or historically overarching "stories about stories"—serve as "the building blocks of national/ethnic identity."

Narrative has been treated here as a powerful form of discourse with a number of differentiating characteristics that include human agency, the narrator's or speaker's perspective, and a plot or ordering of events. "Narrative is especially useful," Patterson and Monroe (1998: 316) assert, "in revealing the speaker's

concept of self, for it is the self that is located at the center of the narrative, whether as active agent, passive experiencer, or tool of destiny." This functionality of narratives as autobiographical accounts has been central to drawing out the dominant "narratives of nuclearity" in ***Article I***—nuclear capability as "resistance", as "modernity" and as "liability"—and scaling them up to the collective level in illustrating the ontological (in)security dynamics of Iranian revisionism pursued in important part through nuclearization and manifested in the Islamic Republic's official foreign and security policy discourse. The methodological narrative approach to OSS scholarship is underpinned by the assumption that we make sense of our social world and constitute our social identities through narratives and narrativity, that in a nutshell "narrative is an ontological condition of social life" (Somers 1994: 614). Yet in the practical conduct of data collection and research production, adequate precautions have been taken against the use of narratives and stories "in an uncritical and unanalyzed fashion" as if the interviewees' voices could automatically "speak for themselves" and deliver the final truth as they are expressed (See Atkinson and Delamont 2006: 166-167). These precautions are inspired by a "narrative ontology" that maintains perceptions, experiences and stories about them are "continuously interactive" and lead to "changes in both the people and the contexts in which they interact" (Caine et al 2013: 576). They also reflect a "constructionist" view of narrative analysis where meanings of stories are assumed to be socially constructed, intersubjectively constituted and always mediated by the time and location of inquiry, its "many differently positioned audiences" including future readers and eventually by the wider context of power relations (Esin et al 2014: 205-206).

Political Texts and (Critical) Discourse Analysis

In addition to interviews as a source of data, digitally accessible textual material generated by and about the state under question and its representatives, such as policy documents, political statements and media reports, have also been drawn upon for the present qualitative research. Unlike interviews which involve direct social interaction between the researcher and the audience, the interactive process as part of the co-construction of meaning is absent in the collection and generation of these texts, and as such (critical) discourse analysis as a broader politically conscious method of inquiry, indeed as an array of analytic approaches, has been employed to analyze them in light of the general theoretical framework (Cosgrove and McHugh 2008). At its

most basic, discourses refer to "sets of statements that construct objects and an array of subject positions" (Parker cited in Willig 2014: 342). A discourse analytic approach to qualitative research, described as a "language-dominant view of language" (Forrester 1996: 32), calls for special attention to the concepts, terms and expressions that their producers pick to manufacture differing versions of reality and enable, or exclude, certain modes of being, thinking, acting, living and governing. It is premised on the social constructionist view that "the words we choose to speak about something and the way in which they are spoken or written, shape the sense that can be made of the world and our experience of it" (Willig 2014: 341, 344). The belief that meaning and knowledge per se are brought into existence through discourse motivates a heightened focus on the real-world effects of discursive practices and knowledge production processes, or how talk and text are constructed and what they achieve (Potter and Wetherell 1996: 163-165).

In this sense, discourses are closely implicated in configurations of power and constitute different modalities of politics and hierarchies of social relations, warranting adoption of "critical" lenses for their analysis (See Fairclough 1995; Wodak 1996). ***Article II*** in particular exemplifies employment of critical discourse analysis to probe how explicitly gendered and emotionally laden concepts like *harim* (sanctum), *namous* (locus of honor), *narmesh* (flexibility/softness), *gheirat* (moral virility) and *pofyouzi* (pimposity) frame the Iranian nuclear discourse along masculinity/femininity lines and reveal deep ontological insecurities about the possibility of the 2015 nuclear accord resulting in collective identity transformation and state feminization. Feminist theorists, including in IR, have been prolific on the simultaneously constructed and constitutive nature of gender as discourse in social and political life. According to Connell (2005: 71-72), gender is a "structure of social practice" where the "everyday conduct of life" is organized not only in relation to what she dubs "a reproductive arena, defined by the bodily structures and processes of human reproduction" but also through "symbolic practices" in the realm of discourse, ideology and culture. The critical discourse analytic approach has helped in this case to demonstrate the performative-constitutive function of gender in language and the role of discursive gendering practices in privileging certain voices, conceptions and interpretations over others.

Article III follows a similar critical methodology to explicate how the discursive framing of a civilian aircraft shootdown as an act of "martyrdom" for prevention of war exposes the "ontological lack" and insecurities at the heart of the Iranian state's revolutionary Self and legitimizes the collective

"sacrifice of flesh" to salvage it. Excavating officially produced texts and harnessing discourse analysis to tease out their ideological underpinnings—in a Lacanian psychoanalytic theorization of a certain type of political behavior/practice, namely "state self-injury"—has thus yielded the added value of not only shedding light on a complex web of power relations but also uncovering the unconscious desires and fantasies that fashion the state subjectivity. This constructionist methodological approach is particularly on display in ***Article IV*** which hones in on the contradictory narratives and representations of Iran's involvement in the Russia-Ukraine war to delineate strategic ambivalence as the discursive strategization of affective ambivalence for ontological security purposes. In so doing, the inquiry consults verified media reports, official social media posts, public and private statements from political leaders as well as excerpts from the Iranian Constitution. Equipped with discourse analytic lenses, it shows that simultaneous approval/confirmation and dismissal/denial of a problematic policy—i.e. intervention in a war of territorial aggression on behalf of the aggressor—is in fact an ontologically driven form of "calculated ambivalence": articulations, iterations, and "utterances…formulated in a way which allows for possible ambiguous interpretations and is open for at least two opposing meanings" (Wodak 2003: 142; Wodak 2015: 14).

In Lieu of a Conclusion

As its title reveals, the core idea behind this thesis has been to theorize a political psychology of state behavior through critically engaging with ontological security studies (OSS) and developing its theoretical frame of analysis. To that end, it departs from an observation of Iran as a revisionist actor, seeking to identify significant aspects of its foreign policy and political subjectivity where ontological (in)security dynamics stand out and inform state agency and action. Doing security research in and about a country that actively securitizes such scholarship is, to all intents and purposes, challenging, with major implications for the research process, methodology and design. Apart from the colossal personal costs of the present project—in terms of indefinite forced exile, family deprivation and loss of a great many bonds—arguably its biggest shortcoming has been a relative dearth of primary empirical material caused by restrictions of access to the field. The empirical case analysis would have benefited considerably and perhaps proven more insightful and nuanced had I been able to reside in Iran even for short stints and interact directly with various audiences and stakeholders involved. Primary material insufficiency has also led, methodologically, to a relatively heavy reliance on discourse analysis of data retrieved from secondary sources. Yet, these deficiencies also contained a potential for originality and imagination that needed to be tapped. Above all, they fostered a greater impetus for bold imaginative theorizing, occasioning what I humbly believe are some of the unique strengths of the thesis, including innovative conceptualizations of "state gender," "ontological dislocation," "state self-harm" and "strategic ambivalence." The decision to say something new and interesting about such a widely explored concept as "gender" was far from an easy one, nor was the actual task of theorizing it at the state level and investigating the ontological security consequence of gender identity destabilization. Venturing into the uncharted territory of "self-harm" in international relations on the back of a literature that strictly belongs to clinical psychopathology was even more daunting. Equally formidable has been the endeavor to devise an apt theoretical framework for defining and delineating such a vague yet widely used concept as "strategic ambivalence."

By these tokens, the present thesis should be seen as still work in progress and part of a larger research project, indeed an ongoing "theorizing" enterprise rather than a done and dusted "theory," even if its constituent Articles do get a chance to see the light in various IR journals. This is not only because the extant scholarship on ontological security studies requires further strengthening and upgrading through more robust theory development and nuanced empirical illustration, but also because the deeper we delve into OSS the more novel avenues for research open up that can contribute significantly to IR theory writ large. For one, while this thesis has concerned itself in important part with theorizing revisionist behavior from an OSS perspective, there is much room for extending a similar line of inquiry into "revisionist alliances" and emerging "strategic partnerships" forged between status-quo challengers like Iran, Russia and China, as well as into the expanding constellation of BRICS nations and their ontological motives for membership in international bodies like the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO). Another so-called "game-changer" in our age that merits theoretical attention is arguably the rapid rise of Artificial Intelligence (AI) and its profound implications for how international relations including war and peace within and among nations are conducted. These new trends will likely become a defining yet complicating feature of international politics in the years and decades to come, and a framework of analysis like OSS that takes political subjectivities, identity formation processes and Self-concept constructions seriously is well positioned to ascend to the challenge of understanding and explaining them.

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Article I

State Revisionism and Ontological (In)Security in International Politics: The Complicated Case of Iran and Its Nuclear Behavior

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Abstract

Despite continuing to be a strong tendency in international relations today, "state revisionism" has been theoretically and empirically understudied. This article attempts to fill the lacuna by further conceptualizing revisionism and subsequently investigating its relationship with ontological (in)security through studying the ways in which revisionist states envision their identities and interests and take measures to secure them. It argues that revisionists define their relationship with outside "Others" primarily in terms of dissatisfaction and self-extending change and thus find themselves operating within an enmity-centric "Hobbesian culture of anarchy," which may ironically serve as a source of ontological security due to the consequent "singularity" status it confers upon them. By opposing the prevailing status quo, however, revisionists are likely to subject themselves to a "geopolitics of exclusion," which in turn helps render them more prone to feelings of ontological insecurity. To instantiate the theory, I focus on Iran and its nuclear behavior, con- tending that it represents a case of "thin revisionism" aimed at attaining ontological security, but which also entails undesirable consequences that generate ontological insecurity. The case furthermore reveals the limits of seeking ontological security, suggesting that the degree of revisionism is usually checked by existential fears of threat to survival.

Introduction

With the rise of developing nations to center stage in world politics primarily as a result of economic development, the idea of the revisionist state has once again gathered traction in studies of international relations. Such nations as Brazil, Russia, India, China, and South Africa—or BRICS as the grouping has famously come to be known—are for the most part experiencing a fast growth

of economic and political power, while the West with its Euro-American civilizational thrust is generally perceived to be losing its erstwhile preeminent standing in world affairs. Such a phenomenon does not necessarily mean or can be said to be caused by a positive decline in power of the West, but the "rise of the rest" constitutes an undeniable reality of global proportions, which represents a shift of geostrategic gravity away from the former toward a multipolar system. This shift is widely perceived to pose a serious ideational and institutional challenge to the international order the West has so painstakingly built over the past centuries (Amsden 2001; Coker 2009). Prominent among these emerging powers that promise the advent of what Zakaria (2008) dubs a "post-American world," China is viewed with greater suspicion, not only due to its alternative ideological orientation as a communist authoritarian state, but also because of its intensive activism in global markets and close entanglement with key international institutions.

Today, though the notion of revisionist state is most notably debated with respect to the rise of China as a potential collaborator with or challenger of the United States (Johnston 2003; Shambaugh 1999/2000, 2000, 2001; Christensen 2001a, 2001b; Huiyun 2009; Kastner and Saunders 2011) and more recently Russia (Mead 2014), the concept of state revisionism can prove of great utility in shedding light on the foreign policy behavior of actors that find their preferences and beliefs at odds with significant forces and institutions of the prevailing regional or international order. All state actors may display a level of dissatisfaction with an existing state of affairs or the way certain policies of interest to them are conducted at the international level, hence a desire for change, but not all can be labeled revisionist for that matter. While Britain might not be happy with the way the European Union (EU) handles a financial or legal case and thus moves to block a measure or rewrite a law affecting its national interests, its aspiration for enforcing change cannot be claimed to be on par with that, say, of Pakistan whose Muslim national-statal identity is closely inter- twined with an enduring struggle against its primordial non-Muslim other, India, with which it has also fought three wars over territory (Paul 2014). Yet, for the purposes of analytic rigor as well as of eschewing "conceptual overstretch" (Ringmar 2014: 6; Gerring 1999), we need to formulate a clear-cut and nuanced definition of revisionism that enjoys adequate explanatory power on the one hand and steers as much clear as possible of such excessively value-laden and politically driven conceptualizations as "rogue state" or "outlaw state" (Chomsky 2000).

In this article, after propounding such a conceptualization I will try to relate it to the concept of ontological (in)security by investigating, from a constructivist stand- point, the ways in which revisionist states struggle to preserve their identities in the face of internal and external threats and define their interests in the process. Then, to apply the theory and further illustrate the argument, I will focus specifically on Iran as a "thin revisionist" and discuss its controversial nuclear behavior as an instance of "thin revisionism," primarily oriented towards acquiring ontological security. Put otherwise, Iran's nuclear venture will be delineated as a manifestation of identity-driven defiance of the status quo order, but also of a proactive attempt by the Islamic Republic to revise its international share of power and reassert itself as *the* predominant player in the wider Middle East. The case study will finally conclude with a discussion on the limitations of seeking ontological security and satisfying identity needs at the expense of preserving physical security and advancing material interests.

State Revisionism: A Rigorous Conceptualization

Before proceeding with an examination of the relationship between state revision- ism and ontological (in)security, a nuanced conceptual framework needs to be put forward. In the context of international relations theory, particularly within the broad camp of realism, various definitions and conceptions of revisionism have been proposed at different levels of analysis. Classical Realists, who gravitate toward explaining change in international politics in terms of individual- and unit-level factors such as natural human appetite for power and state goals and interests, often define revisionism on the basis of a distinction between desire for security and aspiration for power. This closely corresponds to Barry Buzan's differentiation between "power struggle" and "security struggle," whose inevitable interaction, according to him (1983: 157, 175), generates "power-security dilemma" as a critical component of the national security problem in the state of international anarchy.

I would rather define state revisionism as *dissatisfaction activated towards changing the existing pattern of structures and distribution of resources, material or ideational, in ways that involve conflict*/war *or are prone to cause it*. Such a definition assumes willingness on the part of revisionist states to incur considerable costs in the pursuance of satisfaction and holds both state goals and foreign policy conduct significant in establishing whether a state is revisionist or not and the extent to which it is so. In other words, revisionism as a macro-level behavioral orientation but also a micro-level international

practice is not a fixed state of affairs or a "static" property (Johnston 2003: 49), but needs to be construed in terms of a fluid process with a scope as well as character that may change over time and under varying circumstances. Pertinently, given that revisionism by definition can *also* feature ideational, ideological or normative components and span the realm of norms and institutions—as well as that of material resources and territorial boundaries—such as universal human rights and international humanitarian law, one may be tempted to stretch the concept so much as to encompass all "dissatisfied" actors and thus claim that almost all states are "revisionist" in one way or another. To avoid this theoretically specious and empirically abortive exercise, it is of paramount importance to bear in mind an integral part of the definition of revisionism: willingness, or acceptance of risks, to enter into conflict/war for the sake of proactive resource redistribution. This can help us demarcate our theoretical understanding of the concept and shun conceptual over-accommodation.

Equally significant (for the purposes of this study at least) is the *type* of change revisionists may dare to realize and the *ways* in which they do so. With this latter point in mind, I would draw on the realist accounts above as well as on constructivist insights about "the inter-subjectively constituted structure of identities and interests in the [international] system" (Wendt 1999: 401) to distinguish between two ideal *modes* of revisionism: thick and thin. Regardless of what they are dissatisfied with, thick revisionists move to alleviate their dissatisfaction, perception of threat or injustice through *offensive* measures that are fundamentally disruptive of the systemic structure and its basic rules, such as conquest or redrawing of territorial boundaries. These actors are concerned, first and foremost, about the status-quo distribution of material and ideational power and see *redistribution by offense*, among other things, as the chief instrument of threat reduction, identity consolidation, and status enhancement in the international system. Nazi occupation of Europe under Hitler and Russian annexation of Crimea under Putin are instances of thick revisionism, having been accomplished via *offensive* action. To advance our understanding of this specific foreign-security policy behavior, however, another mode needs to be conceptualized on the basis of *defiance*—rather than offense—that may be labeled "thin revisionism."

Thin revisionists, on the contrary, seek to overcome their sense of dissatisfaction and insecurity by policies that are basically *defiant* rather than offensive, but may ultimately prove to unsettle the established structures, norms and institutions of the system and cause a reallocation of material power

and status, hence revisionist. Thin revisionism is therefore characterized by *redistribution by defiance* and often takes the form of resistance against the dominating force of the status quo. Of particular relevance in this designation is also the point that because thin revisionism does not involve outright territorial capture or conquest, as the thick mode does, it is usually executed through destabilizing export of ideology and spread of soft power, cultivation and use of proxies, or defiant power-maximizing action within the territorial boundaries of the state itself. Yet, it is revisionist because it runs counter to the status-quo alignments and produces the same effect of revising it as thick revisionism does in other ways. North Korean and Iranian nuclearization programs serve as instances of thin revisionism, having been attained through *defiant* action within. Ultimately, irrespective of whether one conceives of revisionism under the analytical rubric of power model—and thus as an essentially aggressive course of action—or that of security model—and thus as a defensive behavior in nature—it is demonstrably driven by the fact that while status quo states benefit from the existing order, revisionists "feel alienated" from it and therefore challenge its continuation (Buzan 1983: 177).

Now that a conceptual delineation of state revisionism has been established, I will try to contextualize it within the theoretical framework of ontological security dynamics by probing the relationship between the two analytical categories. However, a metatheoretical point merits attention and needs to be clarified here before we can move on. Given the article's integrative aspiration as it seeks to relate realist insights about "survival" to constructivist and even poststructuralist ideas on "identity," an epistemological tension may be apparent between the two foundational strands of IR theory. While the aim of the paper is not to resolve this entrenched tension, it does introduce ontological security as an emergent yet peripheral theoretical perspective that promises to narrow the gap, if not bridge it, by systematically engaging with physical, psychological and ideational facets of "security" as a "thick signifier" (Huysmans 1998). It should therefore be no wonder that competing understandings and conceptions of the concept has already emerged within the growing project of ontological security studies, with some distinguishing between physical and ontological security—as is also the case in this writing—and others arguing that "all security is ontological" (Mitzen 2015). The present article might be seen as a step in that direction, which takes the "security" of the revisionist state—Iran and its nuclear pursuit here, more specifically—as its point of departure but also scrutinizes its identity underpinnings along the way while trying to steer clear of reducing the consequent foreign policy to "irrational" behavior, however self-harming that may prove to be.

Ontological (In)Security and State Revisionism

Ontological security as a theoretical framework for analyzing the behavior of corporate actors and decision-making groups in states falls broadly within the remit of scholarship on the role of emotions in international relations theory, such as fear, shame, pride, and honor. The term has, however, been originally borrowed from scholarly research in social psychology, psychoanalysis and sociology on individuals dwelling in modern societies and then put to use in IR as a point of departure to theorize about the states' sense of self in a world of anarchy and their self-concept and self-identity in relation to others (Huysmans 1998; Wendt 1999: 131; McSweeney 1999; Manners 2002; Kinnvall 2004; Mitzen 2006; Steele 2008).

Among political scientists, the concept has been approached from different perspectives and employed for various purposes. In an interpretive endeavor to explicate the meaning of security writ large, Huysmans (1998) espouses a "thick signifier" approach that enables us to figure out "how the category 'security' articulates a particular way of organizing forms of life." Such an approach portrays security as a signifier of "performative" force that not only reflects our relations to the outside world as well as to ourselves, but also orders and engineers them through everyday practices of discourse formation (231–232). By the same token, he lays a theoretical distinction between "daily security" and "ontological security," relating the former to determining or categorizing enemies and friends and subsequently devising policies to treat them as a source of menace or reassurance. The latter, however, arises when the very act of determination fails, that is, when a phenomenon does not simply lend itself to "the principle of determinability." This is where chaos kicks in, rendering the act of "ordering" itself impossible and raising fears of the "unknown," of the "undecidable," of the "stranger" as distinct from the "enemy" which constitutes a familiar threat. "Undecidables such as strangers," in the words of Huysmans, "pose a hermeneutic problem because they do not fit the categories."

Yet, among IR scholars, perhaps Mitzen (2006) is most famously credited—or otherwise criticized—for pioneering the attempt to place the debate squarely within the classical contours of international relations theory, by contrasting the struggle for ontological security (or security of identity) with the striving for physical security (or survival), extrapolating the former from the level of the individual to that of the state as a corporate actor, and finally by relating it directly to one of the more common themes of the discipline, namely the security dilemma. Finally, Steele (2008) postulates, in a similar vein, that states

pursue ontological security through social actions that address their "self-identity needs" even when this compromises their physical survival. Differing from Mitzen, however, he puts the theoretical premium not on the maintenance of routines or routinized relationships with key others but on the "biographical narratives" states tell about themselves, "which link by implication a policy with a description or understanding of a state 'self'" (10). These self-stories or "self-concepts" carry a great weight for nation-states since they serve as the principal source of ontological security, that is, states start to experience "shame" when their self-narratives undergo an inconsistency, rupture or disconnect.

By recourse to this account, the relationship between state revisionism and ontological security in international politics can be investigated from a number of angles. Firstly, if we set aside the Offensive Realist proposition that all states in a world of anarchy are predatory power-maximizers, a case can be made for the revisionist actors often tending to be in a *minority* of numbers or self-perceived as such. This appears to be particularly true of those revisionists whose identities are founded on a set of ideologies, moral codes, and political principles diametrically divergent from or at odds with the established norms and values that undergird the status quo order. Given the general revisionist disposition to define relations with the outside "Others" primarily in terms of dissatisfaction and thus self-extending change, these maverick actors find themselves, more often than not, operating within an enmity-centric "Hobbesian culture of anarchy" (Wendt 1999), which may surprisingly serve as a source of ontological security as it confers upon them a status of singularity infused with senses of uniqueness and difference. By the same token, that is, by opposing the prevailing status quo, revisionists are likely to subject themselves to a "geopolitics of exclusion" (Kupchan 2007: 87–88) and international isolation fraught with sentiments of "strategic loneliness" (Juneau 2014), which in turn helps render them more prone to feelings of ontological insecurity.

Secondly, they regard themselves victims of an unfavorable and unjust distribution of resources including power and prestige in the international environment, which is what they primarily want to revise, hence their categorization as revisionist. Therefore, such states find it hard to form reliable coalitions of alliance in the course of fulfilling their objectives or enter into "security communities" (Adler and Barnett 1998) to further their national security interests. What exacerbates the revisionist predicament, caused in the first place by feelings of dissatisfaction, against-the-grain behavior, and dearth

of friends and sympathizers, is the way they are usually perceived by the majority, namely as aggressive powers that pose a fundamental threat to the peace and stability of the whole system or part thereof. While paving the way for exclusionary and confrontational politics, the negative perception often plays down the escalatory effects of exclusion including the generation of resentment and grievance in revisionists, which further fuels their sense of injustice and loneliness (Cf. Kupchan 2007: 87–88; Mazarr 2014). Once prolonged, these conditions translate into an ambience of ontological insecurity that engulfs revisionists over time, triggering a struggle aimed at precluding identity erosion at the same time as they strive to enforce their anti-establishment agenda.

Resort to foreign policy decisions of revolutionary nature, great significance, and high standing in international affairs is one form this type of identity struggle may take as the stage is set for a self-reinforcing spiral of antagonism. Nuclearization is one working example of such course of action (Hymans 2006: 9). It not only offers a powerful deterrence against external conquest, but also helps anchor the identity of its practitioner by catapulting it into an elite club of great prestige in the international system. In enabling the state to be taken seriously and viewed with "awe" at home and abroad alike, it stands of critical value for thin revisionists in particular, who are already suffering from an "Other-esteem" deficit. For these defiant and excluded actors, the exclusive recognition of power and status works as a formidable bulwark against identity erosion and thus contributes to their ontological security. It is as if nuclearization furnishes the state with a precious "nucleus," a "core" upon which a wholesome yet anti-establishment identity can be safely built.

Pursuit of ontological security by the revisionist state through commitment to great ventures of high risk also necessarily affects its relationship with the subjects it wields sovereignty over. Given the heterogeneous nature of the body politic and existence of contending identities as well as attitudes within it towards revisionist policies, the state-society relations may come under strain as a result, particularly if the status-quo backlash against the conduct of revisionism in the international system is too harsh and costly for the actor to easily afford. The latter is usually the case because once originally perceived as predatory or offensive, any essentially defensive attempts to ensure the stability of identity are likely to be interpreted in terms of advancing the same disposition, that is, as an extension or intensification of revisionism. The state-society tension in this respect also represents a tension between the nation-state's multiple selves of which the revisionist leadership has chosen to assert

one at the expense of others in accordance with its preferences and objectives. Thus, the state may end up in a situation where one aspect of its multidimensional identity is consolidated while the other dimensions are undermined.

