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Abstract

What is Ayatollah Khamenei's strategic thinking, and how does it shape and influence Iran's foreign policy, military and national security strategy? This article studies the theoretical and conceptual dimensions of Ayatollah Khamenei's foreign policy and strategic thinking, including his aims and principles, approaches, behaviors, decisions, and incentives, as the Islamic Republic of Iran's commander-in-chief of armed forces. The authors strive to explain how the political and military doctrine of Iran's Supreme Leader is designed to increase the country's relative security. They argue that Iran's leader tries to neutralize challenges caused by new changes that have occurred in Iran's immediate security sphere through activating patterns related to active deterrence. Thus, for him, sufficient military power can only be obtained by maximizing security. This way of thinking can best be explained by defensive realism theory. In this context, four dimensions of this theory i.e., balance of power, balance of threat, interconnected security, and offense-defense approach are discussed in the thoughts of Iran's leader. The authors also hold that the ethical aspect of Ayatollah Khamenei's strategic thinking, based on the principles of Islamic international relations, gives realism in the Middle East a critical approach.

Keywords: Ayatollah Khamenei, Iran's National Security, Defensive Realism, Relative Security, Balance of Power, Offense-Defense Approach

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Introduction

Historically, Iran's survival has been attributed to its geopolitical and geo-economic position and in competition with the great powers. But, since the advent of the 1979 Islamic Revolution, such an atmosphere and mentality has changed substantially, and consequently, some former allies, like the U.S. and Israel, become enemies. Washington's support, as well as other Western and Arab countries' multilateral support of Saddam⁽¹⁾ during the eight years of war waged against Iran was the most important events that has led Iran to require its political decision makers to obtain adequate military capabilities, and to take action for gaining national military might in order to prevent other adversaries from invading Iran once more. As a result of that, Iranian leaders' intense doubt toward the U.S. and the West directly stems from their experiences of the Iran-Iraq War.⁽²⁾ Indeed, for many Iranians, the eight-year war with Iraq was a war of "all against Iran," a true manifestation of Iran's strategic loneliness. Hence, in order to protect itself, Iran has focused on consistent awareness, by increasing national military capabilities and preparing for the worst as one of its greatest tools. In this respect, the U.S. invasion to Afghanistan in 2001 created new insecurity in the region. Two years later, George W. Bush and the neoconservatives invaded Iraq. However, it was not simply to overthrow Saddam Hussein, the Iraqi dictator, but rather was an attempt to pave the way for demolishing Iran's system, and to gradually provide necessary conditions to do so.

Therefore, theoretically, it is not possible to practice idea of territorial defense at the cost of preserving ideological values, attitude and to counteract threats, as well as to understand precisely the defensive thought of the country except through identifying Ayatollah Khamenei's mental perception and exploring his strategic foreign policy and national security thoughts. It is important because according to Constitution of Islamic Republic of Iran, the Supreme Leader is the Commander-in-Chief of the Armed Forces.⁽³⁾ Although Iran has a complicated political system and grants some independence to the president, particularly in domestic affairs, his ability in directing political change or making changes in the security policy of foreign affairs in contrast to the leader's preference is, at most, trivial.

It is significantly important here to propose this issue that after the Iran

nuclear deal, more commonly known as the JCPOA,⁽⁴⁾ two different perspectives about Tehran's security-military policies have been interpreted in the West, particularly in the U.S. On the one hand, some believe that Iran may gradually change its strategic doctrine in its interaction with the West,⁽⁵⁾ and on the other, others believe that Iran's post-nuclear deal strategy will still be an offensive doctrine in the region, and the world.⁽⁶⁾ Such confusing positions among official military and academic circles in the West generally originate from two basic issues. First, in Iran, "White Paper" is not published officially and publicly, so it is not possible to explore how and to what extent actions, extent of threats and security risks of the country is performed based on such a document. Second, it is partly related to information gap and lack of accurate knowledge about the structure of decision-making in strategic domain of the country, where the Supreme Leader plays a determining role.

More importantly is the fact that in Iran Ayatollah Khamenei's meetings with military forces, i.e. all armed forces, are emphasized as meeting with "chief commander of armed forces." This means that when the Leader discusses military, security and defensive matters during his speeches, his statements, whether stated explicitly or implicitly, are immediately considered as new strategic and military instructions for all military branches and centers. Therefore, since Ayatollah Khamenei, unlike many executive officials in different countries, explicitly states his policy and strategy in foreign relations and there is not inconsistency between Iran's declared policies and practiced policies, our analysis in this article will be based on conceptual and referential recognition of the Supreme Leader's views on defensive and military domains through which we can understand the regional strategy of Islamic Republic of Iran.

Iran's Security Dilemma

Some believe that changes during the recent years in the Middle East, and around the world, have given Iran a uniquely advantageous strategic situation in a way that during the past 200 years of political history, Iran hasn't had such a position of power in the region and or the world.⁽⁷⁾ But the fact is that recent events have made Iran face more new threats than opportunities, and Tehran's inability to deal with such threats will be hazardous for Iran's security and

territorial integrity. Such arguments, therefore, should be proposed very carefully. This starting point for such an evaluation begins by examining present threats and identifying Iran's regional strategy.

