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FORUM

State revisionism and ontological (in)security in international politics: the complicated case of Iran and its nuclear behavior

Maysam Behravesh[1]

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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, contending 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.

Keywords Revisionism · Identity · Ontological security · Iran · Nuclear · Constructivism

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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, b; 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 intertwined 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, p. 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 standpoint, 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 revisionism 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, p. 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, p. 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, p. 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, p. 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, p. 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 (pp. 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'" (p. 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, pp. 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, pp. 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, p. 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" (p. 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, p. 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, pp. 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, p. 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, p. 1), one needs to steer clear of treating states as unified homogeneous totalities that come to feel ontologically 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" (p. 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, pp. 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, pp. 924–925; Huddy 2013, pp. 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, pp. 47–54; Saikal 2009, p. 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, pp. 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 widely became 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, contending 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, p. 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 present 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 realities 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, pp. 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, b, p. 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

[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).

> 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] fulfil 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 unmistakeable 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 students 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 save lives really. 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 cannot 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 economic "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, p. 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 January 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 interplay, 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

[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.

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.

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