Of great relevance to this argument is the state of "ontological dissonance" (Lupovici 2012), which emerges when an actor's attempt to augment a certain facet of its identity—or one of its identities—contradicts some of its other measures to secure another dimension of that identity. "The accumulation of these threats" to multiple identities, therefore, "and the difficulties in resolving them challenge the state's consistent view of itself, which may in turn further complicate the dilemma and hamper the state's ability to find a resolution" (810). Reconciliation and concurrent enhancement of contending identities and attendant interests are thus a daunting challenge for revisionists as they seek to secure a reliable operating ground at home. The conflict of identities can manifest itself conspicuously in the state-society interaction, where the leadership strives to legitimize costly policies and build a broad-based consensus around them, or even in relations between various institutions of the state—civil, religious, military, etc.—that are pulling it in different directions according to their institutional interests, "national role conceptions" (Holsti 1970) or "national identity conceptions" (Hymans 2006: 13). However, in contrast to Lupovici's suggestion (2012) that "avoidance" is an appealing policy option for states to deal with the complications emanating from such a dilemmatic situation—exemplified according to him by Israel's unilateral steps towards Palestinians—revisionists tend to respond in a different fashion. They make an ontological selection driven by a dominant ideological self-narrative, prioritizing an aspect of their multidimensional identity that has the greatest bearing on their revisionism. This can be accounted for by the fact that for revisionists, revisionism against an "Other"-made status quo is by definition the most powerful identity projection platform they have in stock. Feeling dissatisfied with but also threatened by the prevailing order, they indeed draw a high degree of ontological security and existential certainty from so constructing and advancing a core Self as they seek to securitize their subjectivities in relation to significant "Others," a feat whose accomplishment is usually facilitated by recourse to a collective historical trauma (Kinnvall 2004: 749–751).

Revisionists' identity-driven foreign policy measures to acquire ontological security are bound to imperil the ontological security of others, including the powerful guardians of the status quo. In response, the latter are expected to

take action in ways that would safeguard their own identity visions and thus placate the sense of ontological insecurity they come to feel as a result, with the whole process likely to instigate a vicious circle of hostility. Once the confrontational relationship between a revisionist actor and the status quo powers reaches this flash point, limits to the pursuit of ontological security come to the fore. Revisionists have little motivation to restrain themselves in a vicious circle of hostility unless they make sure that persistence with the practice of revisionism in the face of more powerful forces of the prevailing order will culminate in overwhelming coercive action or external aggression and may cost them their physical security or survival. By this token, the extent to which seeking ontological security through acts of revisionism is plausible may be described as the *viable space of ontological security* dynamics. This is a finite space within which quest for ontological security may yield the results desired but beyond which proves self-destructive, as "even the most rabid revisionist state cannot pursue its larger objectives if it cannot secure its home base" (Buzan 1983: 177). The argument, it should be noted, stands in contrast to the formulations put forward by Mitzen (2006) and Steele (2008, esp. chap. 5) who seem to suggest that the struggle for ontological security knows no limits and can trump concerns for the preservation of physical security.

Ontological security theory of state behavior seems to suggest the existence of a national psyche as emotions and feelings are extrapolated from the individual to the collective level of the state as a corporate actor. While group-level emotions are experienced through "shared culture, interaction, contagion, and common group interest" and thus cannot be reduced to individuals (Mercer 2014: 1), one needs to steer clear of treating states as unified homogeneous totalities that come to feel onto- logically secure or insecure all at once upon facing a certain set of circumstances. States are heterogeneous collectivities that derive their ontological status from the narratives and stories constructed about them and that hold multiple identities constituted through performatively enacted discursive practices (cf. Ringmar 1996; Wendt 2004). In practice, the point particularly applies to non-democratic states where there may be wide ideological divides and identity differences between the government and the society or between various groups and forces making up the nation-state. What this entails for ontological security theory in IR in general and its deployment here in particular is the indispensability of considering the state's multiple selves/identities that are usually represented by significant groups within the body politic (governing leadership, opposition, military-industrial complex, civil society etc.) and are promoted through the narratives these groups manufacture. Thus, in order to understand whether a given foreign policy

action or conduct provides a given state with ontological security or insecurity, we need to first ascertain the perceived *primary meanings* this conduct has for the salient groups constituting that state and therefore which *selves/identities* of the state it is perceived to consolidate or destabilize.

Iran and Its Thin Revisionism

The "Shiite identity" of the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) and the consequent formation of a "resistance identity," driven by a deep-seated sense of dissatisfaction and injustice, after the 1979 revolution has been one of the principal sources of tension between Iran and the liberal international order spearheaded by the United States. Such an identity, in the words of Manuel Castells (2010), who paraphrases Craig Calhoun (1994), is "generated by those actors that are in positions/conditions devalued and/or stigmatized by the logic of domination, thus building trenches of resistance and survival on the basis of principles different from, or opposed to, those permeating the institutions of society" (8). The Islamic discourse that was intellectually introduced into the Iranian polity- society before the revolution and was subsumed into it in its wake, according to Rajaee (2007), had three significant dimensions; "articulation of the other" in the form of demonizing the non-Islamic West, "romanticization of the past" by ideologizing Islam as a religion and heroicizing the Islamic figures, and theorization of a counter-West "imagined community" through distinguishing between modernization and Westernization (p. 110). This was primarily a political, but also psychological project being narrativized along civilizational and ideological lines (Hammack and Pilecki 2012: 76–79) and contextualized by virtue of collective memories of historical events to redraw the discursive boundaries of what the emergent revisionist state viewed as the ingroup and the outgroup (Reicher 2004: 924–925; Huddy 2013: 740–743; See also Hornsey 2008). The Islamic Republic's identification of the "non-Islamic" West as its chief enemy and the Western cultural institutions and political practices as "anti-Islamic" set the ground for the formation of an anti-establishment identity based upon Ayatollah Khomeini's *mostaz'afin*/*mostakberin* [oppressed/oppressor or literally enfeebled/arrogant] dichotomy and his crusade to empower the former—dispossessed or "have-nots" of the world—against the latter—its "haves" or exploiters (Abrahamian 1993: 47–54; Saikal 2009: 93).

While transforming Iran's domestic politics, the Islamic Revolution of 1979 pioneered a critical approach to foreign policy formulation and an alternative attitude toward the prevailing international order. This against-the-grain

approach was principally encapsulated in the revolutionary slogan "Neither East, nor West, but the Islamic Republic" that was later reflected in the IRI constitution. According to its Principle 2, "denial (*nafy*) of any form of oppressing and being oppressed and dominating and being dominated will secure fairness (*qist*), justice, and [the state's] political, economic, social, and cultural independence as well as [its] national solidarity" (Hosseini-Nik 2006, translated from Persian). Though pertaining much to the revolution's emancipatory ideals, the "Neither East, nor West" slogan had more to do with the construction of a new and different identity for Iran. Rejecting communism (Eastern empire) and capitalism (Western empire) alike, it deliberately sought to strike a third way that according to Ayatollah Khomeini was the "straight path" of Islamicity (*Islamiyyat*) and humanity (*Insaniyyat*) (Izadi 2001: 96–99). Central to internationalization of this ideological identity was the Islamic concept of invitation (*Da'wah*), which was used to call for the world to follow the IRI version of Islam and accept its righteousness. Iran's chief foreign policy instrument for waging that universal crusade was what became widely known as the "export of revolution" (*sodour-e enqelab*). The Islamic Republic has since its establishment contested the international system as ideationally constructed and materially ordered by Western powers and their historical experiences (Behravesh 2011).

An outstanding instance of this contestation can be traced in its view of and approach to the human rights issue, which has invited the consistent condemnation of numerous international bodies and Western governments. The conservative Iranian leadership continues to see the Universal Declaration of Human Rights (UDHR) as ideologically underpinned by liberal-secular values and disqualified for universal application, as these values are believed to be conflicting with Islamic tenets. In a similar vein, a number of Shiite Muslim philosophers have also questioned the legitimacy of the Western morality system as *the* right ideological framework for the formulation of *universal* human rights. Ayatollah Javadi-Amoli (1996), a distinguished Shiite theologian based in Iran, contests the validity of the UDHR, con- tending that the declaration, having been founded upon liberal values, lacks divine essence. Moreover, it fails, in his opinion, to heed the spiritual dimension of human existence and focuses exclusively on her material needs.

This critical line of thinking persisted, though less bombastically, even after the "reformists"—who were politically closer and ideologically more sympathetic to the West—took power in 1997 and sat at the helm of the executive. Notably, while former Iranian President Mohammad Khatami

advocated the notion of a global "dialogue among civilizations" (Petito 2007; Mirbagheri 2007), his foreign minister Kamal Kharrazi officially called in a speech to the UN Commission on Human Rights on March 17, 1998, for the "revision of the UN's Universal Declaration of Human Rights" in ways that it would adequately incorporate non-Western and particularly Islamic cultural values and moral norms (Cited in Littman 2003; Also cited in Behravesh 2011: 337). Articles 3 of the IRI Constitution requires that the Islamic state's foreign policy be based, *inter alia*, upon "uninhibited support for *mostaz'afin* [the enfeebled] of the world" while Article 154 takes this ideological doctrine one step further and stipulates that Iran will "back right-seeking struggles of *mostaz'afin* [the enfeebled] against *mostakberin* [the arrogant] anywhere in the world" (Hosseini-Nik 2006). Aimed at changing the existing pattern of structures and characterized mostly by defiance of and resistance against dominant forces in world politics, such a contestation constitutes a thin version of revisionism that is rooted in Shi'ism as an underdog-sympathetic revolutionary religion and has found expression in a range of foreign policy choices. These choices most notably include antagonistic non-recognition of Israel in contradistinction with the dominant view in the international community, long-standing hostility towards the United States, and persistent attempts at nuclearization against the international will. Interestingly, they have also remained consistent during the lifetime of the Islamic Republic despite the variation Iran's thin revisionism has seen under various governments, ranging from "moderationist" (*etedalgara*) and "reformist" (*eslahtalab*) to hardline and "principlist" (*osoulgara*).

Yet, it is equally significant to note that there is no trace of *redistribution by offense* on the foreign policy track record of the Islamic Republic, as it has not initiated any major act of aggression (territory expansion, border rectification or total conquest) against other state actors since its birth. Delving into the details of Iran's nuclear history over the past four decades from the prerevolutionary era to the pre- sent is beyond the scope of this article. Nonetheless, I will try to tease out physical and ontological security dimensions of the case in the light of the theoretical reflections propounded above.

Iranian Nuclear Narratives

Highly controversial, Iran's atomic program has become one of the greatest security concerns of the status-quo powers in the Middle East and beyond. The crude reali- ties of international politics and its powerful *realpolitik* dynamic

of self-help suggest that Iran has as much reason to acquire atomic weapons as any other nuclear power that preceded it (Behravesh 2013). Saddam Hussein and Muammar Gaddafi would have probably still been ruling Iraq and Libya, respectively, had they possessed an atomic device or two. Thus, though Iran's highest-ranking leaders have publicly stressed the country's need for *civilian* nuclear energy and denounced the pursuit of atomic weapons on religious grounds (Mousavian 2013), the partly constructivist argument still holds that Tehran's revisionist foreign policy and revolutionary identity dispose its top leadership to perceive an ever-present threat from the prevailing order, and as far as survival is concerned, Iran has felt necessary to equip itself duly in order to deter an ultimately possible military action. According to late Ayatollah Rafsanjani, a powerful pragmatist Iranian politician, who was addressing a congregation during a Friday Prayer sermon in December 2001,

> We do not want to fall victim to insecurity, and we do not want a confrontation to turn into World War III. That is the worst that could happen. If a day comes when the world of Islam is duly equipped with the arms Israel has in its possession, the strategy of colonialism would face a stalemate, because the exchange of atomic bombs would leave nothing of Israel, while only damaging the Muslim world (Cited in Naji 2008: 118–119).

Given this basically *realpolitik* argument as well as a number of similar factors—including the neighboring Sunni-dominated Pakistan's possession of the bomb and its close relations with Iran's sectarian archrival, Saudi Arabia (Henderson 2013; Urban 2013; Behravesh 2014)—any attempt on the part of the IRI leadership for acquisition of nuclear weapons would be solidly rational and could well be explained in terms of the traditional deterrence theory or the pursuit of physical security.

However, the nuclear quest has proved enormously costly for the Islamic Republic ever since 2002, when its disclosure by an overseas-based opposition group brought the activities under the international spotlight (Jafarzadeh 2007). In a leaked speech—originally made behind closed doors after the July agreement to senior figures of the radio and television organization (Islamic Republic of Iran Broadcasting or briefly IRIB)—Abbas Araghchi, Iran's Deputy Foreign Minister and chief nuclear negotiator in the Rouhani administration (who is also perceived to have been the closest member of the negotiation team to the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei), admits the sobering reality: "I've always said that if we want to measure our country's nuclear program only by economic criteria, it is indeed a big loss, namely, if we [just] calculate the costs of the production material, we cannot [even]

imagine it at all. But we have paid these prices for our (self-)esteem, independence and progress, so that we do not go under the yoke of others' bullying" (Gooya Newsletter 2015, translated from Persian).

Moreover, the high likelihood of such an endeavor inviting a preventive use of force by the status quo powers and thus plunging the nation into an unwinnable war and probably leading to the loss of the "home base" presents a stronger logic against that rationality. In the same confidential meeting, Araghchi highlights the severity of the military threat Iran faced at the height of tensions over its nuclear activities during the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (when he was also a key member of the Iranian negotiation team):

> "These [Western powers] tried whatsoever avenue they could over the [past] 10 years, [they] used the military threat to its highest extent; now people may not be aware of its details, but our Revolutionary Guards (*sepahi*) and military friends know that there were [certain] nights in the years, say, 2006–2007 (1385–1386) when we worried that by tomorrow morning [they] might have mobilized around Iran all the forces necessary to attack Iran…In some sessions, the military friends illustrated, on the map of the bases, which aircraft [the foreign forces] had deployed in which bases, and [in fact] the [military] attack on Iran depended only on Obama's political will, to [just] take the decision and hit (Ibid, Translated from Persian).

This worked to check the uninhibited pursuit of nuclearization as an instantiation of thin revisionism. In other words, persistence with the attainment of the ultimate deterrent in order to guarantee physical security was very likely to lead to the serious compromise if not collapse of that very security. The calculus casts doubts over the whole assumption of deterrence or physical security preservation in the framework of Iran's nuclear endeavor while also laying bare the limits of ontological security seeking space in the context of revisionism.

Yet, the Islamic Republic has been unwilling to give up its nuclear work once and for all or limit itself to a strictly and unequivocally civilian program in practice despite immense external and internal pressures to do so. "Yet, we stood our ground and did not relent," Araghchi continues, "[they] tightened the screw of economic sanctions as much as they could, so it reached a point where it could lead to conflict. So they tried economic sanctions and military threats for 10 years, but indeed it was our power and capability that brought them to the negotiation table" (Ibid, Translated from Persian). Even while the historic nuclear accord between Iran and the world powers (Britain, China, France, Germany, Russia, and the United States)—which was clinched after over 2

years of marathon negotiations in July 2015 and is officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)—rolls back the Iranian atom project to a significant extent, it far from dismantles it (Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action 2015).

Though JCPOA essentially shuts down Iran's plutonium path to nuclear weaponization by demanding a total permanent redesign of the heavy water reactor in Arak (The White House 2015), it seems to be more modest on the uranium path, partly due to the mere magnitude of that component in the whole program. And though the Western bloc led by the George W. Bush administration earlier aspired for the termination, gradual or abrupt, of Iran's nuclear work—which was one of the reasons negotiations at the time did not bear sustainable results (Rouhani 1391/2012)—JCPOA leaves an industrial-scale enrichment infrastructure in place that can be potentially used to produce atomic weapons, should a political decision be made to that effect. To put it in more technical terms and as almost all observers concur, the Vienna nuclear deal extends Iran's "breakout" time, that is, the time required to dash towards the bomb by producing a sufficient amount of highly enriched uranium (HEU)—from a relatively short period of around 2 months to approximately 12 months (Samore et al. 2015), which would give the international community enough maneuvrability to mobilize preventive action against it.

It would not be too far-fetched therefore to argue that the whole atomic endeavor, including the clinching of the Vienna resolution, has ultimately enabled the Islamic Republic to maintain a threshold nuclear capacity and secure a status of nuclear *liminality*, namely, it is not a full-fledged nuclear weapons state (NWS) but it is not a non-nuclear power either. In fact, it is a liminal nuclear state with a latent weaponization capability that can be activated at will within a not-too-long timeframe. It is well worth noting here that in its final assessment of the so-called Possible Military Dimensions (PMD) of Iran's atomic activities released in December 2015—which marked an end to its 12-year probe into the program—the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) makes such an indication by concluding that "a range of activities relevant to the development of a nuclear explosive device were conducted in Iran prior to the end of 2003 as a coordinated effort, and some activities took place after 2003" (IAEA 2015a, 2015b: 14).

With all these in mind, the question is, why did Iran persist for so long with its nuclear program in the face of colossal costs on the one hand and credible threats to its national security? Appositely, why has it taken great economic

and normative pains to preserve a viable atomic capacity and sustain a state of nuclear latency? Why such a sustained insistence on and persistence with a very costly yet ultimately half-hearted nuclear program? These and similar questions cannot be convincingly answered from a pure economic rational-choice perspective or in the light of conventional deterrence logics and physical security calculations, but require innovative political psychology lenses—such as those provided by ontological security research as touched upon above—to be adequately teased out and explained. To that end, I have briefly employed narrative methodology—based on about 2 months of fieldwork of ethnographic nature in Iran[1]—and set out to identify three dominant narratives of nuclearity that have come to prevail in the Iranian polity-society since the disclosure of the country's nuclear activities in 2002: (1) nuclearity as resistance, (2) nuclearity as modernity, (3) nuclearity as liability.

For hardline Iranian "principlists" or conservatives as the standard-bearers of Iran's revolutionary identity, nuclearization first and foremost means honorable and prestigious resistance against a perceived oppressive order and thus guarantees the continuation, *inter alia*, of an anti-establishment and purportedly justice-seeking path (Moshirzadeh 2007) that started with the 1979 revolution. Encompassing Iran's core decision-making echelon, these groups derive ontological security from such a venture as its controversial nature and the defiant mode of pursuing it renders possible the maintenance of a revisionist foreign policy and the routinized practices associated with it (Mitzen 2006). It also helps the Islamic Republic sustain the revolutionary "biographical narrative" that has continued to inform its "self-concept" and governed power relations within the polity-society nexus.

Significantly, now with the ongoing desecuritization of Iran's nuclear "menace" in the international society in the post-deal era, systematic efforts are made by the hardline core, if not all conservative forces, to manufacture another feasible carrier of revisionism instead as a means to the end of sustaining the increasingly eroding revolutionary identity of the state. Official calls for vigilance about a creeping, calculated and comprehensive "soft war" that is perceived to have been launched against the Islamic Republic speak to this growing sense of ontological insecurity and anxiety. In a key address to the senior directors of the radio and television organization (IRIB), Supreme Leader Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei warned of foreign schemes to "metamorphose" the Islamic Republic, to transform its identity and "inner self":

> Unlike hard war, soft war is [usually] not manifest, understandable and tangible. While hard wars usually provoke popular feelings and lead to national unity and solidarity, soft war dissolves the motivation for confrontation but also sets the stage for disunity and discord…Soft war is not peculiar to Iran, but in the case of Iran the objective of this well-thought-out and calculated war is the metamorphosis of the Islamic Republic of Iran and the modification of its inner self and character (*sirat*) while maintaining its face (*sourat*) and appearance…In the framework of the enemy's soft war objectives, the remaining of the name "Islamic Republic" and even the presence of a cleric at the top of it do not matter; what matters is that Iran [come to] fulfill the goals of America, Zionism, and the global network of power…They seek to influence the people and transform a wide spectrum of their beliefs, particularly [those of] the youth and the elite, and [notably] people's ideological religious, political and cultural convictions are among these beliefs (Khamenei 2015; BBC Persian 2015, translated from Persian).

For them, nuclearity has primarily meant revolutionary *resistance* against the dominant international order and served to reaffirm, as long as it persisted unabated, the "resistance" and "revisionist" facet of IRI identity while the reconfiguration of the nuclear project post JCPOA and thus de-appropriation of it and the foregrounding or otherwise emancipation of its other meanings at the expense of the dominant revolutionary one has expectedly unsettled these political forces.

Relevantly, Iran's nuclear endeavor as a search for ontological security highlights a number of challenges the Iranian leadership feels insecure about. One such challenge is rooted in the threat to Iran's ethnic-cultural cohesion as a consequence of growing separatist sentiments—the Kurdish minority in the west, Azeris in the north, the Arab minority in the south, and the Baluchis in the east—which has exerted an adverse impact on Iranians' collective sense of nationhood. Tehran's full acquisition of atomic capability and its joining the elite club of nuclear weapons states could consolidate the IRI's domestic position by reasserting the sense of national pride, honor, and solidarity (Rouhani 2013) at a time when the fabrics of Iranian body politic as a whole are being worn away by the diminishing appeal of revolutionary ideology and revisionist behavior.

Another important challenge concerns the widening generational gap between those revolutionaries of the 1970s who established the Islamic Republic and a restive young population that is fast distancing itself from the IRI's foundation narratives, myths and ideologies and instead seeks its future in integration into a globalized modern world, where their very this-worldly ideals of prosperity,

progress and good life stand a better chance of fulfilment and fruition. Here is the socio-political space where the narrative of "*nuclearity as modernity*" has its strongest appeal. By its unmistakable associations of technological mastery and modernity, nuclearization helps project a "modern" image of the Islamic Republic as an advanced state on par with the developed nation-states of the world and thus narrows the generational gap, an ideational break that holds the destructive potential in the long run of imperiling the fundamental authority and legitimacy of a revolutionary-revisionist state. In a personal interview in Tehran, I asked an informal gathering of young stu- dents at the prestigious Shahid Beheshti University—known as the National University of Iran (NUI) before the 1979 revolution—about how they viewed the country's nuclear program and what they thought it stood for. One of the responses by a medical student is enlightening:

> Well, honestly who doesn't like to be a nuclear power? Who dislikes nuclear energy? Yes, it can [turn out to] be harmful to the environment as we saw in [the case of the 2011 Fukushima Daiichi nuclear disaster in] Japan, but it can also help prevent environmental pollution. Moreover, it has lots of medical uses and can really save lives. As somebody studying these issues, I can confidently say that. But these things aside, almost all advanced countries of the world have nuclear capability and enjoy its advantages. Why do you have it if it's something bad? Why not us? Does our blood, say, lack color? Apparently, we were a civilization sometime ago! Ok, I know what you have in mind now [while smiling sarcastically]! Yes, our nuclear program is fishy, but well, many others are worse! So for me as a medical student and somebody who belongs to this [young] generation, it stands for progress and advancement, for [high] class! (translated from Persian)

As suggested, the subject of Persian civilization and Iran's past civilizational status is a key leitmotif of the modernity narrative whose underlying nationalist veins can- not be brushed off as insignificant either. More precisely, it conveys the idea that first, the nuclear capability becomes "us" and as inheritors of the glorious Persian civilization, Iranians deserve it, and second, Iran needs that capability, as many others have accomplished it, to restore its well-deserved "high-class" place among other nations (See Mozaffari 2014). In this sense, nuclearity as modernity has been a source of identity upgrading and ontological security for almost all walks of life in Iran, both due to the socially harmonious and seemingly politically "innocent" characteristics it carries as well as due to the "enlightened nationalism" (Jones 2014) it signifies. Precisely for the same reasons, it is arguably the narrative most widely employed by the state and the otherwise conflicting factions with the body politic to legitimize the cause, mobilize nationwide support for it, and justify its colossal costs.

Yet, there is no escaping the fact that the rapidly rising costs of the nuclear venture following the incremental buildup of crippling international sanctions on the one hand and its almost insignificant output in terms of material military or eco- nomic "deliverables" (the bomb, electricity, etc.) gradually convinced more and more stakeholders, including at the grassroots level, to question its real worth. This helped the "*nuclearity as liability*" narrative, which had since 2002 represented one of the main, albeit occasionally marginal, lines of thinking within the wider nuclear discourse in Iran, to shift from the periphery to the center of political consciousness in the elite and public opinion. Apart from the high normative and reputational price Iranians have been forced to pay for the program over the past decade, the sheer opportunity cost of the project, that is, the costs measured only in terms of lost oil revenue and foreign investment as a consequence of international sanctions, has amounted to over $100 billion (Vaez and Sadjadpour 2013). The Bushehr power plant, which is the only one producing electricity in the country, took almost 40 years to complete, with an evidently disproportionate cost of approximately $11 billion. Most surprisingly, however, the Bushehr reactor provides only a meager two of the nation's electricity needs, while a dilapidated distribution grid and old transmission lines cause a 15% loss of the whole generated electricity in the country. Coupled with the estimation that Iran is "not even among the top 40 countries endowed with significant uranium reserves" (Vaez and Sadjadpour 2013: 13; See also IAEA 2015a), these alarming statistics sharpened sensitivities and raised serious doubts about the economic rationality as well as sustainability of the IRI's atomic venture.

For important segments of the society that find themselves at the receiving end of financial sanctions and the consequent economic hardship, the nuclear endeavor for the most part has come to mean isolation, underdevelopment and "misery," which paradoxically undermines Iran's projected identity as a progressive and modern inheritor of a great civilization, thus destabilizing the modernity narrative while coming into clash with the resistance one. Contrary to some of the findings of a telephone-based Gallup opinion poll conducted between December 2012 and Janu- ary 2013 (Younis 2013), I found an overwhelming majority of respondents (61 out of 75, that is, 81%) preferring economic prosperity to nuclear capability if these two happened to contradict each other, with some seeing Iran's costly push for nuclearization a cause of incorrigible "loss." "Ok, let's finish the job and go fully nuclear," a taxi driver quipped, "Excellent! But at what price really? How much should one pay for something? Do we really want to have nuclear power at the expense of sacrificing everything else? I mean, look at the country's situation! The nuclear

issue is devouring everything in itself. Is that fair really? Give me a break!" (translated from Persian). Indeed, the July 2015 historic nuclear deal offered such a break from the long-trodden path of nuclear resistance and paved the way for the liability narrative to be taken seriously in policy-making, once again exposing the limits of revisionist quest for ontological security.

Conclusion

This article is by default an ambitious project and mounts a complex argument accordingly, which basically concerns the relationship between state revisionism and ontological security seeking in international politics. Before focusing on the inter- play, I set out to propound a rigorous and nuanced conceptualization of "revisionism" in the light of the predominantly realist but also partly constructivist literature existing on the concept. Revisionism, which can take both material and ideational forms, is also divided into two types based on the ways in which exercise of change is pursued: redistribution by offense or thick revisionism and redistribution by defiance or thin revisionism.

Conceptualizing and defining revisionism is thus one of the chief arguments of the article, where the author claims to have made an original theoretical contribution. Yet, it should be admitted that the article falls short of propounding a theory of why revisionism arises in various contexts and what its origins, causes and drivers are, a theoretical framework that may help us explain the emergence or genesis of revisionist behavior across different cases in the first place and offer remedies if we should view it as a policy problem. It is equally significant to understand what types of socio-political structures are more prone than others to revisionism and how revisionist actors may be "socialized" into the mainstream of international politics, though this can be a totally normative project. Given the growing literature in political science on global governance, these and similar questions about revisionist behavior merit greater attention.

After discussing the emerging research and major perspectives on ontological security as the security of self-identity or "being-in-the-world" (as opposed to physical security or survival), the paper moves to address the relationship between the two aforementioned concepts. In this respect, two theoretical arguments are posited: First, due to their pursuit of self-extending change at the expense of the prevailing order, revisionists tend to find themselves mostly operating in a "Hobbesian culture of anarchy," but this hostile "symbiosis" with the status quo, while threatening their physical security and affecting their

chances of survival in the long run, confers a status of "singularity" upon them, which works to fulfil their identity needs and provides them with ontological security. Second, because of their against-the-grain anti-establishment behavior, revisionists are likely to be in a minority of numbers and subjected to a "geopolitics of exclusion" with adverse implications for their chances of alliance formation and support mobilization in times of crisis. Therefore, probing the complex relationship between revisionism and ontological security in international politics is another chief contribution of this writing to the extant literature on both concepts.

The paper also argues that in the case of revisionists, where the actor's relationship with the outside world is predominantly characterized by counter-status-quo revision, there is a high likelihood that a facet of national-statal identity that feeds the revisionist behavior will dominate other aspects. This dominant aspect or narrative can lose ground to other rival conceptions in terms of ontological (in)security provision once the revisionist behavior reaches a point where it becomes counterproductive, threatening the state's "home base." Therefore, any quest for ontological security through acts of revisionism in international politics is often limited by the extent to which those acts threaten the revisionist actor's physical security.

In the empirical section, I have instantiated these theoretical propositions by concentrating on the case of Iran and explicating its complicated nuclear policy. Having briefly teased out Iran's "thin revisionism," the paper poses the puzzle why the Islamic Republic has persisted for so long with a costly and confrontation-prone yet ultimately half-hearted atomic capability or a liminal nuclear status. This critical question, it is contended, can be adequately answered only if we take the ontological security dynamics of state behavior into account. Accordingly, three major nuclear narratives are identified (nuclearity as resistance, nuclearity as modernity, and nuclearity as liability)—based on a host of resources including official speeches and personal interviews with citizens during a 2-month fieldwork in Iran—and their identity relevance and ontological status are assessed with a view to the July 2015 Vienna deal[2] between the Islamic Republic and the world powers.

The paper argues that while nuclear weaponization might have consummated Iran's pursuit of ontological security by offering it lasting identity advantages as a revisionist state and ensuring its physical security (deterrence), the same course of action could have elicited preventive external aggression, thus endangering the state's very survival. Moreover, given that a rare religious

fatwa (Khamenei 2010; translated and cited in Behravesh 2011) has been issued against the production and use of nuclear weapons, any attempt on the part of the Islamic Republic to that end would now constitute a fundamental disconnect in its self-conception—or the ideological narrative it continues to tell about itself—thus generating a sense of "shame" for the state and disrupting its ontological security. Therefore, with respect to revisionist nuclearization under the siege of the status quo, the most feasible position that would ensure the highest degree of ontological security for Iran is that of nuclear "threshold," a liminal status where the identity assurances of latent nuclear capability are at hand while the insecurities and perils of counter-status-quo weaponization are absent.

Lastly, this paper has employed narrative analysis as its major methodology to scrutinize the relationship between state revisionism and ontological (in)security, and particularly to circumvent the "level-of-analysis" problem that still continues to vex ontological security research. While narrative methodology purveys theoretically adequate tools enabling a non-reductionist study of emotions (anger, fear, shame etc.) at the collective level in international relations, the question of "whose emotions" still begs answering. After all, whose ontological (in)security are we talking about when we are talking about ontological security in international studies where states as corporate heterogeneous actors are still a main object of inquiry. Pertinently, and assuming that we made progress in addressing this question, another vexing puzzle might be, whose emotions or ontological (in)security matter more and on what grounds? These are some of the moot points and puzzles in ontological security studies as a research program that the future scholarship may need to explore.

Endnotes

[1]The ethnographic fieldwork and small-scale public opinion appraisals were conducted in a number of big Iranian cities including Tehran, Tabriz, and Rasht between December 2013 and January 2014. During the two-month work, I personally interviewed or otherwise questioned a total of 75 male and female respondents (20 in Rasht, 20 in Tabriz, and 35 in Tehran).

[2]It is noteworthy that the developments surrounding the historic Iran nuclear accord in 2015, which I have reflected in the paper during the revision process, have only served to confirm the findings and conclusions I had arrived at in the original manuscript.

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Article II

State Gender and Ontological Dislocation: Gendering Iran's Revolutionary Identity and Nuclear Behavior

(Under second review with a Revise & Resubmit decision)

Abstract

What happens when states' gender identity is endangered? How may a state actor's gender identity be conceived of and (de)stabilized in the first place? What are the ontological effects of such disruptions? And how do states respond to ruptures in their gender identities or selves? Despite growing attention to gendered narratives in ontological security studies (OSS), the extant scholarship has engaged with gender issues more within states and societies than between them in making sense of state identity and behavior in international relations. Building up on the existing literature and the theoretical works of Judith Butler, Luce Irigaray and Hélène Cixous, this article attempts to make a contribution towards theorizing gender more systematically into OSS by demonstrating how it constitutes collective subjectivities and orders imagined state selves in relation to others. Introducing the concept of *ontological dislocation*, it adopts a non-essentialist performative view of statehood as well as of gender and investigates how states pursue ontological security through gendering themselves and others and what ensues when critical facets of these gendered selves are distorted and disrupted. To illustrate the theorization empirically, the research focuses on the gender dynamics of Iran's revolutionary identity and nuclear behavior to show how destabilization of gender identity can cause ontological dislocation and lead to a restless scramble to relocate the self.

Introduction

"There is a highly calculated soft war against us…[waged] by the [global] system of domination…The purpose of this war is transubstantiation of the Islamic Republic. They don't insist on changing the name of the Islamic

Republic; they don't have anything to do with the appearance, [but in fact] want to change the character."

Iran's Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, October 2015

These remarks were part of a high-profile address given to state-affiliated media managers in Tehran a few months after July 2015. That summer, the moderate administration of former Iranian President Hassan Rouhani and world powers had reached a diplomatic agreement after two years of marathon negotiations on Iran's nuclear program, officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA). According to the historic deal, Tehran agreed to curb its nuclear activities in return for reductions of international and American sanctions. In the weeks and months following the accord, there was exceptionally heated debate in the Iranian political sphere on whether the JCPOA was in favor of the Islamic Republic or the moderate negotiators had compromised and, in more vernacular jargon, "given in and away*"* too much under pressure. Hardliners such as the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC) top brass and Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei himself to a large extent sided with the latter reading of events. The political-psychological conclusions were clear: not only had Iran projected a weak and soft self-image in the face of its archetypal adversaries by compromising on hard-earned nuclear achievements, but also the consequent exposure and openness would now gradually erode its revolutionary identity and metamorphose it into an emasculated submissive subordinate, a "feminized" and "devalorized" state (BBC Persian, 2015; Peterson, 2010). Viewed in this light, JCPOA constituted a moment of major identity dislocation for the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) that went beyond a simple disruption in its routinized conflictual relations with Western powers as its significant others (Mitzen 2006) or a historical disconnect in its biographical self-narrative as an uncompromising revolutionary state (Steele, 2005, 2008). In fact, the nuclear accord seemed to have simultaneously dislocated significant aspects of the IRI's imagined self best captured by the state's gender identity. It was an unsettling and agitating source of deep ontological insecurity as if for a moment the Islamic Republic had ceased to feel like the Islamic Republic.

The present article seeks to tease out the theoretical relevance of gender and gender identity to state actors' ontological (in)security as articulated in their foreign policies, and demonstrate it empirically in the case of IRI with special

reference to its nuclear program. Despite growing attention to gender including gendered narratives of self-other in ontological security studies (OSS)—which place the analytical premium on the security of self and being or more precisely "becoming" (Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020)—OSS has engaged with gender as a performative-constitutive discourse mostly within rather than between states in making sense of state identity and behavior in international relations. While building up on the extant scholarship, the article attempts to make a contribution towards theorizing gender more systematically into ontological security research by showing how actors pursue ontological security through gendering themselves, and what transpires when that gendering endeavor undergoes disruptions or entrenched aspects of those gendered selves, that is the state's gender identity, are dislocated. To capture and clarify the process, it introduces the concept of *ontological dislocation* as a horizontal-spatial rather than vertical-longitudinal phenomenon where the imagined state self's established relationship with significant gendered pairs arising from the phallocentric feminine/masculine dichotomy and constituting its identity—such as weak/strong, soft/hard, passive/active, peaceful/confrontational and so on—are destablized all at the same time.

We assume this theoretical and conceptual innovation, namely *ontological dislocation*, is necessary in order to adequately articulate destabilization of gender identity at the state level and its ramifications for ontological security. The necessity arises from the notion that, on the one hand, as Sjoberg argues (2013: 285), gender analysis offers a "wide gaze with many explorations and observations" that can shed light on a multiplicity of security concepts including security of self, identity, being and becoming (See also Basu, 2013; Basu and Eichler, 2017). And on the other, as Basu (2016) illustrates in the context of the UN Security Council, gender itself with all the identity implications it carries constitutes a core determinant of national interest for states, shaping how they go about identifying themselves on the world stage and securing those interests through foreign policy practices. In a similar manner to how security as a "thick signifier" functions (Huysmans, 1998: 231), that is by transcending a mere description of an external reality as potentially signified and instead creating a security condition as soon as the signifier is enunciated, gender too wields performative force and performs an ordering function through processes of discursive formation; it organizes how the signification of reality happens in the first place and configures social relations in complex hierarchical fashions. The concept of *ontological dislocation* proposed here is meant to speak to this wider order of identity conception and self-other construction, and the ontological disorder that may ensue when those

conceptions and constructions are destabilized and dislodged, a critical *problématique* that OSS scholarship has yet to theorize.

The chief theoretical questions this research aspires to answer, therefore, are how gender informs the state's ontological (in)security in its international relations and foreign policy interactions with others, what ontological ramifications follow when a state's gender identity thus informed is disrupted, and how states may respond to disruptions of *state gender*. Empirically, the study zooms in on Iran's nuclear behavior as a critical site where its gender identity has played out prominently, to explain, from a gender perspective, why and how the historic nuclear deal of July 2015 posed foundational identity challenges to the Islamic Republic, dislocating the state's sense of self in terms of gender and undermining its ontological security. On top of what some engagements with the nexus of gendered narratives and ontological (in)security in the literature suggest (Kinnvall, 2019; Agius et al 2020), this inquiry argues that gender is far more than a useful tool in state actors' identity toolkit or psychopolitical repertoire that they pick up and utilize in their narrative constructions of self, other, "nationhood," "community" and so on to generate a certain ontological sense or outcome. Inseparable from identity and language, or the discursive system of signification within which the former take shape, gender dynamics are part and parcel of that ontological sense in the first place and rather inherent to feelings of ontological (in)security. In the process of manufacturing biographical narratives or developing routinized relations and attachments, states inevitably gender themselves and others in their own peculiar ways, which constitutes a significant dimension of who they are or want to become, a dimension that is intimately linked to other aspects of identity and closely implicates them.

After critically engaging with the extant literature on the instantiated linkages of gendered discursive practices and ontological (in)security in world politics, the article will draw on Judith Butler's theory of "gender performativity" (1999 [1990]) and post-Lacanian feminist theorists' critique of linguistic-discursive "phallocentrism" (Cixous, 1981; Cixous and Clément, 2001 [1975]; Irigaray, 1985 [1974], 1985 [1977]) to propose a theoretical framework for understanding gender identity at the state level and its implications for ontological security of the imagined state self. In the section reviewing the existing scholarship, it will address the ways in which gendering the self-other may be approached and explored in the OSS framework, that is, "exogenously" or how gender mediates the "choice" of significant others and of attachment dynamics in relation to them, and "endogenously" or how gender governs the

consistency of actors' autobiographical narratives. The study will then proceed to expound *ontological dislocation* as a process instigated by the destabilization and disruption of state gender identity and how it may agitate the state actor into a restless scramble to repair and relocate its self. The final section will be dedicated to the investigation of Iran's nuclear policy in light of these theoretical propositions and a discourse analysis of its gendered foundations.

Before moving to the next section, a number of significant points, theoretical as well as methodological, warrant clarification. First, since this research basically brings feminist security studies (FSS) to bear on ontological security studies (OSS) through gender analysis of state identity/subjectivity, it is important to elucidate their positioning with respect to each other and their theoretical linkages. Perhaps the concept that most adequately underpins the connection between these two bodies of scholarship is that of what Sjoberg (2016) dubs "security as felt," sensed and experienced, which constitutes a core element in formations of ontological (in)security. Taking cues from Parashar (2013) and Sylvester (2013) among others on "sensory experiences" of conflict, she contends that adoption of such a perspective would push the boundaries of gender and security analyses into "new directions" and as such holds "transformative potential for security studies" beyond considerations of women "or even gendered narratives and constructions of security" (Ibid: 51-52). More specifically, a feminist conception of gendered (in)security as felt and experienced, that is as ontological, reflected already by the "affective turn" in IR (Anderson 2014), can enlighten us on how (in)security functions and produces its referent objects and what conditions of possibility obtain that make those referent objects feel (in)secure in the first place. "A feminist politics of security studies," in Sjoberg's words, "…needs to be matched with, interspersed with, and incorporated into other politics of security studies—from the local to the international to the global, from realist to postcolonial, from core to periphery" (2016: 61).

The current inquiry seeks to take a step exactly in that direction. However, while Sjoberg focuses on the inherently gendered felt (in)security of "*people*, individually and collectively" to argue for "*expanding* and *recentering* security research" (Ibid: 59, emphases in original), this article addresses the gendered felt (in)security of *states* and sovereign state subjects and how it may drive efforts to define and redefine their gender identity. The puzzle that immediately arises then—and this is the second point worthy of delineation—is how feelings, affects, emotions and experiences at the individual human

level can be scaled up to that of the nation-state as a sovereign heterogeneous collectivity. Unlike much OSS literature that proceeds from the Giddensian-Wendtian "state as person" analogy (Wendt 1999, 2004) to deal with the so-called level of analysis quandary and theorize about state self and its ontological (in)security, we do not treat states as persons but instead adhere to a performative conception of statehood. The reasons for picking this alternative framework are twofold.

On the one hand, as Epstein (2011: 331-332) makes it abundantly clear, the Wendtian state personification is grounded in biological essentialist thinking that relegates a "pre-social 'rump materialist' self" to the human body as a premise to postulate that the state unit too is similarly pre-social with an essential identity. This is what she dismisses as "IR's fallacy of composition" (Ibid: 330), which would also contradict the metatheoretical underpinnings of this inquiry centered as it is on a non-essentialist poststructuralist theory of gender. On the other, in contrast to Wendt's pre-given "essential state" as the main point of departure for his systemic constructivist analysis, the performative state has no "a priori existence" but in fact comes into being through affectively and emotionally organized discursive performances (Vulović, 2020: 329-330). More specifically, according to this view, the state as an entity has "no ontological status apart from the claims, representations, assumptions and routines performing it in political and legal practices" (Grzybowski and Koskenniemi, 2015: 29). Thus, an aggregate-level analysis of state gender identity, agency and subjectivity requires engagement with not only the question of "who speaks" (Epstein 2011) but also that of "who feels" as feelings and emotions are clearly implicated in the articulation of gendered subject-positions, practices and performances that constitute the state. Accordingly, an inquiry into ontological (in)security of gender at the state level needs to draw out the emotions and affects that inform the political subjectivity and self-concept of a given state actor in relation to gender in order to make sense of related practices and policies and what drives them.

In light of these (meta)theoretical parameters—and this is the last point—we will employ discourse analysis as a politically conscious methodology of inquiry where discourses refer to "sets of statements that construct objects and an array of subject positions" (Parker cited in Willig 2014: 342). Such a discourse analytic approach to qualitative research calls for special attention to the concepts, terms and expressions that their producers pick to manufacture differing versions of reality and enable, or exclude, certain modes of being, thinking, acting, living and governing. It is premised on the social

constructionist perspective that "the words we choose to speak about something and the way in which they are spoken or written, shape the sense that can be made of the world and our experience of it" (Willig 2014: 341, 344). In this sense, discourses are closely implicated in configurations of power and constitute different modalities of politics and hierarchies of social relations, warranting adoption of "critical" lenses for their analysis (See Fairclough 1995; Wodak 1996). Empirically, therefore, textual material generated by and about the state under question and its representatives, such as policy documents, political statements and media reports, will be examined. In particular, the article will probe how explicitly gendered and emotionally laden concepts like *harim* (sanctum), *namous* (carrier of honor), *narmesh* (flexibility/softness), *gheirat* (moral virility), *pofyouzi* (pimposity) and *nofouz* (infiltration) frame the Iranian nuclear discourse along masculinity/femininity lines and reveal deep ontological insecurities about the possibility of the 2015 nuclear accord resulting in collective identity transformation and state feminization.

Ontological Security through Gender Lenses

In her pioneering work on the political psychology of globalization and religious nationalism, Kinnvall (2006) locates gender at the core of religious nationalist identities and essentialist views of masculinity and femininity which subjects adopt as an ontological security shield against mounting existential anxieties. By "conceptualizing the 'other' as weak, effeminate, and devoid of rational decision-making, nationalism and religion help in degrading the other and in taking away its status as a subject" (Kinnvall 2004: 762). Gendered bordering practices and de/rebordering processes (Agius 2022) and projections of masculinity through practices of "gendered nationalism" (Agius et al, 2020) have also been problematized in the OSS body of research as attempts by nationalist movements and far right governments across Europe, Asia and America to create boundaries of ontological security around the nation and provide answers to pressing questions of insecurity and anxiety. While these works accentuate the gendered aspects of identity-making and security-seeking, it is not abundantly clear yet how a gender identity can be conceived of for the state self—that produces such exclusionary narratives—*outside of* the discourse of nationalism as such. What if the chief perceived threat does not come from, say, national minorities or immigrant others against the nation's females—which nationalism purports to protect—but from other states against the state self's perceived manhood?

Gendering Ontological Security Exogenously

With a few exceptions that expand the debate into the domain of foreign policy and relations between states, scholarly interventions on the interface of ontological security pursuits and gendering practices have largely concentrated on nations' domestic politics and the role of the state as a purveyor of ontological security for its nationals. Interrogating the "masculinization" of Indian politics, for example, Kinnvall (2019) shows how under Prime Minister Narendra Modi as a populist leader, India's foreign policy discourse has been recalibrated to feature hegemonic reinventions and reiterations of "nationhood" along the gendered lines of "Hindu masculinity." This mode of masculinization for political gains and ontological security goals bears close resemblances to the deployment of "toxic masculinity" and its various iterations such as a militarist discourse in the performance of Brexit during negotiations between the UK and the EU (Achilleos-Sarll and Martill, 2019). Drawing on feminist IR theory, Bilgic (2015) examines gendering as a means of "constructing power hierarchies between the West and non-West" and how it may generate a sense of "gendered ontological insecurity." The study in particular advances our understanding of the ways in which gendered interstate relations and hierarchical positionings of masculinities in international politics have a direct bearing on actors' feelings of ontological (in)security. The emphasis on Connell's differentiation between "hegemonic masculinity" and "subordinate masculinities" (2005) as well as on Hooper's historical typology of individual and collective masculinities (1999)—"citizen-warrior masculinity," "bourgeois-rational masculinity" etc.—is of particular note in this respect.

That OSS has not accorded state gender much systematic consideration could be seen in Mitzen's (2006) otherwise groundbreaking inquiry into the stability of security dilemmas for ontological security reasons, where a gender analysis of attachment to routinized conflicts with significant others is conspicuous by its absence. This is perhaps because neither Anthony Giddens (1991) and R. D. Laing (1969) nor Realists on whose works Mitzen builds her theorization of ontological security-seeking behavior account for gender and how the gender aspects of identity construction may influence quests for ontological security. Interrogating the structural realist explanation that persistent security dilemmas—exemplified by "intractable conflicts" or "enduring rivalries"—are driven by uncertainty about states' intentions, Mitzen contends that on the contrary states may in fact desire continuation of conflictual relations with significant others due to the ontologically reassuring sense of continuity, predictability and certainty they cultivate.

Of course, adoption of gender lenses would further complexify this interaction-based, hence "exogenous," account of ontological security. The gendering of state actors in terms of the gendered ways in which they conduct themselves in relation to others obtains quite vividly when factoring state type or "role identity" in, which Mitzen does profusely to postulate that "in trying to secure their types states will secure the relationships that make those roles meaningful" (2006: 354). The gender role or identity that a given state thus performs can affect its attachment to routines in at least two principal ways, that is, by informing the very *choice* of significant others with whom a certain mode of interaction—conflictual, cooperative etc.—is to be routinized, and by influencing the degree to which such routinization and attachment may be pushed and sustained. In other words, both the act of assigning social significance in the othering process and the manner of operationalizing it in practice are mediated by gender identity and gendered construals.

Along these lines, as an empirical example, Mitzen's attachment-centered ontological security framework compellingly explains post-revolutionary Iran's long-standing conflict with the United States despite its massive material and physical security costs. It can be equally persuasive in making sense of Tehran's lasting, and costly, enmity with Israel as yet another source of ontological reassurance for the Islamic Republic, a "revolutionary" actor with entrenched patriarchal and masculinist tendencies (Moallem, 2005). However, unless state gender identity and gendered conceptions of the self and others are accounted for, the theory may not afford to shed much light on the nature of, and variations in, these ontological security-generating conflictual relations. It is not well equipped, for instance, to tell us why Iran has generally sought to maintain a managable degree of antagonism to the United States, with a strong preference for "management" of tensions (Wang, 2020), but keeps pursuing unconditional enmity with Israel to the extent of openly calling for and actively working towards its "annihilation." In fact, while America is often viewed in a masculine light as the leader of the global system of domination and "headman" of the global village (Mehr News, 2013), Israel is remarkably feminized in the Iranian state discourse as "feebler than a spider's nest" that spreads its toxicity like a "cancerous tumor" and is destined for disintegration (Associated Press, 2020; Tasnim News, 2023). In the ideological context of Iranian state patriarchy, these descriptions have strong gender implications, as they particularly foreground association of Israel in an essentialist manner with weakness and inferiority on the one hand, and with uncleanliness, contamination ad "pollution" on the other (See Moore, 1988). This is one iteration of how "masculinization as valorization and feminization as

devalorization" (Runyan and Peterson, 2014: 17-18) operate in the OSS framework, demonstrating that integration of gender into the attachment dynamics can furnish OSS with greater nuance and purchase.

Gendering Ontological Security Endogenously

The "endogenous" approach to ontological security studies, which in IR tradition is primarily based on state actors' "autobiographical narratives" and espoused most characteristically by the writings of Brent Steele (2005, 2008), lends itself more readily to gender analysis. In addition to narrative-oriented works on nationalism, populism and globalization reviewed earlier—where for the most part the state itself acts as a source rather than referent object of ontological (in)security—there have been notable calls for taking onboard insights from feminist IR to "amend" the narrative perspective of OSS by recognizing that states' self-conceptions are gendered and the dominant narratives they are centered upon are "masculine" (Delehanty and Steele, 2009). This implies that on the one hand those masculinized stories about the self often depend for their viability and legitimacy on an "internal" othering process that serves to suppress competing feminine counternarratives of identity and thus, on the other hand, they could be interrogated, resisted and subverted "from within" (Ibid: 524-25). The mutual constitution of autobiographical narratives also points to the fluidity of states' sense of self and cautions against assumptions or attempts that tend to homogenize self-identities. "The implication here is that the dominant narrative retains its dominance precariously; any shift in the construction of marginalized narratives can potentially challenge the dominance of a particular narrative" (Ibid: 531)

Yet, while such a gender analysis of the competition of dominant/masculine and subjugated/feminine narratives within the state addresses an important lacuna in endogenous OSS, its exclusive emphasis on the internal dynamics of identity runs the risk of reifying the *inside* by overlooking threats to self that emanate from other, potentially more powerful and hegemonic, masculinities lying outside of the state. This gendered threat *from without* is salient not only from the perspective of exogenous ontological security but also in light of the possibility that those internal feminine counternarratives could be viewed by proponents of the dominant narrative as extensions of masculine external others bent on feminizing the state self-identity, that is, as *enemies within*. In the case of Iran, this dynamic was exemplified by the so-called "infiltration" (*nofouz*) discourse introduced by the Iranian leadership articulated in the wake of the July 2015 nuclear accord to warn against internalizing identity narratives

about the political malleability of the masculinist revolutionary state (More on this in the empirical section).

What transpires in ontological (in)security terms in such circumstances and how agents may respond to radical disruptions in their gender identity has remained pretty much a moot point in the OSS framework. One port of departure would be a consideration of the experience of "shame" which Steele theorizes as "a discursive expression of remorse or regret" that takes place "when actors feel anxiety about the ability of their narrative to reflect how they see themselves…when there exists too much distance between this biographical narrative and self-identity" (2008: 54-55). Even though shame could be a byproduct of disconnects in an actor's gendered self-concept, a few caveats need to be considered: First, shame is usually the result of a "negative event," a morally reprehensible and/or materially ruinous outcome which the agent has somehow brought about or contributed to, whereas destabilization of gender self-identity does not necessarily follow from negative occurrences and might not culminate in a sense of shame as such. Second, not all actors could be assumed to feel shame, which according to Young requires a "self-directed adverse *judgment*" and an "*audience* before which he now feels degraded" (1995: 220, emphasis in original). This is especially true of those agents, such as Iran, that commit themselves to carving out a "revisionist" self-identity which is defined by opposition to the prevailing order and reaffirmed every time they challenge its underlying structures, infusing them with a sense of ontological security (Behravesh, 2018a). These states might even take pride in, rather than feel ashamed of, defying certain norms of behavior predominantly adhered to and upheld by the majority "audience". Yet, even agents who are so immune to shame and remorse could be susceptible, and responsive, to variations in their gender self-concepts.

Lastly and most crucially for the purposes of this study, due to the broad sociopolitical implications of gender and the numerous cultural meanings attached to it, disruptions in gender identity are expected to engender more radical and overarching ontological repercussions as the actor's self-perceived position in relation to those meanings and categories will be dislocated. This is mainly because gender is a "categorization imbued with…an unpredictable array of further signifiers…a signal that sex and sexuality become power relations in society, and international society is no exception" (Carver, 1998: 343-344). Accordingly, gender identity disjunctures could be said to constitute, from a Giddensian perspective, a "critical situation" disrupting institutionalized certitudes and accustomed routines and implicating

"fundamental questions" about actors' existential status and ontological experience of reality in relation to others as well as to themselves (Ejdus, 2018).

Gender Identity and Ontological Dislocation

Ontological dislocation is the concept this article employs to capture the phenomenon of gender self-identity destabilization, as a process of horizontal and multidirectional rather than vertical and unidimensional disruption, indeed a multiplicity of simultaneous disconnects, that the self perceives or experiences in the form of what might amount to a metamorphosis of subjectivity. In other words and as elaborated in detail below, ontological dislocation is a process of experiencing existential anxiety and insecurity spawned by a critical situation that specifically targets state gender or a state's gender self-identity, destabilizing all symbolic masculine/feminine qualities and characteristics associated with it. It is crucial to immediately clarify that *gendering the state* here is not to suggest states are ungendered or genderless entities and thus need to be gendered or even to assign a state a specific gender (as a given), but basically means unpacking the ways in which states manufacture their self-concept with reference to gender as a simultaneously constructed and constitutive category. As Yuval-Davis has demonstrated in her study of gender and nation-states, notions of manhood and womanhood, masculinity and femininity, are integral to constructions and reproductions of nationhood and statehood, manifested in particular in her feminist argument that "it is women" rather than gender-blind bureaucracies "who reproduce nations, biologically, culturally and symbolically" (1997: 2).

This stems, among other things, from a fundamental deconstruction of two fictional divides that have traditionally helped exclude women from sociopolitical life and foreclose gendered understandings of nation-states: the nature/culture division which bars women as "natural" childbearers from the "civilized" domain of politics and the private/public dichotomy, which relegates women to the confined privacy of home (Ibid: especially 40-46, 78-83). As pointed out earlier, a crucial underlying premise here is that subjects, including sovereign national-statal ones, do not have "natural identities" but in fact their identities are "the effects of citational processes" and constructed through "impersonation—whether one is impersonating someone of another sex or gender, someone of the same sex or gender, or even oneself" (Weber, 1998: 79). Pertinently, gendering the state requires far more than merely adding women, the feminine, or more broadly the "gender variable" to

explanations of state behavior, identity and international relations, simply because "gender constructions are relationally defined" and intersected with other aspects of identity, involving "a whole series of gendered dichotomies" where the masculine is generally valued over the feminine (Hooper, 1999: 475-476). While mainstream IR has been critiqued by many feminists as reflective of a world of men and male dominance (Enloe, 1990; Tickner, 1992), there is a nuanced spectrum of masculinities as well as femininities within and between "manly states" that are valorized or devalorized based on a given actor's gendered self-concept.

In this light, one may wonder, for instance, why the United States refused to enter hostage negotiations with the Islamic State (ISIS) terror group even though it was arguably the only way to save its kidnapped (and later beheaded) nationals? (See Cronin, 2015). And if the US has an established policy or principle of "no negotiations with terrorists," why has it held similar talks with the IRGC even though it has designated the Iranian military body as a terrorist entity? Was it because talks and concessions to a violent hypermasculinist group like ISIS would project a weaker American masculinity or make it look and feel feminine, thus dislocating its masculinized self-concept ontologically? And what does it tell us about the gender self-identity of France and Spain which did negotiate with ISIS and reportedly paid massive ransoms to bring home their kidnapped citizens (See Briggs and Wallace, 2022)? Indeed, a performative view of both gender and statehood would help answer such questions and in particular elucidate what might ensue when a gender identity a state aspires to is disrupted by gendered practices and performances that do not align with that self-construal. Significantly, it is through such performative lenses that in Faking It, as a foundational work of Queer IR, Cynthia Weber deconstructs the nexus of sex-gender-sexuality in US foreign policy, psychoanalyzing the "identity crisis" of a "masculinized" sovereign American subject triggered by the "loss" of a "feminized Cuba, its symbolic object of desire" (1999: 1). In the face of Fidel Castro's hypermasculinized Cuba following the 1959 revolution, which had earlier served as America's "trophy mistress," the United States "seemingly faced two options: either a symbolic castration—a loss of phallic power coded as an inability to produce meaning that resulted from a lack of a feminine object in which to 'express' its masculine identity—or a queering/nonnormalizing of its subjectivity if it retained Cuba…as its object of desire" (Ibid: 2). Since 1959, therefore, Weber concludes, the American state "has been 'faking it'—'it' being a straight/normalized masculine hegemonic identity and the phallic power…that comes with such an identity" (Ibid: 3).

Feminist theorists, including in IR, have been prolific on the simultaneously constructed and constitutive nature of gender in social and political spheres. According to Connell, gender is a "structure of social practice" where the "everyday conduct of life" is organized not only in relation to what she dubs "a reproductive arena, defined by the bodily structures and processes of human reproduction" but also through "symbolic practices" in the realm of discourse, ideology and culture (2005: 71-72). Echoing Carver's famous enunciation that gender "is neither a synonym for women nor for sex" (1996; 1998: 343), Sjoberg similarly defines it as "a system of symbolic meaning that creates social hierarchies based on perceived associations with masculine and feminine characteristics" (2010: 3). And for Runyan and Peterson, it consists of "the socially learned behaviors, repeated performances, and idealized expectations that are associated with and distinguish between the prescribed gender roles of masculinity and femininity" (2014: 2).

Indeed, a conception of gender as a socially and historically constructed set of "repeated performances," practices and acts seems to be fittest for the purpose of ontological security studies, a broad framework for analysis that accentuates the central role of repetitions, routines, and continuity in managing existential anxiety and ensuring security of the self over time. In the "Preface" to the 1999 edition of *Gender Trouble*, Butler lays out a refined introduction to her theory of performativity along two major lines: that gender lacks an "interior essence" but is basically the product of an anticipation that "conjures its object," an expectation that produces the appearance or effect of an essence which it anticipates, and that gender comprises "a repetition and a ritual" manufactured through a set of stylized bodily acts and "naturalized gestures" (1999: xiv-xv).

Inspired by Friedrich Nietzsche's philosophical claims on the "metaphysics of substance"—that "there is no 'being' behind doing, effecting, becoming; 'the doer' is merely a fiction added to the deed"—Butler further postulates that the "substantive effect" of gender is a matter of performative production, "constituting the identity it is purported to be" (Ibid: 33). Thus for her, gender is invariably a "doing" rather than a "being," that is, "not a doing by a subject that might be said to preexist the deed," meaning that in point of fact it is the sustained commission of certain acts that compose and concoct gender identity rather than the other way around: "There is no gender identity behind the expressions of gender; that identity is performatively constituted by the very 'expressions' that are said to be its results" (Ibid). The following excerpt offers a lucid synopsis of the theory:

> Gender is the repeated stylization of the body, a set of repeated acts within a highly rigid regulatory frame that congeal over time to produce the appearance of substance, of a natural sort of being. A political genealogy of gender ontologies, if it is successful, will deconstruct the substantive appearance of gender into its constitutive acts and locate and account for those acts within the compulsory frames set by the various forces that police the social appearance of gender (Ibid: 43-44).

Equally crucial in this respect is the recognition that while gender is performatively constituted, it is at the same time constitutive of social structures, formations and "configurations of practice." In Connell's words, "we find the gender configuring of practice however we slice the social world, whatever unit of analysis we choose" (2005: 72).

At the level of the symbolic, namely language, knowledge and discourse, this constitutiveness is primarily due to the opposing dualisms or "binary oppositions" of masculine/feminine underpinning the "phallocentric" logic at the heart of our system of signification, where masculinity is equated with positivity-presence and femininity with negativity-absence or *lack* (Cixous and Clément 2001, [1975]). Along parallel lines, female "sexual difference" is also erased and subsumed under the masculine "One," "Oneness," and "Sameness" as the standard of a priori value, "of form…of the proper name, of the proper meaning" (Irigaray 1985b [1977]: 26, 72, 1985a [1974]). For Luce Irigaray, post-Lacanian feminist philosopher, it is this "*sexual indifference that underlies the truth of any science, the logic of every discourse*," with the feminine never defined "except as the inverse, indeed the underside, of the masculine" (1985b [1977]: 69, 159, emphasis original). The female "lack" or "atrophy" here refers more specifically to that of *phallus*, "the transcendental signifier" in Lacanian terminology that operates as the "primary organizer of the structure of subjectivity" and constitutes the "a priori condition of all symbolic functioning," a signifier whose absence in woman places her "outside the Symbolic" (Cixous 1981: 46).

Hélène Cixous, another post-Lacanian feminist philosopher, encapsulates the phallic logic of representation and signification pithily:

> So…she is laid, ever caught in her chain of metaphors, metaphors that organize culture…ever her moon to the masculine sun, nature to culture, concavity to masculine convexity, matter to form, immobility/inertia to the march of progress, terrain trod by the masculine footstep…This opposition to woman cuts endlessly across all the oppositions that order culture. It's the classic opposition, dualist and hierarchical…In fact, every theory of culture, every

> theory of society, the whole conglomeration of symbolic systems—everything, that is, that's spoken, everything that's organized as discourse, art, religion, the family, language, everything that seizes us, everything that acts on us—it is all ordered around hierarchical oppositions that come back to the man/woman opposition, an opposition that can only be sustained by means of a difference posed by cultural discourse as "natural," the difference between activity and passivity (1981: 44).

Gender identity, therefore, performatively composed as it is, is in fact the subject's stylized and time-congealed relationship with the vast nexus of these dualist and hierarchical oppositions—hard/soft, tough/tender, competitive/caring, strong/weak, dominant/submissive, rational/irrational, prudent/impulsive, objective/subjective, orderly/disorderly, forceful/peaceful and so forth (See also Hooper 2000: 43-44). In other words, the repeated and routinized ways in which an actor acts in relation to gender-laden dichotomous pairs and privileges one side of the dichotomy over the other constitutes their gender identity over time. The question that emerges for ontological security studies then is, what occurs when such a relationship is disrupted and destylized?

Ontological dislocation, implying a horizontal disjuncture or a series of simultaneous disconnects, is the answer to the above query. It is a "rhizomatic" dispersal of destabilization, to borrow a term from post-structuralist theorists Gilles Deleuze and Felix Guattari (1987: 21), where disruptions and displacements spread across multiple sites and in manifold directions to permeate the totality of the subject rather than implicate a certain facet of subjecthood. While such dislocation of self-identity might be triggered by a single act of significant gender implications such as concessions in a round of negotiations or reconciliation with a powerful ancient adversary, its ontological effects are likely far more radical and less manageable, extending beyond those caused by a simple disruption in routinized relationships or a break in biographical continuity as a consequence of a shame-evoking course of action.

This is basically because gender identity, as shown earlier, does not consist of a single act or performance but is encompassing by nature, a "thick signifier" that governs a wide network of privileged practices repeated and ritualized over time, so ontological dislocation may be presumed to involve at least three anxiety-inducing formations: 1) a loss of grip and control over salient aspects of the self that used to feel familiar and "in place" but which are now slipping out of hand, generating a sense of confusion, alienation and estrangement; 2)

a state of unease and apprehension about the self-perceived need to fall in line with and live up to new *expectations* of gender performance, that is to start repeatedly privileging a different set of acts and navigate uncharted territories of practice, and finally 3) a sense of agitation and restlessness to restore the familiar order of gender and reclaim the jeopardized identity. In more concrete terms, the feeling of, say, *acting like a woman* for an agent who has historically sought to *act like a man* and thus whipped up a masculine self-identity as his principal compass of performance must be one of confusion, indeterminacy and agitation produced, first and foremost, by the loss of self-sameness, a feeling that he is no longer the same subject, nor in the same subject position, as he has biographically and ritualistically known himself to be (in).

A common response to these radical modes of ontological insecurity, especially in a "manly" milieu like the international society, is what Kinnvall has dubbed "securitization of subjectivity" which refers to building walls of closure, protection and purity around the (collective) self in relation to a "stranger-other" and in an attempt to manufacture a singular, stable and secure identity (2004: 749-50, 2006: 35-37, 48-49). Securitization of this sort is oftentimes underpinned by the logic of masculinist protection whereby "the role of the masculine protector puts those protected, paradigmatically women and children, in a subordinate position of dependence and obedience" as a security state wields paternalistic power over its subjects in the name of shielding them against threats, internal and external (Young, 2003: 2). The Iranian state's policies towards women serves as a telling instance of the masculinist control. The IRI leadership, for instance, opposed the UN 2030 agenda for its emphasis on gender equality as a prerequisite for sustainable development, with the Supreme Leader Khamenei repeatedly condemning such views as part of Western "enemies' soft war" against the nation through efforts to disintegrate the "family" institution (BBC Persian, 2016). "On the basis of which logic" he questioned in an April 2014 speech, "should we introduce women, whom God has created physically and emotionally for a special zone [in life], to areas that cause them suffering and hardship?" (Deutsche Welle, 2014), insisting in another in December 2023 that "women's core job is housekeeping, childbearing and motherhood" (BBC Persian, 2023).

What might render disruptions and variations in gender identity particularly unsettling for an agent is the prospects that once new structures of performance and expectations of how to act with respect to gender-signaling signifiers congeal and solidify, it would be tricky, socially and ontologically, to reconfigure them back to the "status quo ante," creating an increasingly

unpredictable and irreversible slide down the identity road. It is therefore no wonder if ontological dislocation prompted by jeopardization of gender identity spurs a restless scramble for extraordinary measures to relocate, reclaim and securitize the self. Along these lines, the Islamic Republic's deligitimation of the 2022 "Woman, Life, Freedom" movement for women's rights and liberties as a sedition to spread "promiscuity" is highly relevant (Etemad Online, 2022). The state response to the feminist-spirited protests was not only one of brutal suppression that killed over 550 people (OHCHR, 2024), but it was also followed by the passage of an overarching law called "Chastity and Hijab" to criminalize "improper" feminine behavior in society and control women's bodies (Human Rights Watch, 2024). This institutionalized exercise of masculinist control over women as reproducers of the nation echoed fears of state feminization, gender identity transformation and ontological dislocation in the wake of the 2015 nuclear accord and measures to counter them, which will be empirically illustrated in the next section.

Gendering Iran's Revolutionary Identity and Nuclear Discourse

Ever since it came under the international spotlight in 2003, Iran's controversial nuclear program has been the central site of state identity politics and ontological (in)security dynamics.Today, over two decades on, *who* the IRI is (becoming) is intimately intertwined with *how* it acts and conducts itself in the nuclear policy area. It is a locus where almost all salient components of Iran's state self-identity can be seen at play. Pitting the IRI against established world powers, the controversy has afforded it, *inter alia*, a position of singularity and uniqueness (Behravesh 2018a) as purportedly the only remaining "revolutionary state" around that has refused to "betray its ideals" but "defended its dignity and originality," as Supreme Leader Khamenei enunciated in a speech marking the "second stride of the [1979] revolution" on its fortieth anniversary (Khamenei's Office, 2019).

The subjective complexities of this self-other construction process, however, cannot be adequately understood without close attention to its gendered aspects and the state's gender identity. Both in the framework of Iran's foreign policy in general and that of its nuclear program in particular, projection of a revolutionary self marked by defiance and resistance is inseparable from pursuit of an idealized masculine identity defined most characteristically by an exhibition of "moral virility" (*gheirat*) as well as an ability to exercise "authority" with ease (*eghtedar*). These highly political and gender-laden qualities connote the ideological primacy of a masculinist logic that deems

paternalistic protection of honor signifiers and/or forceful fulfillment of supposedly sacred religious values an ethical obligation, that is a virtue in and of itself (Razavi et al 2023; Mazaheri 2015). Bakhtiar (2015) analyzes *gheirat* from a cognitive linguistic perspective as "an emotional alarm system" whose key function is to protect the self and anything/anyone that it holds dear against threatening others. *Gheirat* in this sense also implies an underlying sense of entitlement and possession towards its objects. It would be safe to argue that for the Islamic Republic, revolutionary identity is, at its core, a hegemonic masculine identity imbued with moral self-righteousness, a desire for authority and a propensity for protection of what the manly subject feels entitled to (See Connell and Messerschmidt, 2005).

It is difficult to envisage a masculine identity thus informed absent a delineation of the principal objects of moral virility and patriarchal protectiveness that lie at the heart of it, namely *namous* and *harim*. *Harim* in Persian means sanctum, a site of sanctity with associations of privacy and intimacy that merits protection. Pertinantly, *namous* is an originally Greek term that describes, in the Iranian context, a significant carrier or locus of honor which is exemplified by the female kin in marital and familial-tribal relations and whose uncontested protection and control represents the height of moral virility and underwrites the integrity of manliness. Perhaps the most notorious *performance* of *gheirat* as a fundamentally masculinist attribute that involves *namous* is honor killing, where the signifier of honor, usually a female, who is believed to have been violated or otherwise adulterated by a stranger-other in breach of the possession-protection nexus, is eliminated in order for familial-tribal honor to be cleansed and restored. *Namous*, however, is not limited to individuals and humans but may be extended to encompass collectivities and entities as well, like an ethnic ingroup, a popular cultural institution, a symbolic monument of historical import, a religious site of pilgrimage, a national initiative or military body and so forth.

Speaking of which, Iran's nuclear program acquired such a gender-laden status during the presidency of Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013) who rose to power on a platform, among other things, of protecting and reviving the nation's "nuclear rights" (BBC, 2010). This came after Tehran agreed in negotiations with European powers under former president Mohammad Khatami (1997-2005) to curb its nuclear activities, temporarily suspend uranium enrichment and voluntarily implement the Additional Protocol to the Non-Proliferation Treaty (NPT) which granted the International Atomic Energy Agency (IAEA) inspectors greater powers in their verification scheme

including unannounced inspections of Iranian nuclear facilities. Against this backdrop and upon assuming office in 2005, the Ahmadinejad administration, politically espoused by Supreme Leader Khamenei and the IRGC, started promoting a discourse of resistance against "world bullies" on the nuclear question that revolved around the notions of *gheirat*, *namous* and *harim* (Kelemen, 2007). Accordingly, Tehran resumed uranium enrichment and suspended implementation of the Additional Protocol, with Ahmadinejad emphasizing in numerous speeches at the time the "non-negotiability of the nation's nuclear rights" (Radio Farda, 2009). In the words of Ahmad Shirzad, a former reformist parliamentarian who has been critical of the discursive attempt to render the atomic program a "state *namous*," "when something turns into *namous*, one can no longer bargain over it" (Ensaf News, 2014). Ahmadinejad went as far as to repeatedly declare the "closure" of Iran's nuclear file (NBC News, 2007), setting the stage for a wide array of international, including UN, sanctions against the country—from July 2006 to June 2012, the United Nations Security Council (UNSC) passed altogether eight resolutions specifically concerning Tehran's nuclear activities.

The widespread dissatisfaction with the political and economic costs of a *gheirat*-centered approach to foreign policy, including an exacerbated "strategic loneliness" on the world stage (Mesbahi, 2011), manifested itself most unequivocally in a landslide victory in 2013 presidential elections for moderate forces headed by Hassan Rouhani and Mohammad Javad Zarif. The ascent to power of moderates who unlike their predecessors were open to realistic concessions as part of a negotiated settlement of the nuclear dispute helped replace the dominant discourse of masculinist possession-protection—of the nuclear rights as *namous*—with a comparably feminist "ethics of care" (Delehanty and Steele, 2009: 534) for national prosperity and public well-being. The new discursive reprioritization was best encapsulated by then president Rouhani's emblematic statement that along with the continued rotation of centrifuge cylinders for uranium enrichment—that guaranteed the progress of the nuclear program—"the wheels of economy and people's lives should also continue to rotate" (BBC, 2013). Crucially, this shift in politics of discursive *privileging* reflected the rare empowerment of a long-subdued national desire for change in the IRI's masculine self-conception and masculinist performance of foreign and security policy accordingly. This compelled Supreme Leader Khamenei to publicly advocate "heroic flexibility" (Radio Free Europe, 2013) on the nuclear question that paved the way for a historic accord between Iran and world powers in 2015, the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA).

Khamenei's qualification of "flexibility" with "heroic" was particularly significant from a gender identity perspective as it revealed deep anxieties and an underlying sense of ontological insecurity about the potentially *feminizing* effects of a major *reconciliation* with the "arrogant" and "bullying" West on Iran's masculine self-construal, revolutionary identity and righteous nuclear behavior. Indeed, a sense of ontological dislocation had started to take form, characterized at this stage by perceived imminent loss of control over familiar facets of the revolutionary self as masculine and a consequent feeling of alienation. "A wrestler who exercises flexibility for a tactical reason should not forget who his rival is and what his goal is," Khamenei cautioned in the same speech (Ibid). And our embattled wrestler's chief goal was in fact to reaffirm and perpetuate, rather than reform and propitiate, his manly revolutionary character by utilizing what was ideally meant to be a single-issue tactical agreement with powerful opponents to take much enervating pressure off his shoulders for as long as possible and obtain as much breathing room at home and abroad as he could.

The JCPOA was, however, far more than a tactical or technical deal. The unprecedented flexibility it involved and epitomized was hoped by its architects and proponents to soften up the Iranian state, to permeate other arenas of political practice and therefore transform its revolutionary tradition of performance and masculinist self-identity over time. This was supposed to be achieved externally through integrating Iran in the international community and internally through empowering the Iranian civil society to press its democratizing demands with greater vigor. As a result, the hardline patriarchal leadership in Tehran felt that it had not only been compelled to show some substantive softness on a highly significant matter of "state *namous*", but also that this was just the beginning of the state feminization process and much more flexibility was to be exercised down the road. In fact, the manly state felt it had acted like a woman and far more of such feminine acting, practicing and performing was on the horizon. Sovereign nation-states, as Weber (1998: 78) astutely points out, "are not pre-given subjects but subjects in process" and "all subjects in process (be they individual or collective) are the ontological effects of practices which are performatively enacted."

Thus perceived, the historic diplomatic accord of July 2015 represented a rare moment of ontological dislocation for the Islamic Republic of Iran, destabilizing the gender foundations of its masculine revolutionary self-concept, that is the time-congealed state gender. The idea for JCPOA proponents was that if the IRI could subscribe to a compromise of such scope

and significance it could probably *repeat* the same kind of *performance* with respect to so many binary oppositions of which it had characteristically privileged the masculine side in the name of revolutionary acting for decades. And if so, then those repeated performances would *congeal* into a new state identity away from moral virility and revolutionary manliness over time, an identity that would structurally privilege detente over confrontation, prosperity over resistance, cooperation over defiance, integration over isolation, flexibility over rigidity, and so forth. Indeed, to leave no doubt about the plausibility of this anticipated trajectory, proposals were publicly propounded about the initiation of a "regional JCPOA" as well as a "domestic JCPOA" by no other figure than moderate president Rouhani himself—and vehemently dismissed by hardliners, not least Supreme Leader Khamenei (Al-Monitor, 2016). And this reflected the second facet of ontological dislocation where a deep sense of anxiety developed about the emerging expectations of performance in contradiction with Iran's masculine self-concept and the need for privileging a different set of practices perceived as feminine.

The masculinist backlash was already underway. The agreement had clearly destabilized and dislocated the IRI's highly gendered self-identity as if it was not the kind of "doing" that would become a manly revolutionary state. It sent hardliners scrambling for new ways and narratives to discredit the deal, restore the virile self-image of the Islamic Republic and reclaim their position in it as true revolutionaries. A powerful counternarrative revolved primarily around the notion that the nuclear accord was a moderate "sellout" to the West, that moderates in charge of the executive sold out Iran's hard-won atomic achievements, that is its national carrier of honor (*namous*), to the enemies of the state and in so doing betrayed the moral ideals of the revolution (Radio Farda, 2017). Suggesting the deeply gendered nature of the identity threat posed by the deal, some hardline critics went as far as to accuse proponents of marathon negotiations that culminated in the JCPOA of "*pofyouzi*"—pimposity or cuckoldry in Persian—for exhibiting "liberal" tendencies and lacking *gheirat* in defending and protecting what they had long framed as a state *namous* and a national *harim* (Serat News, 2015). The subject noun "*pofyouz*" or "*dayyouth*" is a derogatory term in Persian reserved for a man who has a weak moral character and fails to show moral virility (*gheirat*) when his *namous*, female kin in particular, is disrespected or otherwise violated (Razavi et al, 2023).

The ontological threat to the IRI's gender identity had to be neutralized through a set of securitizing moves. Perhaps the most decisive of them came in an

address by Khamenei to commanders of mobilization forces (*Basij*)—a paramilitary organization affiliated with the Revolutionary Guards—a few months after the JCPOA was signed. In that influential speech, the Supreme Leader warned against the "great danger" of infiltration-influence (*nofouz*) as an insidious endeavor on the part of Iran's enemies to infiltrate various parts of the body politic and "build networks of influence within the nation" in order ultimately to "change beliefs, change ideals, change perspectives, change lifestyles…that is, to do something so that the influenced subject thinks the same way a certain American does" (Khamenei's Office, 2015). These securitizing iterations and practices suggested a deep desire for masculinist protection of the sovereign nation-state subject, articulating the culmination of ontological dislocation evident above all in a sense of restlessness to restore the supposedly dissipating masculine self-concept of the state. Given the extremely broad semantic scope of the concept *nofouz*, any nonconformist and alternative way of thinking and acting could be interpreted at will as reeking of adversarial foreign influence, hence a legitimate target for suppression and elimination. By that token, as he and security authorities alike later accentuated, one could even be an infiltrator without knowing it herself (Gohari Moghaddam and Kiani Mojahed 2020: 15-16). The Iranian leadership's threat framing was therefore not only an unmistakable signal to the state security apparatus to suppress change-seeking forces and initiatives that had been empowered by the nuclear accord, but more significantly it was a concerted attempt at "securitization of subjectivity" that sought to govern, control and eventually homogenize hearts and minds in the self-image of a masculinist Islamic Republic.

Over the following months and years, the IRGC pursued a systematic "counter-infiltration campaign," particularly targeting academics, environmentalists, entrepreneurs, civil society groups and even non-governmental charities (Behravesh, 2018b) whom the state found a creeping threat to its revolutionary identity. At the same time, Iran doubled down on its revisionist regional agenda and bolstered material and military support for the so-called "axis of resistance" in the Middle East, all to demonstrate that it had stayed true to its revolutionary self and that a historic breakthrough with the West, albeit potentially transformative, was not supposed to translate into a transformation of subjectivity and character. With the ontological dislocation caused by the JCPOA thus addressed and the identity threat of state feminization thus averted, all the rest flowing from the accord was a bonus: Tehran was in no rush to leave the deal when the Trump administration jettisoned it to much fanfare in May 2018. Yet significantly, the Supreme Leader capitalized on the

occasion of US withdrawal from the nuclear agreement to categorically ban negotiations on "*namous*-category issues of the revolution" with "others" including Europeans, insisting that Iran will neither "bargain" nor "compromise" on its defense capabilities: "It is like the story of that suitor who was asked, what happened?" Khamenei quipped, "And he said all has proceeded [well] except two things: we say we want your daughter, and they say you eat crap!" (Radio Farda, 2019).

Conclusion

This writing has been an intellectual endeavor to advance ontological security studies (OSS) by theorizing gender as a "property of collectivities, institutions and historical processes" (Hooper, 2000: 35) more centrally into its analytic framework and scrutinizing the consequences of disruptions in gender identity at the state level. Recourse to gender is prevalent in composing ontologically securing or securitizing narratives of identity by social actors including states, particularly compared to stories that center around other identity dimensions and differentiating categories such as race, religion and class—with which gender of course intersects and overlaps in what has come to be famously known as "intersectionality" in feminist theory (Crenshaw 1989). After a critical investigation of exogenous and endogenous approaches to ontological (in)security dynamics from a gender perspective, it adopts Judith Butler's theory of gender performativity to unpack the key linkages between the two broad frameworks, that is, both to theoretically demonstrate the relevance of state gender to OSS and to methodologically facilitate attribution of gender to collective actors through a performative view of statehood. A probe into post-Lacanian feminist critiques of "phallocentrism" in the symbolic sphere of language and knowledge sheds further light on gendered acts and performances, discursively and historically organized around dualistic oppositions where masculinity is valorized by association with presence-activity and femininity devalorized by association with lack-passivity. In light of the vast expanse of these gender-defining oppositional dualisms that underpin our system of signification, *ontological dislocation* is proposed as a new theoretical conceptualization to articulate processes of gender identity destabilization and disruptions in state actors' gender self-concepts. Due to its horizontal dispersal and rhizomatic rippling across a wide network of stylized characteristics and "naturalized gestures" that constitute one's gender identity, ontological dislocation, it is further argued, amounts to a radical sense of ontological insecurity and existential anxiety beyond what might be caused by a temporal disconnect in biographical narratives that agents tell about

themselves and/or a linear rupture in patterns of routinized attachment to significant others. The resultant theoretical framework is finally applied for empirical instantiation to the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) as a masculinist revolutionary state, with special focus on how the nuclear accord of July 2015 with world powers destabilized its manly identity and masculine self-concept, and how the ensuing ontological dislocation manifested itself in the state's radical response.

Lastly, this research is a testament to the wide reach of gender that extends far beyond quotidian dynamics of power relations to "existential questions and existentialist ideas" of inevitable anxiety, ontological insecurity, perpetual struggle and contingency of human existence that inform much IR theorizing today while "lurk[ing], largely unnoticed, in its shadows and background" (Hom and O'Driscoll 2023:783). As Hoogensen and Vigeland Rottem contend, "recognizing gender as a significant dimension of identity and security opens the door" (2004: 156) to non-traditional understandings of security, including questions about whose ontological (in)security it is that merits attention, while exposing the political processes through which security needs are addressed. Operating within and through the symbolic, gender necessarily mediates subjectivity and conditions the individual as well as collective subjects' ontological sense of self. After all, "where there are humans, there is gender" (Carver and Lyddon 2022: 1), so If we accept that gender is inherently entangled with identity and identity constructions are necessarily gendered by nature, then it logically follows that ontological security studies as a framework of analysis that primarily concerns itself with security of being/becoming and self cannot be detached from or neutral to gender dynamics.

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Article III

Self-Harm as Desire for Ontological Security: The Lack, Trauma, and Iran's Shootdown of Civilian Flight PS752

(Under review after editorial approval)

Abstract

While sacrificing physical-territorial security as an attempt to attain ontological security has been well theorized in ontological security studies (OSS), instances of harm directed by states against their own nationals have received almost no attention in security studies. Practiced by states, deliberate self-directed harm that would involve considerable sacrifice of human life or, metaphorically speaking, "flesh" is not an uncommon phenomenon in world politics. What drives states to embrace such sacrifices of flesh? What psychopolitical dynamics may underpin these violent practices? In an attempt to answer these questions and partly inspired by psychopathology of individual self-harm, the present article seeks to introduce the concept of state self-harm (or self-injury) into OSS. Drawing upon Freudian psychoanalysis of trauma and more centrally upon Lacan's theory of subjectivity, it argues that self-harm on the state level serves ontological security-seeking purposes through trauma management and fantasy rearticulation, culminating in ontological recovery and recreation of a fantasized Self. The research tries to instantiate these theoretical propositions by interrogating Iran's deliberate downing of the passenger flight PS752 in January 2020 as an example of state self-injury where the Iranian state turned on its own in a moment of trauma, sacrificing the "flesh" to salvage the Self.

Introduction

"Keep shedding [our] bloods and our life will endure." Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini

Perhaps the most significant trope emerging from the context of Russia's war on Ukraine has been "meat grinder." Symptomatic of the senseless violence

and massive bloodshed caused by the conflict, meat grinder has been specifically used for the Battle of Bakhmut in the eastern Ukrainian region of Donetsk where Russia sacrificed a surprisingly high number of fighters to capture the small town, pretty much like throwing meat into a grinder. “They gave their lives for the motherland and have fully absolved themselves of their guilt,” Russian President Vladimir Putin later said on two such fighters who had been recruited from among prison inmates (Nikolskaya & Tsvetkova 2023). In May 2023, US National Security Council spokesman John Kirby announced that since December 2022, Russia had suffered over 100,000 casualties in Ukraine including 20,000 combat fatalities. “It’s really stunning, these numbers,” he jibed (Mitchell 2023). The psychopolitical effect of the colossal loss of life the meat grinder represented was deep enough to trigger an unprecedented mutiny by its main protagonist, the Wagner mercenary group, against the Kremlin, severely undermining the state’s narrative of invasion and Putin’s political authority as a “strong” leader. A historical parallel of even bigger proportions to the Russia-Ukraine meat grinder can be seen during the Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) where the Islamic Republic, a newly formed revolutionary state back then, relied heavily on high-casualty swarming operations or “human wave” raids as a major component of its land warfare strategy against Iraq (Sciolino 1987). Iranian human wave attacks involved deliberately sending masses of usually ill-equipped soldiers straight towards enemy lines, with fighters running across minefields to clear them or braving direct machine gun fire from fortified positions ahead in attempts to cross the border. The mammoth human toll among Iranian forces, estimated to run as high as one million deaths by the eighth year of the war, clearly did not bring about the kind of uncontested triumph Iran’s revolutionary leaders had aspired for, eventually compelling Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini to drink the figurative “chalice of poison,” as he infamously lamented, and accept a UN-brokered ceasefire in the summer of 1988 that ended the conflagration (Pear 1988).

These types of spectacularly self-injurious behavior and sacrificial practices on the part of states are not uncommon in international history and world politics, and yet they have not received much theoretical attention in International Relations (IR) theory in general and Ontological Security Studies (OSS) in particular. What they have in common—and matters most significantly for the purposes of this study—is a distinct sacrificial element which arises from a desire to mark and animate sovereignty of the state far more than a need to guard and insulate its survival. As social theorist Paul W Kahn (2008) argues in his political theology of the legitimacy of violence—what he dubs “sacred

violence"—the modern popular sovereign not only sustains its political meaning through a unique demand for sacrifice, "of killing and being killed," but perhaps more importantly it also "generalizes sacrificial violence to an ordinary condition of life" exemplified by the practice of "universal conscription" and symbolized by "the tomb of the unknown soldier" who is "quite literally everyman" (pp. 35-36). Pertinently, since sacrifice is ultimately about giving up something of one's own, it lays bare the boundaries of the self; indeed, as Kahn puts it, the state "is sacrificing itself in the body of the citizen" (Ibid, p. 109).

The nexus of sovereignty and self-sacrifice thus paves the way for OSS interventions to explore the deep-seated psychopolitical factors and psychic processes at the root of self-injurious acts perpetrated by states against their own nationals or citizens. More specifically, the main questions this inquiry seeks to engage with are, what drives states to embrace self-directed sacrifice of flesh/bodies? How may such self-harming practices serve state sovereignty and what do they tell us about the collective "Self" and subjectivity of the state? In sum, how can we make sense of those significant occasions where state actors turn on their own and as such how can state self-harm be theoretically conceived of? To answer these questions, we will draw insights from Freudian psychoanalysis on individual "self-harm"—however without importing the concept uncritically into IR and extrapolating it directly to the state level (more on this below)—and especially on Lacan's theorizations of the lack, the Real, desire and fantasy in the framework of ontological (in)security dynamics. We will then hone in on the case of Iran's deliberate shootdown in January 2020 of the Iranian-majority passenger flight PS752 departing from Tehran—that killed all 176 people onboard—to empirically show that self-harm on the collective/state level is primarily about sacrificing the flesh to salvage a fantasized Self and thus serves ontological security-seeking purposes through trauma management and fantasy reanimation.

Individual Self-Harm: Death Instinct, Trauma and the Self

At the most basic level, the common denominator of acts of self-harm is that they are purposefully inflicted by an agent on their own physical body, soma or flesh. "Self-injury" has basically been defined as "*the deliberate, direct, alteration or destruction of healthy body tissue without an intent to die*" (Favazza 2011: 197, emphasis in original; See also Nock 2010: 342). Yet whether such types of autoaggression are also directed *against* one's subjective self-concept as the term self-harm might implicitly suggest is a moot point. In

other words, while self-injury is generally understood as bodily harm against oneself, it can hardly be asserted beyond doubt that it is necessarily an injurious act of violence against one's notion of Self and ontological "being-in-the-world" as well. Such a complexifying consideration, which in part speaks to the philosophical body-mind distinction, carries great analytical weight for an inquiry that seeks to shed light on the ontological, as contrasted with physical, (in)security dynamics of self-harm (See Rumelili 2015).

Self-Harm and the Death Drive

Defined earlier as direct and deliberate damage to body in the absence of suicidal intents, self-injury could both be an embodiment of the Freudian "death drive" and, on the contrary, a form of self-help insofar as it keeps the self-destructive instinctual impulses in check, moderating the affective drive for suicide. The "trend to self-destruction," in the words of Freud, "is present to a certain degree in very many more human beings than those in whom it is carried out; self-injuries are as a rule a compromise between this instinct and the forces that are still working against it" (1901 [1960]: 181). Pertinently, he developed an important part of his theorization of the "death drive"—*Todestrieb* in German, symbolized by "Thanatos" in Greek mythology as opposed to "Eros," the mythological symbol of the "life instinct" and libidinal drive for survival—in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920 [1955]) and later in *The Ego and the Id* (1923 [1961]) in relation to the clinical phenomenon of "repetition compulsion" which he had frequently came across during psychoanalytic work on infantile play as well as treatment of neurotics, traumatized war veterans and even ordinary subjects. Featured by the apparently "perpetual recurrence of the same thing" (Freud 1920 [1955]: 22), the compulsion to repeat is an almost irresistible urge to rehearse and relive generally unpleasant or destructive experiences from the past such as traumas in contradiction with the "pleasure principle," the instinctive quest for pleasure and escape from pain that constitutes the driving force behind the id. According to Freud, the compulsion to repeat proceeds from the "instinctual impulses" and is "probably inherent in the very nature of the instincts—a compulsion powerful enough to overrule the pleasure principle, lending to certain aspects of the mind their daemonic character" (1919 [1955]: 238). Elsewhere he describes it as "something that seems more primitive, more elementary, more instinctual than the pleasure principle which it overrides" (1920 [1955]: 23).

To the extent that it functions as a continuous source of "unpleasure" by reviving traumas from the realm of the repressed, repetition compulsion reflects the purchase of the death drive, which points to the "effort to reduce,

to keep constant or to remove internal tension due to stimuli" (Freud 1920 [1955]: 55-56). It aims to resolve all psychic struggles arising from life instincts including "the sexual instincts or Eros" by leading "organic life back into the inanimate state", namely death (Ibid, 1923 [1961]: 40). With this in mind, nonsuicidal self-injury speaks both to the life instinct as manifested in the pleasure principle and to the death instinct as captured by the "nirvana principle," a term Freud borrows from Barbara Low to articulate "the dominating tendency of mental life" and all instincts towards ultimate elimination of tension and achievement of eternal equilibrium (1920 [1955]: 55-56). Anyway, either pursued through conscious desire or unconscious intention—what Freud labels "half-intentional self-injury"—harm against one's own physique is, from a clinical perspective, symptomatic of psychoneurosis, a mental disorder marked by immense anxiety and impaired functionality short of break with reality, and a consequence of intense internal "psychical conflict" (1901 [1960]: 178-180). In his later work on the mental life and treatment of neurotics, he elaborates on the subject's "need to be ill or to suffer" as a source of resistance to psychoanalytic therapy, which may be driven by a particularly harsh and hostile superego—that needs to be slowly "demolished"—or, worse yet, by the reversal of the self-preservation instinct emanating from "a liberation of excessive quantities of the destructive instinct directed inwards" (Freud 1938 [1964]: 179-180).

Such an understanding of self-injurious behavior aligns with those psychopathological studies that locate its roots in childhood traumas and disruptions in the course of personality development, construing acts of self-harm as primarily having an "affect regulation" function and working as a "compensatory regulatory and relational strategy" that alleviates acute emotional distress and enables negotiation of developmental challenges due to early adaptational failure (Yates 2004: 36, 54; Klonsky 2007; Nock 2010; Jacobson and Batejan 2014). Thus the "greatest trauma" at the early stage of object relationship development, according to object relations theorist Ronald Fairbairn—who incidentally "felt an analytic vision could and should be applied to…an understanding of nationalism and international relations" (1994 [1952]: xix)—takes place when the subject experiences "frustration of his desire to be loved as a person and to have his love accepted" by the real objects. It is "this trauma above all that creates fixations" to which the subject tends to resort "in an attempt to compensate by substitutive satisfactions for the failure of his emotional relationships with his outer objects (Ibid: 39). From this object relations perspective, self-injurious behavior is one such mechanism of trauma management and substitutive satisfaction, much like "masturbation" and

"masochism," representing "*relationships with internalized objects*" to which the agent turns in the absence of a "*satisfactory relationship with objects in the outer world*" (Ibid: 40, emphasis in original).

Underlying many instances of self-injury, therefore, is what Csordas and Jenkins (2018) describe as a "crisis of agency" enacted on the "terrain" of the flesh where cutting signifies three modes of agentive engagement at the intersection of the body and the world: 1) an iteration of "active being-toward-the-world," with the opening of the flesh and flowing of the blood being an "emanation of personhood into the world," 2) an intersubjective instantiation of the Self-Other reciprocity in which the subject's physical flesh becomes the locus of an "anguished subjectivity" that is "opened" up to the world through the simultaneous infliction of pain and elicitation of relief, and 3) incorporation of the world's "oppressive agency" and structural violence in one's flesh "as an object rather than a subject" in the face of existential uncertainty and precarity (208, 224). While theoretical recognition of the sociocultural milieu and historical context may furnish us with a more nuanced understanding of self-injurious behavior, perhaps the universal aspect of self-mutilation rests in the subject's decision to project and enact the "fundamental human process" of ontological struggle and existential strife on the flesh (See Jenkins 2004, 2015). The use of flesh to negotiate insecurities of an imagined Self in relation to both the inner psyche and the outer world situates self-injury squarely within the theoretical framework of ontological security studies (OSS).

Our core argument in the following section and more broadly in the present article as stated earlier is that at the heart of the psychological functions that self-injurious behavior fulfills and the affective-emotional purposes that it serves, there is a fundamental quest for ontological security and a primal need to shield an imagined Self against destabilizing, if not crippling, existential anxieties, be they driven from within or enforced from without.

State Self-Harm: Ontological (In)Security, the Lack and Desire

Analytic interrogation of self-harm at the state level is particularly incumbent on OSS as a relatively novel theoretical framework in IR that has demonstrated an exceptionally powerful purchase in explicating collective behaviors that run counter to actors' physical security or material interests, hence self-deleterious and sacrificial in a sense (See Mitzen 2006; Steele 2008; Mitzen & Larson 2017; and Hansen 2016). Indeed, many OSS scholars seem to suggest that the quest for ontological security is generally a pricey pursuit for which agents

tend to go to great lengths and take extraordinary, and somehow self-harming or morally questionable, actions such as recourse to xenophobic nationalism and exclusionary politics (Kinnvall 2004), denial of historical crimes (Zarakol 2010), propagation of civilizational clash discourses (Kazharski 2020), manipulation of national narratives for political purposes (Subotić 2016), populist threat inflation and deployment of "crisis talk" (Homolar & Scholz 2019), emotional governance of anxiety through normalization of masculinist, populist and far-right fantasies (Kinnvall 2019; Kinnvall & Svensson 2022; Kisic Merino & Kinnvall 2023), promotion of racism and white supremacy (Kinnvall & Kisić Merino 2023), and engagement in othering and bordering practices (Kinnvall 2015; Agius 2022; Kinnvall & Svensson 2023).

Most OSS works concerned with the state level of analysis, however, take a metatheoretical shortcut by treating "states as persons" (Wendt 1999; 2004) and then attributing to the resultant "state person" human feelings, affects and emotions such as those of ontological (in)security. Correspondingly, the scaling up from the individual to the state level, which enables the assumption of a state Self, aligns with—and perhaps also inclines those works to embrace—a Laingian-Giddensian understanding of identity and "integral selfhood" where contextual predictability in the form of "basic trust" in the constancy of the social world, consistent autobiographical narratives, and temporal routines ensure a *continuity* of being-in-the-world, that is ontological security (Laing 1960: 39-41; Giddens 1990: 92-96; 1991: 6, 243). An OSS framework thus conceived relies on two presuppositions as it takes for granted the Self of the person, *à la* Laing and Giddens, and thence that of the state, *à la* Wendt, as givens waiting to be secured by the agent in question. The notion of a fixed essential Self is implied in Giddens's assertion that in order to attain ontological security, one needs to "possess, on the level of the unconscious and practical consciousness, 'answers' to fundamental existential questions which all human life in some way addresses" (1991: 47), as if having ready answers at any given time suffices to resolve ontological tensions inherent to the human subject.

Taking cues from Epstein (2011), this inquiry aspires to steer clear of the Giddensian-Wendtian view, which she dismisses as "IR's fallacy of composition," (p. 330) for a number of reasons. First, as Epstein makes it abundantly clear, the Wendtian "state as person" analogy is grounded in biological essentialist thinking that relegates a "pre-social 'rump materialist' self" to the human body as a premise to postulate that the state unit too is similarly pre-social with an essential identity, a move Wendt deems necessary

for his "systemic" social theory of international politics (Ibid: 331-332). Her poststructuralist discourse-oriented critique of Wendtian constructivism ties in neatly with a performative conception of the state as an entity that has "no ontological status apart from the claims, representations, assumptions and routines performing it in political and legal practices" (Grzybowski and Koskenniemi 2015: 29). In contrast to Wendt's pre-given "essential state" as the main point of departure for his systemic analysis, the performative state has no "a priori existence" but in fact comes into being through discursive performances (Vulović 2020: 329-330). Second, while a Giddensian reading of ontological security as *continuity* of being may lend support to explicating certain facets of self-harm, it ultimately proves theoretically hamstrung by foreclosing the possibility of fragmentation, disruption or *discontinuity* so common to the dynamics of self-injurious behavior—represented, *inter alia*, by deflection of the death instinct and, to reiterate Freud's words, the "trend to self-destruction"—as the subject strives to demarcate a radically different space or order of security, a new normal as it were, where she might manage existential anxiety and feel ontologically secure.

These considerations set the stage for adoption of a Lacanian approach to ontological security as "security as/of becoming" or management of an existential state of flux—rather than that of being *à la* Giddens—where existential anxiety is seen as a default feature of the ontologically "lacking" subject and thus warrants celebration as a force of transformative potential that would open up sociopolitical space and spawn new possibilities for alternative thought and creative action (Cash and Kinnvall 2017: 269; Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020: 245-247; See also Rossdale 2015). A similar conclusion, albeit with some qualifications, could be noted in existentialist approaches that instead concentrate on the multimodality of anxiety, classifying it into "normal" and "neurotic," with the former viewed as promising and potentially conducive to creativity and the latter equated with ontological insecurity and considered "highly pathological and debilitating" (Gustafsson and Crickel-Choi 2020: 876-877). In the next part, we will delve into the Lacanian theory of subjectivity for insights on how self-harm may operate as a vehicle for ontological security quests and how this applies as much to states as to persons.

The Lack and the Real, Desire and Fantasy

Theoretical engagement with the security of becoming as an infinite process presupposes inescapability of existential anxiety and relevance of the "death instinct" or "primary masochism" as a facticity of human psyche originating, from a psychoanalytic perspective, in the "*trauma of birth*" as the infant is

separated from the caregiving mother's body before going through "six months of *physiological prematurity*" and eventually through the "*trauma of weanin*g" (Lacan 2006: 152, emphasis in original). More fundamentally for Lacan, however, in contrast to Freud, primal anxiety—and with it desire—is associated with the subject's "lack" of an essential core of identity, unity or fullness which stems from an inner split caused by its entry into a pre-existing Symbolic order that is the locus of language, discourse, signifiers and values.

Reflective of the Freudian "gap of the unconscious"—which Lacan regards "*pre-ontological*" and describes as "neither being, nor non-being" but "something of the order of the *non-realized*" (1998 [1978]: 30, 22)—the "constitutive lack" at the heart of the inherently divided subject suggests two crucial points. First, ontology is constructed around an unrepresentable negativity. In fact, the existence of the lack is the very "condition of possibility" of search for ontology in identification processes (Solomon 2015: 42; Mandelbaum 2023; Epstein 2011). Put otherwise, it is this ontological lack that renders ontological quest relevant in the first place. And second, there is no end to ontological search and no final destination of subjective development as the lacking subject is a "*manque-à-être"* ('want-to-be,' 'want of being' or 'lack of being') invariably involved in the process of becoming through the workings of desire and fantasy (Lacan 1998 [1978]: 29-30, emphasis in original; Green and Vanheule 2023: 2-3; Mandelbaum 2020: 51-52).

The void, split or dividedness is also implicit in Lacan's mathematical illustration of the nature of identity as an entity equal to itself, namely "A = A," which in a sense alludes to the staged process of ego formation in the mirror stage as well, revealing the inevitable doubleness and division of identity rather than its oneness and completion (Vanheule and Verhaeghe 2009). As Lacan postulates it, the infant's identification with herself starts from "a fragmented image of the body" or "fragmented body" (*corps morcelé*) and proceeds to "an 'orthopedic' form of its totality," that is its "imago-gestalt," in the mirror or in the eyes of the other/Other (2006: 78). Even though this specular image is the first representation for the infant of a bounded body distinct from the body of the other/Other, the A of the mirror image and the imaginary "*Innerwelt*" ('inner world' or interior space) that it occupies is not exactly the same A of the embodied subject outside of it and the "*Umwelt*" ("outer environment") within which it is situated. Therefore, the subject comes to a false or "fictional" conception—"paranoiac knowledge" in Lacan's words—of the Self as unified and whole (Ibid: 76-77; See also Mandelbaum 2020: 52-53).

This means the primitive ego or "*I/me*" that emerges from the specular image in fact does so through an act of "misrecognition" (*méconnaissance*) characterized by the illusion of wholeness and autonomy that passes for an inner essence and lays the grounds for alienation in part because of its dependence on identifications that are extracted from the other/Other—usually the mother. "At the core of the ego," Green and Vanheule (2023: 7) explain, "is the mistaken belief that we are equivalent to our image; thus, the ego provides a protective but alienating identity"—what Lacan refers to as the "donned armor of an alienating identity" (2006: 78). Alienation is not only a product of the Imaginary register as a site of illusions and images, but it is also "a basic condition for the formation of subjectivity" within the Symbolic order (Kinnvall and Svensson 2018: 906). For Lacan, alienation is the first effect of the "imago" for it is "in the other that the subject first identifies himself and even experiences himself" (2006: 148; See also Hook 2018: 21-23). And alienation breeds ontological anxiety in a trajectory of becoming whereby the "specular *I"* turns into the "social *I."* In other words, the specular image of the body, as Verhaeghe (2004: 219) elaborates, "forms the basic layer of identity, the first alienation in the mirror stage on top of which all further alienations through the signifier of the Other will be stacked."

The highest form of existential anxiety transpires, however, in encounter with or experience of "the Real," which Lacan describes as "the lack of the lack," a traumatic component that amounts to the very category of the "impossible" (Lacan 1998 [1978]: ix, 166-167; Botting 1994: 24, 29). It is "perhaps best understood as that which has not yet been symbolized, remains to be symbolized, or even resists symbolization" (Fink cited in Kinnvall and Svensson 2023: 3-4). It is a space or "plane" on which "this other plane," namely the Symbolic, is inscribed through language (Lacan 1988a: 262). Thus located beyond the realm of the Symbolic and all systems of signification and reference, the Real is some sort, as it were, of an unlocatable blackhole, an unknown that we know "is there" but which indefinitely eludes any attempt at knowing it. It is, more specifically in Lacan's words, that "essential object which isn't an object any longer, but that something faced with which all words cease and all categories fail, the object of anxiety *par excellence*" (1988b: 164). This is exactly why the Real has a traumatic nature that daunts language, desecrates discourse and defies discretion. Botting articulates it pithily here:

> In psychoanalysis, the missed encounter with the real recalls the effects of trauma, a trauma inassimilable to consciousness, forming the lost origin of neurosis and the basis of neurotic repetition…The real mocks discourse, taunts it with the impossibility of an end or closure, teases it with an excess that can

> never be recovered for meaning…How can one write or speak about the unspeakable? (1994: 24-26).

Self-injury, enacted on the plane of flesh, is one answer to this question, albeit ultimately abortive. To put it at greater length, in the face of the traumatic force of the Real and its resistance to iteration and symbolization, the subject senses her ontological lack, which prompts her into embarking on a struggle to locate and capture it, but precisely because the lack is lacking, nowhere to be found and fixed in psychic or social spheres, she turns back on her own body, as if to make a "cut" into the Real and inscribe it into the Symbolic. Insofar as self-harm becomes a valve to escape these traumatic effects and a vehicle to cope with paralyzing anxiety in their wake, it functions as a source of ontological security and paves the way for its attainment even though it never fully succeeds in achieving it. Crucially, such a move is enabled by "desire" and the yearning for its constantly-sought-after yet unattainable object-cause or *objet petit a*, "a privileged object which has emerged from some primal separation, from some self-mutilation induced by the very approach of the real" (Lacan 1998 [1978]: 83; See also Mandelbaum 2023). A fantasy object originally constituted by lack and represented later in various forms through signifiers of the other/Other in the Imaginary as well as Symbolic registers, *object a* thus belongs to the order of the Real, resistant to symbolization. "This coincidence of emergence and loss, of course," according to Žižek, "designates the fundamental paradox of the Lacanian *objet petit a* which emerges as being-lost…the process in which the object is first given and then gets lost" (1997: 15). Characterized paradoxically by both presence and absence, *object a* operates as the unconscious propelling engine of desire that is to be distinguished from "need" and "demand" with which, nonetheless, the former has a dialectical relationship.

Need is a biological instinct that requires satisfaction for perpetuation of organic life, and in order for needs to be satisfied they have to be articulated as demands via the "discourse of the Other" in the Symbolic that inevitably overwrites its dictates on how they are to be enunciated and gratified. Yet, the (m)Other's responsive presence to meet those demands unconsciously inclines the subject to want far more than instinctual need gratification, rendering them unconditional demands for infinite presence of the (m)Other in the form of love. Demand thus "annuls *(aufhebt)* the particularity of everything that can be granted, by transmuting it into a proof of love" (Lacan 2006: 580). However, because such "unconditionality of demand" for fullness and fulfillment, or perfect ontological security as it were, on the part of the Other is impossible, it

is substituted by the conditionality of desire. “This is why,” as Lacan points out, “desire is neither the appetite for satisfaction nor the demand for love, but the difference that results from the subtraction of the first from the second” (Ibid). The Lacanian notion that “demand – need = desire” also helps explain its endless drift from object to object along the chain of signifiers. The raison d'être of desire, in the words of Žižek, “is not to realize its goal, to find full satisfaction, but to reproduce itself as desire" (1997: 39).

Lastly, what makes reproduction of desire possible and keeps desire from fading away is fantasy. The “fundamental use” of fantasy, according to Lacan, is to enable the subject to maintain himself “at the level of his vanishing desire, vanishing inasmuch as the very satisfaction of demand deprives him of his object” (2006: 532). Thus directed towards *objet petit a* as the fantasmatic object cause of desire and *jouissance* (enjoyment), fantasy is a schema or story that connects the subject to sociopolitical reality and serves to concretize or particularize his irreparable ontological lack and irrecoverable loss of *jouissance* into the absence of a certain empirical object, such as a sexual partner, a national victory, an ideological objective and so on, whose imaginary or real recapture then falsely yet usefully promises accomplishment of wholeness (Glynos and Stavrakakis 2008: 262; Eberle 2019: 245-47; Zevnik 2023). Fantasies help indefinitely defer our encounter with the constitutive lack by allowing us as social actors situated in the significatory structures of the Symbolic order to gloss over the unattainability of a unique and complete identity. As such, they order the “affective” properties of the lacking subject, organizing “the way it desires and enjoys,” and therefore keeping the otherwise omnipresent anxiety of alienation and ontological insecurity thereof at bay (Glynos and Stavrakakis 2008: 263; Zevnik 2017: 629).

Fantasies comprise, as Glynos demonstrates, three core components including a narrative form or structure with utopian (“beatific”) and dystopian (“horrific”) iterations, a “foundational guarantee” of protection against uncertainty or contingency, and an inherent element of transgression against officially sanctioned ideals (2008: 287). Self-injury, by this account, has a clearly fantasmatic function in that on the one hand it dampens the death drive as a compromise mechanism, *à la* Freudian “pleasure principle,” in the face of traumatic activation and on the other it actualizes a self-transgression beyond sociosymbolic prohibitions, “beyond the pleasure principle” as it were, in search of the lost *jouissance*, an uninhibited sense of enjoyment that the subject has had to renounce as a condition of entry into the Symbolic. Given subjective transgression of the limits of pleasure in the quest for *jouissance* is fraught with

pain and "suffering" (Lacan 1992: 183-85; See also Lacan 2006: 53; Hook 2017: 607-8, 612-14), self-injurious behavior provides the subject with a taste of *jouissance* as she is fantasizing her way out of a crisis of ontology at the intersection of the body and the sociosymbolic world of the Other, as indicated earlier (See Zevnik 2023). In other words, self-harm is fantasy (re)articulated and (re)inscribed on the flesh that helps maintain unconscious desire for a state-space of ontological security where fullness of (a fantasized) Self is supposed to be achieved and total enjoyment or *jouissance* to be experienced, a desire that thus carries on reproducing itself without ever reaching its end destination. Self-injury, in sum, is a psychic mechanism of trauma management and fantasy reanimation aimed at acquiring ontological security, a mechanism which sacrifices the flesh to salvage a fantasized Self.

Now how can we apply this affective-fantasmatic process of Self-recreation to a collective actor like the state without the essentialist reduction of the social to the individual (See Stavrakakis 1999: 3)? Put differently, how may the concept and its attendant emotions and affects travel across different levels of analysis? The way forward is to be sought in the realm of political subjectivity, marked by the "hyper-individualized" category of desire on the one hand and the social category of discourse—which mediates desire and thus splits the subject—on the other (Epstein 2011: 335-336). It is within the Symbolic order, the sphere of the Other, of discourse and language, that the subject constitutes her (perpetually unfulfilled) Self through speaking, signification and symbolization (Stavrakakis 1999: 29). Considering the pivotal role of "speaking" in the formation of Self, Epstein (2011) relies on "discourse theory" to appraise state agency and identity, posing the question of "who speaks?" and distinguishing between "subject-positions" and "subjectivities" to answer it. Since "talking" is so central to what states do and who they are, a focus on discursively produced subject-positions, "the I/we of a discourse," allows for a non-reductionist analysis of state identity "while bracketing issues of subjectivity" which is "a much more extensive, and consequently unwieldy, category where all the hyper-individualized characteristics of identity are relegated" including affects and emotions; in sum, in Epstein's words, "subject-positions constitute identities *minus* subjectivities" (Ibid: 343).

While Epstein's emphasis on discursive subject-positions or "who speaks" is undoubtedly useful in enabling us to analyze identity at the state level, it comes at the expense of leaving out the question of "who feels." It is indeed theoretically problematic to attribute "feelings" to states and claim that states "feel" in the same way as we attribute statements to them and claim that they

"speak" by recourse to subject-positions, exactly because "social actors, that is, political *subjectivities* cannot be reduced to being discursive phenomena" (Ibid: p. 343, emphasis in original). In fact, feelings, emotions and affects are an inherent part of any political subjectivity and ultimately manifest themselves in subject-positions. Metaphorically speaking, political subjectivity may be envisaged as an iceberg of which subject-position is the tip, and it is the tip that alerts us to the workings of what is underneath. We might not be able to determine "who feels" as clearly as we are able to determine "who speaks" at the state level, but since emotions are clearly implicated in the articulation of subject-positions, representations, practices and performances that constitute the state, the latter hold the key to appraising those emotions and, by extension, its political subjectivity. When Britain says it is "alarmed" or "appalled" at a development, all those representing the British state are taken to espouse the feelings of alarm or shock at that development regardless of how they might individually feel, and the audience realizes by observing the connection between Britain as a state and the discursively expressed emotions that if a certain policy decision or course of action ensues with respect to that development, those emotions are part of what has induced it. By the same token, an inquiry into self-harm at the state level needs to draw out the emotions and affects that inform the political subjectivity and Self-concept of a given state actor in order to make sense of such sacrificial practices and what drives them.

In the following section, the January 2020 downing of the Ukraine International Airlines Flight 752 (PS752) by the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC), Iran's most powerful state military body, will be interrogated through Lacanian lenses and in light of the theoretical framework laid out above.

State Self-Harm and Iran's Shootdown of Civilian Flight PS752

On 8 January 2020, a civilian passenger plane operated by Ukraine International Airlines and flying from Tehran to Kyiv crashed shortly after takeoff from Imam Khomeini International Airport in the Iranian capital, leaving all 176 people onboard dead. While there were citizens from Canada, Sweden, Britain, Ukraine and Afghanistan among the deceased, Iranian nationals accounted for the majority of its 167 passengers. After days of silence and denial, the IRGC eventually admitted responsibility for the deadly crash, blaming "human error" behind the "unintentional" launch of two surface-to-air missiles that brought down the civilian aircraft (Helsel and Arouzi 2020).

The "human error" or unintentionality thesis was highly dubious from the outset due to the state's earlier misrepresentations and cover-up before admission of guilt and the implausibility of claims that the Boeing airliner was mistaken by trained air defense personnel for a "cruise missile" aimed at a key target in Tehran, hence engaged (The Association of Families 2021: 63).

Indeed, the PS752 downing took place on the same day as—more precisely, only a few hours after—the Revolutionary Guards struck the Ain al-Assad military base in Iraq that housed American forces with a number of ballistic missiles in retaliation for the surprising US assassination on 3 January, five days earlier, of Iran's most iconic military commander Qassem Soleimani near Baghdad. Understandably, there were grave concerns among Iranian leaders about a possible US military response to the retaliatory missile strikes and the outbreak of a full-fledged conflict between the two traditional enemies as a consequence. These worries were explicitly revealed later in a private meeting between the IRGC commander-in-chief Hossein Salami and family members of some of the victims, suggesting that the PS752 shootdown was *intentionally* carried out to prevent all-out war, further debunking the "human error" hypothesis. "Do you know what status your [fallen] children hold and that they have an even more paramount position than martyrs on a literal battlefront?" Salami was quoted by parents of two flight victims as asking during that meeting (BBC Persian 2022). "Do you know that had it not been for them, what a [disastrous] war could happen? Had it not been for this incident, 10 million people would have been killed, but this occurrence caused such a war not to transpire." In brief, as many state critics and families of victims have since stressed, the Ukrainian civilian airliner with a majority of Iranian passengers was used as a "human shield" and shot down to prevent possible war between the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI) and the United States.

With these details in mind, the PS752 downing may be designated as a clear case of a state *sacrificing* its citizens to salvage its sovereignty, that is of state self-injury. Yet emphasis on "war prevention" as the chief motive behind it—that supposedly prompted the IRI to use the civilian flight as a "human shield"—does not adequately capture why and how the Iranian state turned on its own nationals and sacrificed scores of them in the process. After all, the likelihood of war with the US in the wake of IRGC's missile attacks could be managed and minimized via far less extraordinary measures as well. Moreover, such a likelihood was not at all strong in the first place as, according to subsequent leaks and reports (Abdul-Zahra and Abdul-Hassan 2020), Iran had informed Americans of its plans through the Iraqi government *prior to*

launching the retaliatory strikes, leaving sufficient time for the US military to evacuate the Ain al-Assad base or take shelter, which is why no American soldier was killed or even severely injured as a consequence. In other words, the IRGC struck a "vacant" base in reprisal, and knowingly so. Again, the main question that begs answering is why and how an extraordinary act of citizen sacrifice on such a grand scale came to pass.

The key to grasping Iran's deliberate shootdown of an Iranian-majority airliner lies in the deep trauma that the unexpected elimination of Soleimani in a drone strike triggered, evoking a whole chain of other traumas that have defined the Iranian state's enmity with the United States, its chief other, and correspondingly its revolutionary Self-concept since the 1979 revolution. An event "experienced too soon, too unexpectedly, to be fully known" to the consciousness, trauma is a wound of the psyche that points to the "oscillation between a *crisis of death* and the correlative *crisis of life*: between the story of the unbearable nature of an event and the story of the unbearable nature of its survival" (Caruth 1996: 4-7, emphasis in original). One such traumatic experience that the Soleimani assassination resurrected in the Iranian political subjectivity was the US downing of the Iran Air passenger flight 655 over the Persian Gulf waters on 3 July 1988 (See Gambrell 2020). The airliner, an Airbus A300, was targeted with two surface-to-air missiles from American navy cruiser USS Vincennes, killing all 290 onboard including 274 passengers. Consummating deeper US involvement in the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988)—exemplified by Operation Nimble Archer in October 1987 and Operation Praying Mantis in April 1988 against Iranian assets in the Persian Gulf—the shootdown of Iran Air aircraft played an undeniable role in compelling the Islamic Republic to accept the UNSC ceasefire resolution 598 shortly afterwards in August that officially ended the 8-year-long war with Iraq (Pollack 2005).

Against this backdrop and with regards to the theoretical framework above, the Iranian state's decision to shoot down PS752 was an act of "compulsion to repeat," elicited by the traumatic Soleimani assassination and directed inwards, pretty much echoing the US shootdown of Iran Air flight 655. It was a psychic mechanism of trauma management and affect regulation activated to check the death drive and destructive impulses that the abrupt elimination of Iran's most symbolic military figure had unleashed and the promises of "harsh revenge" against the United States clearly represented (See Aljazeera 2020). In other words, had the Iranian sovereign subject let loose those destructive urges and thus taken the potentially suicidal action of striking a populated and "full"

rather than evacuated and "empty" American base in retaliation without prior notification—which would have likely resulted in a full-blown war with the United States—the repetition compulsion that led to the self-injurious downing of PS752 would have most probably been kept at bay. The act of self-injury perpetrated by the Iranian state was therefore both a response to a traumatic experience and a way to manage the traumatic memories that the former evoked. Yet, this is only one dimension of the self-harming shootdown.

The bigger trauma for the state subject was not the unexpected humiliating loss of its most influential military commander to hostile action by an archenemy, but the realization of its "lack" in the wake of such action. The Soleimani assassination trauma provided the IRI with an unprecedented historic opportunity to fulfill its fantasized anti-American revolutionary Self by, say, taking meaningful revenge on the US forces in the region, but the inability to do so, to achieve the fullness of its Self as a revolutionary subject and become whole, confronted it with its ontological lack. From a Lacanian perspective, the void was visible nowhere more clearly than in the "vacant" base that Iran targeted in reprisal, but that void or vacancy was only a specular image reflecting a split subject and an unfulfilled identity, with the lack itself in the revolutionary subjectivity impossible to locate and fill up. The lack was there but nowhere to be found and fixed. To employ Lacanian terminology, the lack was lacking, giving rise to the trauma of the Real as the ultimately futile quest for wholeness instigated a desire to salvage the fantasized Self from the traumatic experience of that encounter. The failure to achieve the singularity of what had been fantasized as a full Self was a moment of intense and intolerable ontological insecurity for the revolutionary subject.

Striking a military base as a potent signifier of the Other was the Iranian sovereign subject's attempted employment of the Symbolic to avoid facing the Real, to "cancel [it] out" and create "reality" (Fink cited in Kinnvall and Svensson 2023: 4). Yet since this act of symbolization necessarily failed, the traumatic crisis of the Real endured. Faced with its ontological lack and subjective fragmentation, reflected and foregrounded by the specular image of a hollow base on the one hand and the inevitable failure to locate that lack in its subjectivity and thus escape the trauma of the Real on the other, Iran turned back on its own, sacrificing the flesh to salvage the Self fantasy. Revealing the fantasmatic function of state self-harm to recreate a full sovereign Self, the PS752 shootdown demonstrates how the desire for wholeness and ontological security, was sustained through fantasy production: a civilian plane "full" of passengers passed unconsciously as a perfect substitute for an "empty" base whose successful targeting subsequently proved to the sovereign revolutionary

subject that a full, unique and stable identity was within reach, *not just yet*. Notably, the desire for fullness is above all represented by the "revenge" discourse (See Perez et al. 2024), as Iran keeps reviving promises of punishment against those responsible for the Soleimani elimination such as the former US President Donald Trump, a promise that feels into a fantasy of the Self and will probably never be carried out.

Conclusion

This article is a characteristically interdisciplinary endeavor to bring theoretical insights about self-harm in psychoanalysis to bear on IR theory in general and ontological security studies in particular, specifically drawing attention to those sacrificial practices whereby states direct violence against their own nationals. Such practices are not uncommon in world politics and international history, and the present writing seeks to demonstrate that the concept of self-injury, grounded as it is in a rich psychoanalytic literature, can furnish us with sharper theoretical tools to problematize and deconstruct acts of self-directed state violence. To this end, we have drawn on Freudian psychoanalysis and especially Lacanian theory of the subject to develop a theoretical framework that allows for traversing various levels of analysis and analyzing state-level self-injurious behavior as desire for ontological security. The principal argument presented here is that acts of citizen sacrifice on the part of a sovereign subject allude to a desire for ontological security that is never achieved yet sustained by keeping alive the notion of a fantasized Self.

The article examines the concepts of ontological lack, the trauma of the Real, and political subjectivity with reference to self-harm at the state level before deploying them to analyze why and how the Iranian state resorted to the high-casualty shootdown of civilian flight PS752 on the night of its "harsh revenge" against the United States for the traumatic assassination of IRGC Quds Force commander Qassem Soleimani. Shedding light on the psychic drivers of such self-injurious behavior which involves considerable sacrifice of "flesh" and loss of life, the analysis highlights a theoretical potential that transcends the empirical case in question and may be applied to other instances of self-directed political violence in international relations. Scrutinizing, for example, what emotional modes of governance, strategic cultures of statecraft and epistemic discourses of knowledge-power facilitate or otherwise hinder these acts of state self-injury could be one avenue of inquiry for future research. Another ambitious project of scholarship in this respect would be an

international history of state self-harm, with significant implications for IR theory and our understanding of it moving forward.

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Article IV

Strategic Ambivalence as Ontological Security: Iran and the Russia-Ukraine War

(Under review with a Revise & Resubmit decision)

Abstract

Due to its close association with uncertainty, undecidability, indeterminacy and "strangeness," ambivalence is typically regarded as a major source of ontological insecurity and anxiety. Dwelling in ambivalence and developing what has been termed "the art of doubt" is thus hailed as a necessary and ineluctable mode of being, relating and acting in a globalized world fraught with risk, unpredictability and vulnerability. While ontological security studies (OSS) has usefully engaged with the concept of ambivalence as such and its manifestations in international politics such as the position occupied by "strangers," almost no attention has been paid to deliberate strategization of affective ambivalence by state actors through narrative deployments and representations, or *strategic ambivalence*. Inspired by Melanie Klein's psychoanalytic notion of splitting in schizoid mechanisms and Jacques Lacan's theorization of Self-Other relations in the dialectic of desire, this article seeks to fill the lacuna and investigate the question of how (opting for) ambivalence may operate as a vehicle for ontological security. It argues that strategic ambivalence, represented by simultaneous confirmation/approval and rejection/denial of a certain deed or object, constitutes a double-sided quest for identity affirmation, that is positive (and conscious) furtherance of an identity which aligns with the deed through *introjection* by the Self and negative (and unconscious) defense of an identity that collides with the deed through desiring for its *recognition* by the Other. Strategic ambivalence thus allows actors to accommodate self-contradictory patterns of behavior and uphold conflicting self-identities while mitigating anxieties and insecurities arising from ontological shame, autobiographical dissonance and behavioral self-contradiction. To instantiate its theoretical propositions, the article proceeds to interrogate the Islamic Republic of Iran's controversial intervention in the Russia-Ukraine War on behalf of the Russian aggressor, which it has *both* confirmed *and* denied in an attempt to manage contradictions of its anti-Western and anti-aggression identities through strategic ambivalence.

Introduction

Those who follow international political and security developments in the news media are likely to come across occasions where politicians and spokespersons refuse to comment on certain subjects and their respective states' relations to or involvement in them. This calculated silence that usually manifests itself in a "no comments" policy and a tendency to "neither deny nor confirm" engagement in an outcome or activity may signify efforts to eschew conflicts of interest but it also often speaks, more significantly, to a desire to placate a sense of affective unease about committing to contradictory practices and self-identities, of "ontological dissonance" in other words (Lupovici 2012). Perhaps less common yet equally significant is when international actors choose to send "mixed signals" about morally contentious or dubious courses of action and thus somehow *both deny and confirm* involvement in them, a type of foreign policy conduct partly captured by the term "plausible deniability" as an instrument of statecraft (Poznansky 2022). The choice for mixed signals, of simultaneous narrative dismissal and confirmation, opposition and approval, indicates above all a preference for projecting and nestling in affective ambivalence.

A contemporary case in point is Iran's representation of its controversial engagement in the Russia-Ukraine war to support the Russian aggressor against NATO-allied Ukraine, boasting of close military cooperation with Moscow in congruence with its anti-Western identity (Motamedi 2023; Al Mayadeen 2023) yet at the same time repudiating any involvement in it in defence of its anti-aggression self-concept. "Those who accuse Iran of providing weapons to one of the sides in the Ukraine war are doing so for political purposes," Iranian Foreign Ministry spokesperson Nasser Kanaani said on the second anniversary of the invasion in response to questions about Tehran's military deliveries to Russia. "We have not given any drones [or missiles] to take part in that war" (Hafezi et al. 2024). Due to its close association with uncertainty, undecidability, indeterminacy and "strangeness," ambivalence is typically regarded as a major source of ontological insecurity and anxiety (Huysmans 1998; Van Leeuwen 2008). Dwelling in epistemic ambivalence and developing what has been termed "the art of doubt" (Beck 1997) is thus hailed as a necessary and ineluctable mode of being, relating and acting in a globalized world fraught with risk, unpredictability and vulnerability (Cash 2016).

While ontological security studies (OSS) has usefully engaged with the phenomenon of epistemic ambivalence as such and its manifestations in

international politics such as the position occupied by "strangers" (Berenskötter and Nymalm 2021), almost no attention has been paid to deliberate instrumentalization and strategization of affective ambivalence by state actors in the form of narratives and narrative representations for ideational and ontological ends—what we dub *strategic ambivalence* here. The present writing thus differentiates between two forms of often interconnected ambivalence for purposes of better analytical clarity: *epistemic* and *affective*. Epistemic (or epistemological) ambivalence is the kind of knowledge-related ambivalence encountered in the social world, which ontological security research in IR has concerned itself with for the most part. Affective ambivalence, on the other hand, is emotionally based and of particular interest to psychoanalysis and psychology proper. With this distinction in mind, strategic ambivalence, as will be unpacked later, is meant to refer to an agent's narrative renditions and discursive strategization of *affective* ambivalence at the service of ontological security aims. The principal questions this inquiry seeks to answer are why, from an OSS perspective, actors opt for affective ambivalence in their foreign policy behaviors and choose to send mixed signals about certain issues or events, and how strategic ambivalence thus informed may operate as a vehicle for pursuit of ontological security.

Inspired by Melanie Klein's psychoanalytic notion of subjective "splitting" in schizoid mechanisms (1996 [1946]; 1975 [1952]) and Jacques Lacan's theorization of Self-Other relations in the dialectic of desire (1988, 1998, 2006), the article argues that strategic ambivalence, represented by simultaneous narrative confirmation/approval and rejection/denial of a certain deed or course of action, constitutes a double-sided quest for self-identity affirmation. It comprises, on the one hand, positive (and conscious) furtherance of an identity which aligns with the deed through "introjection" by the Self and, on the other, negative (and unconscious) defense of an identity that collides with the deed through pursuit of its "recognition" by the Other. Strategic ambivalence thus allows actors to accommodate self-contradictory patterns of behavior and uphold conflicting self-identities while mitigating anxieties and insecurities arising from ontological shame, autobiographical dissonance and behavioral self-contradiction (See Steele 2005, 2008 and Lupovici 2012). In other words, strategizing ambivalence or "straddling" (Jacobsen 2016) in the practice of social interactions and especially in narrative representation of those practices is not only a political attempt to have the cake and eat it too, so to speak, but also an affective identity strategy to shield a fantasized Self against feelings of ontological insecurity that such paradoxical acts and efforts entail.

This writing proceeds in three major sections. First, we will provide an investigative review of scholarship on ambivalence as a source of ontological insecurity in existing IR theory and OSS literature, tracing its roots back to the sociological thoughts of Zygmunt Bauman on modernity (1990, 1991). The next part will investigate the concept of strategic ambivalence through psychoanalytic lenses, relying primarily on Kleinian and Lacanian theories of the schizoid and desiring subject to illustrate how it may be deliberately deployed by actors in pursuit of ontological security and as an affective-narrative identity strategy to placate anxieties stemming from self-contradiction. These theoretical propositions will inform, in the last section, the empirical analysis of Iran's involvement in the Russia-Ukraine war to delineate what identities such contentious behavior upholds and what self-conceptions it undermines, and how purposeful projection of ambivalence enables the state subject to carve out a space of agency where it is possible to contradict and negate the Self without suffering affective paralysis or collapsing into ontological chaos.

(Epistemic) Ambivalence as Ontological Insecurity

It is perhaps no coincidence that the first serious, albeit brief, engagement with the idea of ambivalence in International Relations theory appeared in an inquiry into the concept of security. In his seminal work on security and its discursive formation as a "thick signifier," Huysmans (1998) draws attention to the "hermeneutic problem" posed by the failure of the act of ordering itself when we face "undecidables" in the social world such as "strangers" who are neither friends nor enemies, neither insiders nor outsiders, but in fact somehow both. "They articulate ambivalence and therefore challenge the (modern) ordering activity which relies on reducing ambiguity and uncertainty by categorizing elements" (241). These inherently ambivalent forces that resist discursive determinability and defy symbolic categorization are thus a source of ontological insecurity *par excellence*, exposing the limits of reflexivity and intelligibility as they do (Ibid: 242-243). They threaten a stable, continuous and bounded sense of Self as distinct from the Other and "differentiated from the rest of the world" yet "coextensive with the body", which Laing (1960: 41) assumes to be core requirements of ontological security. In other words, as Giddens (1990: 92-96) maintains, what is destabilized and disrupted here is the unconscious sense of "confidence" subjects are supposed to have both in the "continuity" of Self or their internal identities and in the "constancy" of Others, or their external environment. In this sense, epistemic ambivalence embodied by strangers and foreigners, confounds our efforts to find, "on the level of the

unconscious and practical consciousness, 'answers' to fundamental existential questions which all human life in some way addresses" (Giddens 1991: 47).

From Stigmatized Other to Liminal Stranger

In light of this strong linkage between ambivalence and ontological insecurity, the former has been as insightfully spotted in collective identification processes and explored in the OSS literature in various ways. In her groundbreaking work on stigma in IR, Zarakol (2011) teases out Norbert Elias's "established-outsider" figuration (1994) in the historical context of East-West relations, demonstrating how occupying the "ambivalent" position of non-Western status while aspiring for Western standards of civilization has caused post-imperial Eastern states—Turkey, Japan and Russia in the study—to be stigmatized as "outsiders" by the "established" Western states in the modern international system. Drawing on Erving Goffman's conceptualization of stigma—as an internalized mark of discredit imposed from outside (1963)—and Bauman's sociology of the stranger as an "excluded Other" (1991: 68), she contends that "states which fall short of the normative ideals of international society at any given time can be (and have been) stigmatized—in other words, tainted and discounted, both in the minds of others and their own" (2011: 63). Even though Zaraol does not directly delve into the concept of ambivalence, her stigmatization thesis connects it with the affect of "shame" and ontological insecurity at the collective level in that being stigmatized "as an outsider", she points out, "has serious costs and leaves a permanent mark on the national habitus" (ibid: 22). A similar line of argument could be tracked in Çapan and Zarakol's (2019) work on ontological insecurities of the "non-Western Self" where Turkey's "ambivalent" identity and liminal sense of place as a bridge between East and West is scrutinized in terms of spatial/"structural insecurity" and "temporal insecurity" by contrasting "Kemalist" and "Erdoganist" responses to them.

Picking up on these theoretical cues about anxieties of divided Selves, Vieira (2018) sets out to theorize postcolonial subjectivity from a Lacanian perspective, zooming in on the ontological lack at the core of the "ambivalent/hybrid" subject who is torn by an "ever-present desire to emulate but also resist the 'ego-ideal'" of the Western Other (143). Vieira's analysis of Brazil's postcolonial ontological (in)security has significant implications for our understanding of ambivalence as he uniquely uses the phenomenon to instantiate Lacan's theory of the split subject and the lack of a core of identity caused by its entrance into the Symbolic (colonizer-dominated international) order. For him, the ambivalence "between being and not being

Western/modern" constitutes postcolonial states' autobiographical narratives and is embedded into their foreign policy practices (ibid: 146). Accordingly, one may posit, ambivalence generates affective unease and ontological insecurity *not only* because it troubles our tendency to order, structure and categorize external reality, as represented by strangers or foreigners, *but also* because it implies division, fissure and splitting within the ambivalent subject itself. What arises from such a theoretical consideration is a broader understanding of the concept, that is, both as indeterminacy and as dividedness (See Frankfurt 1988, 1998). Pertinently, in the latter sense in particular, ambivalence also connotes a state of overlap or, more precisely, liminality as an in-between and threshold space of ambiguity, blurriness and hybridity where "established structures are dislocated, hierarchies reversed, and traditional settings of authority possibly endangered" (Mälksoo 2012: 481; See also Rumelili 2012: 496-498). The ambiguous and disconcerting nature of ambivalent states thus understood is due to the fact that they do not lend themselves to the network of sociopolitical and cultural designations since "liminal entities are neither here nor there; they are betwixt and between the positions assigned and arrayed by law, custom, convention, and ceremonial" (Turner 1977 [1969]: 95; See also Combes 2016).

The IR literature on epistemic ambivalence encompasses almost all these conceptual dimensions of the term as the most elaborate theoretical treatment of it to date, with special focus on the figure of "the Stranger," demonstrates. In their astute effort to turn the analytical spotlight on the concept, "understood as a figure representing ambiguity and triggering feelings of ambivalence," Berenskötter and Nymalm (2021) primarily concentrate on how state subjects may construe each other as strangers and how they may respond to such encounters and interpretations (20). Differentiating between sociological and phenomenological readings of the Stranger, as the epitome of ambivalence that defies familiar friend-enemy classifications and as an evasive "uncanny experience more generally," they delineate three expressions of strangerhood in interstate relations: the encounter with "rising powers" in the eyes of the hegemon, the disappearance of enmity between actors who used to have an antagonistic relationship and the fading of friendship between close allies (Ibid: 29). In all three scenarios, they contend, it is the experience of ambivalence as a consequence of facing a so-far-familiar and "close" Other who then moves to an unfamiliar and "distant" zone that spawns sentiments of ontological insecurity for the Self (For more, see Simmel 1950: 402-408).

The Inescapability of Epistemic Ambivalence

The ontological (in)security approach to ambivalence as a categorically "disordering," hence psychologically unsettling, phenomenon derives for the most part from the sociological theory of modernity developed by Zygmunt Bauman who defines it primarily in terms of an intrinsic and natural linguistic (mal)function:

> Ambivalence, the possibility of assigning an object or an event to more than one category, is a language-specific disorder: a failure of the naming (segregating) function that language is meant to perform. The main symptom of disorder is the acute discomfort we feel when we are unable to read the situation properly and to choose between alternative actions. It is because of the anxiety that accompanies it and the indecision which follows that we experience ambivalence as a disorder…Ambivalence is therefore the *alter ego* of language, and its permanent companion—indeed, its normal condition (1991: 1, emphasis in original).

To instantiate ambivalence, characterized by undecidability and indetermination, Bauman (1990: 145-46) cites a number of linguistic examples from Jacques Derrida such as *pharmakon* (a generic Greek term that denotes both remedy and poison), *hymen* (another Greek word standing for "both membrane and marriage"), and *supplement* (a French term meaning both an addition and a replacement), which all share the position of neither the inside nor the outside. "Undecidables are all *neither/nor*, that is, simultaneously, *either/or*," he asserts. "They bring the outside into the inside, and poison the comfort of order with suspicion of chaos. This is exactly what the strangers do" (Ibid: 146).

Bauman then irrevocably politicizes the argument by bringing in the modern national state which, according to him, is "*designed primarily to deal with the problem of strangers, not enemies*" (Ibid: 153, emphasis in original). It is therefore in important part through eliminating ambivalence and the "industrial waste," as it were, of strangers that the modern state in its role as a "collective gardener" creates the modern existence, marked by order and "the Other of order" i.e. chaos, and provides its members with ontological security and existential assurance (Ibid: 154-55, 165). Designing, structuring or ordering thus becomes the single most decisive benchmark of sovereignty as well, exercised by an agent that has been rendered a state in the first place by virtue of an initial act of ordering, that is territorial separation and organization. "Agencies," for Bauman, "are sovereign inasmuch as they claim and defend the right to manage and administer existence: the right to define order and, by implication set aside chaos, as the leftover that escapes the definition" (Ibid: 165). In other words, the very exercise of sovereignty is the primary means by

which the state seeks not only to guarantee the ontological security of the persons under its tutelage but also to secure its own "Self" in terms of personhood (Krickel-Choi 2024; See also Wendt 2004) as well as "body politic," physical security and territorial integrity (Krickel-Choi 2022). Such a move, above all, involves extermination of ambivalence as a fundamental source of chaos, epistemological as well as psychological.

It is crucial to point out, however, that ambivalence is not solely a socially constructed phenomenon. Unlike the native who is born "into" a community setting, the stranger does not, by default, enjoy the state of "being situated" or "tuned." The stranger, in this sense, is "his own problem," self-constructed as such: regardless of being alien to the graduated knowledge of the community shared by the natives and no matter how hard she strives to assimilate the native knowledge, her "*incongruent existential constitution*...as neither *included* nor *excluded*" makes her escape from strangerhood impossible, a process of which she, of course, actively and inevitably so, partakes (Bauman 1991: 75-77, emphasis in original). A stranger is defined *a priori* as a stranger rather than becoming one *a posteriori* or after being defined. Put otherwise, one does not *become* a stranger but *is* one, thanks to her inescapable ontological and existential position. "One cannot knock on a door," in Bauman's words, "unless one is outside; and it is the act of knocking on the door which alerts the residents to the fact that one who knocks is indeed outside" (Ibid: 78).

In response to encounters with ambivalence as a wellspring of psychological discomfort, scholars have proposed strategies that share the common denominator of treating strangeness, liminality, and ambiguity as an all-encompassing universal "condition of the social" (Rumford 2016: 509; Marotta 2012), as an opportunity for, rather than a threat to, identity formation which thereby steers clear of dualist friend-enemy frameworks (Huysmans 1998; Combes 2016; Berenskötter and Nymalm 2021). Along these lines, Cash draws on Ulrich Beck's conceptualization of "reflexive doubt" versus "linear doubt" and John Keats' notion of "negative capability" to invite us "to dwell in ambivalence" as a "capacity to resist the lure of ready-made certainties" (2016: 172-173). For Beck, reflexive doubt in particular is about "break[ing] the energy of truth, which drives doubt to despair" and thus his "art of doubt" consists primarily in developing the ability to not only accept doubt as "an element of life like air and water" but also to learn to doubt doubt itself: "To doubt completely, doubting down even the supreme doubt, is to be able to discover that doubts *empower* us…They force the doubter to decide, and design himself" (1997: 166, emphasis in original).

These calls for openness to ambivalence, strangeness and doubt are underpinned, from a psychoanalytic perspective, by Kristeva's (1982; 1991) transformative proposition that the stranger or foreigner, indeed the ambivalent Other, resides within us and is already part of our unconscious Selves. Kinnvall aptly adopts this critical insight in her ontological security study of Self-Other conflicts triggered by globalization to eschew the pitfalls of essentialism in analyses of collective identity formation (2004: 752-753). Influenced by Lacanian psychoanalysis, Kristeva suggests that in our desirous struggle for self-sameness, wholeness, unity and integrity, we as split and ailing subjects marked by ontological lack and divide, seek to remedy the ailment by projecting it onto the foreigner and protecting ourselves against her—what Kinnvall refers to as "securitization of subjectivity" (2006: 27, 35, 48). "A symptom that precisely turns 'we' into a problem, perhaps makes it impossible," Kristeva asserts. "The foreigner comes in when the consciousness of my difference arises…" (1991: 1). The "strange" truth that we fail to grasp, however, is that "the foreigner lives within us, he is the hidden face of our identity, the space that wrecks our abode" and yet this ruinous foreigner starts to vanish as soon as "we acknowledge ourselves as foreigners…" (Ibid). She therefore urges us to recognize the ambivalent Other within ourselves while refusing to give it a "permanent structure," and to seek to "lighten that otherness by constantly coming back to it" rather than "solidify [it]…into a thing" (Ibid: 3). For Kristeva, the absence of such recognition and the attendant solidification of the stranger's otherness into a burden inclines us towards "abjection" and "abject" creation as our "safeguards," that is, threat construction with reference to a "jettisoned object" from which one cannot escape or separate oneself as "the abject does not cease challenging its master" (1982: 2). More specifically, abject is the "imaginary uncanniness" that menaces the Self from within, "something rejected from which one does not part, from which one does not protect oneself as from an object" (Ibid: 4). Here Kristeva cites a quotidian example worth quoting:

> Food loathing is perhaps the most elementary and most archaic form of abjection. When the eyes see or the lips touch that skin on the surface of milk…I experience a gagging sensation…*nausea* makes me balk at that milk cream, separates me from the mother and father who proffer it. "I" want none of that element, sign of their desire; "I" do not want to listen, "I" do not assimilate it, "I" expel it. But since the food is not an "other" for "me," who am only in their desire, I expel *myself,* I spit *myself out,* I abject *myself* within the same motion through which "I" claim to establish *myself* (Ibid: 2-3, emphasis in original).

Having discussed the concept of ambivalence and its manifestations from socio-psychological viewpoints, we have so far illustrated how the phenomenon may engender ontological insecurity and what implications this might hold for Self-Other relations. We will now proceed in the next section to delineate the question of *strategic ambivalence* and how ambivalence may be employed by agents to secure the Self, namely for ontological security-seeking purposes.

(Affective) Ambivalence at the Service of the Self

Whether one subscribes to the view that ambivalence emanates from the Other and the onus of resolution is on her or that it originates in the unconscious Self and is intrinsic to it, there seems to be consensus over the idea that it does pose a challenge to the subject's psychological integrity and ontological security. This ambivalence, embodied by the figure of the stranger, alien, or any other unknown and uncategorizable entity for that matter, is something the subject encounters in the social world, fails to categorize as good/friendly/safe or bad/hostile/threatening, and consequently feels disordered, discomforted and unsettled by it. For the sake of analytical clarity, we may label this phenomenon *epistemic ambivalence*, which as Kristeva contends, may ultimately be rooted in the unconscious. Yet, it is the kind of encounter the subject experiences in the course of interacting with external social reality but does not *necessarily feel ambivalent* about. Rather, the feeling such encounters generate is often one of ontological unease and existential anxiety, as the above review reveals. That epistemic ambivalence is experienced as a disorder, as per Bauman, does not necessarily mean that we simultaneously love and hate it. An object is ambivalent—or carries ambivalence—not because the subject feels ambivalent, that is simultaneously good and bad, about it but because it does not lend itself to the subject's epistemological ordering and categorizing attempt who thereby fails to classify it as good or bad. In other words, epistemic ambivalence is to be theoretically distinguished from *affective ambivalence*, a feeling of concurrent positivity and negativity about something, which the subject might experience upon encountering an object (Van Leeuwen 2008).

Affective Ambivalence Strategized

In psychology and psychoanalysis, ambivalence was first introduced by Swiss psychiatrist Eugene Bleuler in a lecture in 1910 where he differentiated

between voluntary ambivalence or that of the will (See also Frankfurt 1998), of the intellect (intellectual) and of the emotions or emotional ambivalence (Holder 1975: 198). The third iteration was later picked up by Freud in his psychoanalytic study of obsessional neurosis—exhibited by the so called "rat man" in this particular case—and generally described as a "battle between love and hate" within the subject about an object of interest (1909 [1955]: 191). In this dynamic, the simultaneous existence of opposing feelings or affects towards the same object signifies a conflict in the psyche between sexual drives and ego instincts as the subject seeks to achieve satisfaction and pleasure through love and avoid frustration and pain through hatred. In the later stages of his psychoanalytic work, Freud seems to understand ambivalence far more broadly than before in terms of any conflicting pairs of instinctual tendencies that cover "such polarities as activity and passivity, masculinity and femininity, sadism and masochism…expulsion and retention, control and submission" (Holder 1975: 201-02). Lastly, in what appears to be a conceptual shift after the introduction of life and death instincts in *Beyond the Pleasure Principle* (1920 [1955]), he argues that affective ambivalence appears to result from an arrested convergence and integration of these opposing instincts rather than their divergence and separation. In Freud's words, it is "such a fundamental phenomenon that it more probably represents an instinctual fusion that has not been completed" (Cited in Holder 1975: 205; See also Swales and Owens 2020: xiv-xv, 9-11).

When identity dynamics are brought into play and significantly implicated due to contentious engagements that undermine an agent's self-narrative (Steele 2005), create a "critical situation" (Ejdus 2018) or prompt "ontological dissonance" (Lupovici 2012), affective ambivalence might be discursively strategized through concurrent positive/affirmative and negative/dismissive narrative representations in order to shield the Self against pressures of ontological insecurity and anxiety. This is when affective ambivalence acquires self-identity or ontological dimensions and becomes strategic. In other words, strategic ambivalence is nothing more than the discursive deployment and strategization of affective ambivalence, namely simultaneous approval/confirmation and dismissal/denial of a problematic action, through the use of narratives for purposes of ontological security attainment. It is thus a strategy of "discursive damage control" that relies in important part on "framing and rhetorical packaging" of Self-damaging commissions (Hatakka et al 2017: 263-264) and involves "doublespeak" (Feldman and Jackson 2014) to project ambiguity about an agent's actual involvement in morally reprehensible or ontologically disruptive deeds. Strategic ambivalence bears

strong resemblances to what Ruth Wodak refers to, in the context of populism and fascism studies, as "calculated ambivalence": representations, statements and "utterances…formulated in a way which allows for possible ambiguous interpretations and is open for at least two opposing meanings" (2003: 142; Wodak 2015: 14; Engel and Wodak 2013). In strategic ambivalence as conceptualized in the framework of ontological security dynamics, however, the emphasis falls on the instrumentalization of affective ambivalence for ontological ends, suggesting that the subject herself feels ambivalent about her controversial role and unconsciously desires that the Other attribute to her the identity she has thereby violated (More on this below).

With this formulation in mind, the theoretical significance of affective ambivalence from an OSS perspective rests partly in its insightful potential to shed light on how actors may deal with ontological consequences of disconnects in their autobiographical identity narratives (Innes and Steele 2014; Berenskoetter 2014; Subotić 2016) as well as of dissonances between multiple self-identities and contradictory practices to uphold them (Lupovici 2012). As Steele has unequivocally demonstrated, agents are prone to feelings of ontological remorse and shame when an action or type of behavior they engage in is perceived to contradict how they view and narrate themselves, that is "when there exists too much distance between this biographical narrative and self-identity" (2008: 55). In these and other "critical situations" where "fundamental questions" arise about an agent's ontological status (Ejdus 2018), they are likely to brave materially costly scenarios or take extraordinary actions that may jeapordize their physical security, all to make sure that their sense of ontological security remains intact and experiences of shame and anxiety at bay. Along similar lines, as Lupovici contends, collective actors may resort to avoidance or ontologically defensive measures that enable them to "separate the threatened self from the source of the threat" (2012: 818) when efforts to safeguard an identity run counter to other identities and breed "ontological dissonance" (See also Ejdus 2020: 127-134). Yet, rather than adopting measures of survival-menacing nature or of psychological avoidance or even ceasing participation in a controversial course of action altogether, an actor may opt to put her affective ambivalence about such anxiety-inducing engagements to strategic use by both dismissing involvement and confirming it at the same time.

Strategic Ambivalence: Introjection, Projection and Desire

But how does strategic ambivalence as a mechanism of ontological security pursuit function and what psychological processes does it involve? At face value, due to ample semantic-conceptual overlap between ambivalence and ambiguity, it might appear rather intuitively that strategic ambivalence achieves its ontological aims through cultivating ambiguity about commission of an autobiographically disruptive deed. While this type of ambiguity creation, which Lupovici considers an "avoidance measure" (2012), might help defer getting fully to grips with an unsettling situation, it does not seem psychologically durable and is not how strategic ambivalence operates as a vehicle for ontological security. To answer the above question, therefore, we need to dissect strategic ambivalence into its major constituent parts: the affirmative aspect where the subject feels affectively positive about a deed and confirms involvement in it accordingly, and the dismissive aspect where the subject feels affectively negative about an action and denies partaking of it.

Melanie Klein's theorization of the "schizoid" or "split" subject in the object relations tradition of psychoanalysis and of the process of "splitting" in particular offer perhaps the best analytical tools to elucidate the positive side of strategic ambivalence. First, it needs to be clarified, broadly speaking, that in contrast to Freudian psychoanalytic thought that relies mainly on *intrapsychic* factors—such as repressed libidinal drives, life/death instincts and "pleasure-seeking" tendencies—in analyzing (un)conscious human behavior, object relations theorists like Klein (1996 [1946]; 1975 [1952]), Donald Winnicott (1994 [1965]), Ronald Fairbairn (1994 [1952]) and Wilfred Bion (1994 [1962]) assign a central role to "object-seeking" and pre-Oedipal interpersonal relations between the infant and her primary attachment figures, internalized as "self-objects," in their psychoanalysis of ego development and identity formation. Unless we concern ourselves with a "theoretically perfect person" for analysis—who does not exist—there remains no doubt as to the inevitable presence of splits in the ego, meaning, as Fairbairn has prominently enunciated, that "*the basic position in the psyche is invariably a schizoid position*" (1994 [1952]: 8, emphasis in original). Besides a vast array of developments and conditions of a characteristically schizoid nature ranging from schizophrenia to "adolescent nervous breakdowns" to the experience of déjà vu, he highlights two "universal" phenomena as conclusive proof of a split ego and of "everyone without exception" being schizoid: the fact of dreaming where the dreamer or Self is commonly represented by "two or more separate figures" and the existence of the superego "as an ego-structure capable of distinction from 'the ego'" (Ibid: 5-9).

Building up on this premise, Klein develops her notion of the "paranoid-schizoid position" according to which not only the ego is split into good and bad parts but the object—mother's breast being the prototype—is also dichotomized into "gratifying" and "frustrating" breasts as a deflectory-dispersive defense mechanism against fears, impulses and anxieties in early infancy stemming from the inner operation of the death instinct, the trauma of birth and separation, and frustration of physical needs like hunger (1996 [1946]: 164-166). For Klein, the infant's phantasmatic splitting of the object is inevitably accompanied by a corresponding split within the ego itself and entails two crucial anxiety-reducing processes of "introjection" and "projection," that is, directing the good part inwards and deflecting the bad part outwards. Bound up with introjection of goodness and projection of badness are defensive mechanisms of "idealization" and "omnipotent denial" whereby on the one hand good and satisfying facets of the object/Self are aggrandized and separated from its bad and persecuting aspects, and on the other, the very existence of those frustrating parts are, furthermore, totally denied as if annihilated unconsciously (Ibid: 167-168).

Accordingly, an analogous series of phantasmatic processes take place at the heart of strategic ambivalence, which involves splitting an object or an experience associated with that object and which ultimately culminates in a twofold quest for self-affirmation and ontological security. With respect to the positive side of strategic ambivalence, the subject tends to confirm her engagement with an object such as an ally or in an event such as a war primarily because it converges with and consolidates an autobiographical narrative/identity that is perceived to be fundamental to her self-concept and dominant among her various self-narratives (See Wendt 1999: 230-232, also Delehanty and Steele 2009). This is the good and gratifying part of the object/event that the subject thus introjects and attributes to her Self. But the same object/event has a bad and persecuting side too as it collides with and violates another autobiographical narrative/identity that the subject holds significant to her self-concept. This frustrating part is dealt with through outward projection and thus involvement with the object/event is denied, a denial or dismissal which constitutes the negative or dismissive facet of strategic ambivalence.

While projection through splitting partly accounts for the negative dimension of strategic ambivalence—as the Self seeks to get rid of their ontologically disruptive violations by transferring them onto the Other—it barely affords to explain the *continuation* of this negative aspect, that is, the sustained and

repeated denials of involvement over time. The question here, more specifically, is why does an actor keep repudiating commission of a deed they partake of while simultaneously confirming that participation? Continued confirmation of an even morally controversial action that affirms a dominant self-identity or self-narrative is understandable and expected, but what about the continued denial of the same action as it undermines another conception of the Self? In other words, how can this continuity (of dismissal) be explained? In fact, repetitions of denial or dismissal in practices of strategic ambivalence signifies an unconscious longing for something which may best be delineated by bringing the Lacanian theory of desire in the analytical framework of Self-Other relations to bear on this apparently paradoxical dynamic.

For French psychoanalyst Jacques Lacan, desire is inextricably entangled with the subject's ontological "lack" which originates from the inner split generated by her entry into a pre-existing Symbolic order that is the plane of language, signifiers and discourse. It is this "constitutive lack" of a core of identity and fullness that renders the divided subject's search for ontology relevant in the first place (Solomon 2015: 42; Mandelbaum 2023). The ontological quest for wholeness and unity, however, knows no end and never reaches a final destination as the lacking subject is a "*manque-à-être"* ('want-to-be,' 'want of being' or 'lack of being') indefinitely trapped in the process of becoming through the operations of desire and phantasy (Lacan 1998 [1978]: 29-30; Green and Vanheule 2023: 2-3). This is why Lacan defines desire primarily in relation to lack:

> Desire is a relation of being to lack. This lack is the lack of being properly speaking. It isn't the lack of this or that, but lack of being whereby the being exists. This lack is beyond anything which can represent it…Desire, a function central to all human experience, is the desire for nothing nameable. And at the same time this desire lies at the origin of every variety of animation…Being comes into existence as an exact function of this lack. Being attains a sense of self in relation to being as a function of this lack, in the experience of desire (1988: 223-224).

To adequately grasp the negative dimension of strategic ambivalence as an expression of unconscious desire for an ontology, it is also crucial to take onboard Lacan's axiomatic "formula" that "*man's desire is the desire of the Other*" (1998 [1978]: 38, emphasis in original), a defining proposition of Lacanian psychoanalysis which, in his words, "basically means that we are always asking the Other what he desires" pretty much like a religious person striving to know and fulfil what God fancies (2008: 38). An inescapable

condition of the Symbolic order, desire as a subjective structure functions in a "trans-individual" rather than "intra-psychic" fashion, necessarily taking form via mediation "in the field of the Other" which constitutes "the very medium of symbolic pronouncement, the symbolic means through which our communications to others—and indeed, to ourselves (our 'own' thoughts, ideas)—are possible" (Hook 2018: 21-22).

But very much like the lacking and desiring subject, the Other, too, lacks and desires, hence unsatisfying and alienating by definition. And crucially, Stavrakakis asserts, "it is exactly this impossibility, this lack in the Other, which keeps desire—and history—alive," that we as desiring subjects "never get what we have been promised, what we were expecting from the Other, but that's exactly why we keep longing for it" (2007: 47). So the object of one's desire, which according to Lacan, is "essentially an object desired by someone else" never crystalizes, causing the desire to keep sliding from object to object and the subject to keep desiring on and on in an endless process that "tends to diminish the special significance of any one particular object, but at the same time…brings into view the existence of objects without number" (1953: 12). In light of this formulation, paradoxical denial of a deed the strategically ambivalent subject has already confirmed is suggestive of a desire to cover or remedy a lack, which has been laid bare by that deed, through an appeal to the Other, craving for their recognition of an identity the subject keeps violating in order to consolidate another identity. Yet since that recognition or satisfaction never materializes—as the Other, too, lacks and is incapable of providing it—the desire continues unabated and with it the denial. Put otherwise, the denial of commission in practices of strategic ambivalence is not only an attempt on the part of the subject to project the bad content on the Other and make them own and internalize it, as discussed above, but at the same time also an outreach to them for what the subject unconsciously thinks the Other holds the key to and the remedy for, that is, a violated lacking Self.

In the following section, we will rely on the above theoretical framework to interrogate the Islamic Republic of Iran's (IRI) controversial involvement in the Russia-Ukraine war on behalf of the invader, illustrating why Tehran has adopted a strategically ambivalent approach to the conflict and, equally importantly, to its role in it and how such an approach serves as a source of ontological security for the anti-Western revolutionary state.

The Russia-Ukraine War and Iran's Strategic Ambivalence

When Russia occupied the Crimean Peninsula of Ukraine for annexation in February 2014 in the wake of popular protests, known as the "Maidan Revolution," that ousted pro-Russian president Viktor Yanukovych (For more, see Konończuk 2014), Iran was in the throes of marathon negotiations with world powers—UN Security Council permanent members Britain, China, France, Russia, United States plus Germany—to reach a resolution over its nuclear program. Beware of the adverse implications of rekindled Russian-Ukrainian tensions for the nuclear talks, including the possible siding of Moscow with Tehran's Western nemeses or its decision to throw a wrench into the diplomatic process (Crowley 2014), the IRI opted for a practically neutral stance on the Crimea question.

For one, Iranian representatives to the United Nations did not show up for a vote in the UN General Assembly on Resolution 68/39 that declared the Crimean referendum to secede from Ukraine invalid (Katz 2014). "We are not without opinions on the [Ukraine] dispute but there is no reason to comment on and enter into every issue," Iran's then parliament speaker Ali Larijani stated at the time, adding that "we should [wait and] see where things end up" (Khabar Online 2014). Those "opinions" however were largely *against* Russia's military occupation and annexation of Crimea, in important part because Tehran considered herself a historical victim of imperial land grab and foreign aggression, not least by Tsarist Russia in the 19th century (more on this below) and later on as a consequence of Iraqi invasion of post-revolutionary Iran in 1980s by the Saddam Hussein regime which, incidentally, received substantial military and political support from Soviet Russia in its war effort (Smolansky and Smolansky 1991, ch. 7; Kalinovsky 2012). Also anxious about secessionist tendencies and separatist sentiments of ethnic origins inside Iran as a multiethnic nation, the Islamic Republic refused to endorse secession of Crimea from Ukraine or recognize its annexation into the Russian Federation. "Today…separatism is a [serious] threat against Ukraine and the security of the Caucasus region…must receive special attention," Ali Akbar Velayati, senior foreign policy advisor to the Supreme Leader Khamenei, warned about the occasion (The Iran Primer 2014). A combination of political considerations and historical factors thus informed Iran's neutrality policy and hands-off approach to the Crimean crisis, underpinned by silent disapproval of territorial revisions it involved.

From Neutrality to Ambivalence

Fast forward to February 2022, when Russia launched a full-fledged military invasion of Ukraine, this expedient neutrality came under enormous pressure. For the preceding four years since the Trump administration's withdrawal from the nuclear accord—officially known as the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA)—and reinstatement of crippling sanctions against Tehran under a signature "maximum pressure" policy, the IRI had been struggling to break out of its splendid isolation while at the same time maintaining its revolutionary self-identity home and abroad through the exercise mainly of "maximum resistance" (Behravesh 2020). Surely, Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei's "heroic flexibility" rhetoric (Radio Free Europe 2013) which paved the way for major nuclear concessions during the talks in the first place had backfired, questioning the revolutionary credentials of the Iranian leadership. For a "revisionist" state whose foundational identity was premised on resistance against Western imperialism or "global arrogance," showing further flexibility and compromise in the face of what was perceived as an uncompromising West was out of the question (Behravesh 2018). From an ontological security perspective in particular, the Islamic Republic was stuck between a rock and a hard place: on the one hand, it had to sustain an increasingly unsustainable revisionist identity despite growing domestic discontent (Wintour 2019) and on the other it had to manage the consequences, ontological and physical, of its mounting "strategic loneliness" (Mesbahi 2011) as a direct corollary of pursuing an anti-status-quo foreign policy in congruence with a revolutionary self-narrative.

In these critical circumstances, Iran sought the best way forward in a strategy described as "Look East," characterized by fostering strategic partnerships and building grand alliances with two chief rivals of the West in an increasingly multipolar world, namely China and Russia (Mousavian 2020; Fan 2022). A paramount step in the direction of this pivot to the East was a 25-year cooperation agreement which Tehran clinched with Beijing under President Hassan Rouhani in the hope of integrating more systematically into the Chinese Belt and Road Initiative (BRI) and neutralizing growing economic pressure by the US and the EU (Reuters 2021). While China was hoped, in the face of Western economic embargoes against Iran, to serve as a reliable market for Iranian oil exports and trade ties in general as well as a source of access to modern infrastructural technologies, Russia was mostly reserved for procurement of military hardware and defence capabilities. Having far more at stake in their relations with Western powers, however, neither Beijing nor Moscow took Tehran seriously as a strategic partner, much less an ally, and

more often than not ended up treating it as a bargaining chip to secure concessions from the US on various issue-areas of strategic import.

Thus when the Ukraine war broke out in 2022, even though the Islamic Republic blamed NATO provocations and eastward expansion for the conflict, it was initially opposed to the Russian aggression and inclined to preserve its hands-off neutrality. "[While] the Ukraine crisis is rooted in NATO's provocative measures, we do not regard engagement in war as a solution," Iranian foreign minister Hossein Amir-Abdollahian wrote on 24 February, emphasizing the "necessity of ceasefire and concentration on a political solution" (Donya-ye Eqtesad 2022). Yet, during President Vladimir Putin's state trip to Tehran a few months later in July, Iranian Supreme Leader sounded a confirmatory tone, blasting NATO as a "dangerous creature" and endorsing Russia's "initiative-taking" under Putin in standing up against it. "If the road ahead of NATO remains open, it will not know any limits and bounds, so if [NATO's path] were not blocked in Ukraine, it would wage this very war [against Russia] on the pretext of Crimea after a while," Khamenei stressed (BBC Persian 2022). Iranian attitude towards the Russian invasion of a Western ally was one of affective ambivalence, with the IRI drawing satisfaction from seeing the West, its principal Other, paying a price for its presumably imperial advances and taking a beating in Ukraine, but at the same time feeling unsettled by the notion that it was siding with the aggressor in the war.

Backing the Russian aggressor-occupier did not align at all with the collective memory of Iranians as a nation that had historically lost vast expanses of its northern territories in the Caucasus to the Russian empire through the infamous treaties of Gulistan in 1813 and Turkmenchay in 1828 (See Behrooz 2023). This unequivocal disregard for collective memory as "*the* carrier of [national-statal] identity" over time instigated strong feelings of ontological insecurity for the state subject (Bachleitner 2021: 22). Support for Russia in its invasion of Ukraine also violated post-revolutionary Iran's collective self-identity as a victim, hence vehement opponent, of foreign aggression as the nascent revolutionary state had to repel Baathist Iraqi invasion of its own territory under Saddam Hussein in what Tehran has since glorified as eight years of "sacred defense" from 1980 to 1988. Lastly, endorsing the use of force by a militarily superior great power against a far weaker and smaller neighbor did not sit well with the historical Shia narrative of standing up for the underdog, which the Islamic Republic generally invokes to vindicate support for "resistance" groups including Palestinians and which has also been enshrined

in the Iranian Constitution. Article 3 of the Constitution stipulates that the Islamic Republic's foreign policy be based, *inter alia*, on "uninhibited support for the weakened of the world" while Article 154 takes this ideological doctrine even further, accentuating that Iran will "back right-seeking struggles of the weakened against the arrogant anywhere in the world" (Hosseini-Nik 2006; Behravesh 2018).

This affective sense of ambivalence had to be discursively strategized in the form of simultaneous narrative confirmation/approval and denial/dismissal of involvement in the Ukraine war when Tehran indulged Russian outreach for military help after Moscow's initial offensive to capture Kiev and conquer the entire Ukrainian territory failed. This is how Iran's strategic ambivalence towards the Russia-Ukraine war emerged. Iranian military support for the Russian aggressor started with the transfer of hundreds of kamikaze Shahed drones and loitering munitions, which Moscow has since used to target Ukrainian military sites and critical infrastructure (Mason and Holland 2023). Due to their low cost and high efficacy in inflicting lasting damage and depleting Ukraine's NATO-supplied air defenses, the Iranian Revolutionary Guards also collaborated with the Kremlin to build a drone factory and mass-produce unmanned aerial vehicles (UAVs) inside Russia (Bennet and Ilyushina 2023). The Islamic Republic's response to these reports and revelations has been one of strategic ambivalence, of concurrent confirmation and denial, introjecting the "satisfying" facet of engagement in the war as a consolidation of its independent revolutionary Self and projecting the "persecuting" part of it as expansionism onto the Western Other.

In a highly significant address to science students in October 2022, which was later suspiciously removed from state-affiliated news platforms, Supreme Leader Khamenei confirmed the sales of Iranian UAVs to Moscow, albeit without explicit mention of Russia or its war against Ukraine. "A few years ago when the photos of advanced Iranian drones and missiles were published, they used to say it was photoshop!," he pointed out, quipping "now they say Iranian drones are very dangerous; why do you sell them to this or that person? Why do you give them to this or that person?" (Eghtesad News 2022). Khamenei's veiled verification of drone transfers to Russia was clearly meant to uphold the autobiographical narrative that despite decades of pressure and isolation, the Islamic Republic as a revolutionary actor is a force to reckon with, that revisionist behavior pays and that there is every motivation for Iran to preserve this revolutionary self-concept. Intervention in the Ukraine conflict on behalf of the aggressor-occupier and against the West operates, in this

sense, as a vehicle for attainment of ontological security for the Iranian state subject. A similar introjection or self-attribution of revolutionary "goodness" and anti-Western identity was at play when the head of IRGC aerospace division General Amirali Hajizadeh boasted ahead of a visit to Tehran by Russian defense minister Sergey Shoigu in September 2023 that "superpowers with whom we could not interact even through third parties are now reaching out to purchase" advanced military equipment from Iran (Press TV 2023).

Simultaneously, however, the Iranian government has kept denying extension of military support to Russia or any involvement in the Ukraine war for that matter by recourse to three overlapping narratives: outright rejection of claims about Iranian military engagement in the conflict as "absolute lies" or "mere storytelling" (Xinhua 2022; DW Persian 2024); qualified acceptance of those claims by insisting that military support for Russia through drone shipments took place "months before" the invasion (Motamedi 2022); and finally admitting to the transfers but stressing that the weapons "were not supposed to be used in the Ukraine war" (BBC Monitoring 2023). Reflective of attempts to manage a state of "ontological dissonance" and deal with feelings of national shame as a result, the negative or dismissive dynamics of Iran's strategic ambivalence were thus set in motion and subsequently sustained by "projection" of badness onto the imperial Other, that is, the West as the primary culprit all along. "Countering shared challenges, including US unilateralism, is among the most important and strategic issues in our joint efforts," Iranian defense minister Mohammad Reza Ashtiani told his Russian peer Shoigu during his tour of Iranian missiles and drones in Tehran (Motamedi 2023).

These repeated denials of wrongdoing not only point to the ontological lack and split in Iran's revolutionary Self—questioned and contradicted as it is by game-changing support for the oppressor rather than the oppressed—but they also signify an unconscious desire of the Self for the symbolic international Other to provide it with what it lacks, recognizing and validating the anti-aggression and anti-imperial identities that its backing of aggression and conquest negates and nullifies. And as the Self's desire to secure what the Other desires inevitably goes unmet, denials and projections of wrongdoing continue unabated. In a key speech symptomatic of these unconscious desires, the IRI leader Khamenei commiserated with the "defenseless" Ukrainian nation, attributing its predicament to the West, which in his words, "has fortunately become more vulnerable than ever today," as if Iran itself has not sided with the aggressor-occupier and never contributed to Ukrainian victimization through its sustained military assistance to Russia (BBC Persian

2023). “They are willing to victimize a nation like the desperate and defenseless nation of Ukraine in order to fill the pockets of American arms manufacturing companies,” he asserted, adding that “the heart of the matter in Ukraine” is Americans desire that “Ukrainians fight and Ukrainians get killed so that they can sell weapons” (Ibid). If anything, this critique ironically applies no less to the Islamic Republic itself whose revolutionary lack, and desire to repair and remedy it, has been exposed by self-disruptive involvement in the Ukraine war. Correspondingly in remarks that foregrounded the IRI’s strategic ambivalence in general and a desire for the Other’s affirmation of its lacking revolutionary Self in particular, Iranian foreign minister Amirabdollahian reiterated in January 2023 that “we oppose the war and the displacement of people in Ukraine” and that “despite excellent relations between Tehran and Moscow,” Iran has refused to recognize Russian-occupied Crimea, Luhansk and Donetsk (Ukrainska Pravda 2023).

Conclusion

Distinguishing between different types of ambivalence along with sociological and psychoanalytic approaches to it, this article has shown that whereas epistemic ambivalence spells disorder and spawns ontological insecurity, affective ambivalence could be discursively strategized for ontological security-seeking purposes. It draws on Kleinian and Lacanian psychoanalytic theories to elucidate how ambivalence is deployed to shield the Self against deep effects of anxiety, discomfort and shame stemming from paradoxical and self-contradictory behavior. The processes of introjection, projective identification and unconscious desire for the Other’s recognition are delineated accordingly to shed light on the psychological mechanisms through which strategic ambivalence functions as a vehicle for pursuit of ontological security as security of being/becoming-in-the-world (Kinnvall and Mitzen 2020). These insights are empirically instantiated in the case of Iran which, it is contended, has adopted a policy of strategic ambivalence towards the Russia-Ukraine war in terms of simultaneously confirming/glorifying and denying/downplaying its involvement in the conflict on behalf of the Russian aggressor-occupier.

While ambivalence may be interpreted and understood in various ways, it has generally not received adequate theoretical or empirical attention in IR theory and political science. The conceptual-theoretical framework laid out in this writing suggests that strategic ambivalence is a highly politicized form of ambivalence which makes it likely to be employed not only as an instrument

of foreign policy but also as a methodology of governance. More specifically, given the discursive and narrative elements of strategic ambivalence, an insightful avenue of research will be to study it as an mechanism of "emotional governance" in an age of disinformation campaigns and conspiracy theories where politics consists, *inter alia*, of "emotional labor" by politicians and statespersons (Richards 2007). And needless to say, the ontological dynamics of strategic ambivalence are expected to feature prominently in this interdisciplinary area of scholarship.

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