To Ayatollah Khamenei, besides the U.S., Israel is another major threat to Iran's security and stability. The role played by Saudi Arabia for equipping and financially supplying radical anti-Shia groups such as Al-Qaeda, Taliban and ISIS have also caused great concern for Tehran.⁽⁸⁾ Iranian officials are aware that their country, with its expansive land and sea borders, is located at the heart of a critical region.⁽⁹⁾ There are several locations around Iran for deploying American military forces and those of its allies, which threaten Iran's national security. In total, there are 422 military airports collectively possessing 7500 feet of runway in 2800 km in Iran. Out of a total of 422 runways, 331 of them are out of Iranian ballistic missiles range (i.e. they are not exposed to any efficient and effective military threat).⁽¹⁰⁾ Indeed, Iran's surrounding environment is not only host for many military bases of the Western countries, but also many different possible partners can also be found in this region. Turkey is an old member of NATO, and countries located at the Persian Gulf enjoy extensive support provided by the U.S., UK, and France. Having the security obligations of Western countries to support it, Israel recently opened its representative office at NATO headquarters in Brussels.⁽¹¹⁾ This resulted from a series of measures aiming at strengthening cooperation between NATO and Israel, which included conducting joint military maneuvers and information exchange. Opening such an office is an umbrella to strengthen Israel's military-security cooperation with NATO. In contrast, strategically, Iran is an isolated country, which is not a member of any major defensive coalition. It even cannot obtain membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) during the recent meeting in Tashkent. As a result, Iran finds itself surrounded seriously by various military bases and a complicated security dilemma. Thus, Ayatollah Khamenei has a good reason for focusing his strategic statements on the U.S., Israel, and Saudi Arabia as a threat and a target.

On the other hand, it is obvious that how Iran's neighbors have experienced crises one after another. Some of them, such as Iraq and Afghanistan, have experienced a severe crisis from which they cannot come out of in the near future. Pakistan is faced with internal instability. The Arab

countries of the Persian Gulf (excluding Oman) led by Saudi Arabia began a cold war campaign against Iran. Terrorist explosions can frequently be heard in Turkey, and the July 2016 coup indicated uncertainty and instability in this country. If such a trend continues to happen, Iran's borders will be faced with widespread crisis and anarchy. Emerging and developing anti-Shia terrorist groups such as ISIS Al-Qaeda, Al-Nusra Front (now known as Fateh al-Sham), and Ahrar Al-Sham have caused such a massive disturbance in the Middle East that followed by terrible consequences such as instability, war, and terrorism, as well as the Shia-Sunni conflict, and Iranian-Arab conflict. This trend cannot be controlled through the current policies of regional and world powers, and Iran inevitably has to take action against these threats.

More importantly, during Obama's presidency, there has been a gap between Washington, Tel Aviv and Riyadh's relations, which is mainly in Iran's favor. Tel Aviv and Riyadh fully utilized their power and have influenced the U.S. enter a war against Iran because of nuclear matters, though it was not successful. In the second phase, they used all their power to prevent a nuclear agreement, and in this manner, Iran would remain as a hostage in the hands of UN Security Council and the most powerful sanctions will continue. Since such plans were not successful, Saudi Arabia launched a war against Yemen, and the damage it has caused has intensified repeated debates on the question that Iran used its own "proxies" to overthrow monarchical regimes in the Middle East. In this regard, terms such as "Shia Crescent,"⁽¹²⁾ "the New Iranian Order," and "the rise of Persia's New Empire"⁽¹³⁾ can also be evaluated; all of these debates being based on a narration presented by the U.S., Israel, and some Arab countries in the Persian Gulf led by Saudi Arabia that claim "Iran trying to increase instability in the region and finally to capture it."⁽¹⁴⁾

It is clear that in such a situation, Israel took advantage of the frustration experienced by Saudi Arabia and some Arab countries as the closest allies of the U.S., and embraced them. Obama's proposition is that Iran and Saudi Arabia should equally and proportionally participate in the region⁽¹⁵⁾ and Israel's proposition is to eliminate Iran from the region. In order to proceed with this strategy, Israel has adopted a double control policy, attempting "to defuse Obama at home"⁽¹⁶⁾ and "to neutralize Iran in the region." As a result, it has spent billions of dollars of Persian Gulf countries' capital and facilities to

execute this policy.⁽¹⁷⁾ In order to reinforce this trend, Israel and Saudi Arabia have joined together to contain Iran.⁽¹⁸⁾

Therefore, by such a change, one can argue that the new Tel Aviv-Riyadh axis intends to provide necessary grounds for running a “new conflict between Iran and the U.S.” during the next American presidency. This has been fully understood by Ayatollah Khamenei. Thus, he believes that the United States stands at the center of extensive alliance system, and that the value of these alliances and coalitions in the Middle East is evaluated by their impact on Iran’s national security. It means that “these alliance commitments create a special kind of danger. Indeed, the extensive protection provided by the U.S. will encourage these states to engage in risky behavior toward Iran.⁽¹⁹⁾ Israel and Saudi Arabia’s regional behavior is a clear example of such a strategy, which is not accepted by Iran.

Nevertheless, this new axis considers any defensive policy or regional behavior of Iran in the Middle East, as a threat and largely magnifies it in different media. It can be seen that Iran’s defensive power, particularly its missile power, which is its only preventive instrument in such dangerous conditions in the region, has become America and its allies’ main concern. As a result, they try to propose plans such as the JCPOA II in order to weaken and restrict one of Iran’s main defensive deterrence factors, its missile power. According to Ayatollah Khamenei, these threats indicate that Iran should have high military preparedness because regional and international enemies seek to bring conflict to Iran. The Iranian leader states that “the Americans and their allies always threaten Iran, meanwhile, they expect that Iran reduce its defensive power. Is this a joke? Isn’t that ridiculous?”⁽²⁰⁾ In this context, Iranian policy makers have adopted protection of territorial integrity and political consolidation, as well as neutralizing the U.S. and its regional allies’ threats, rather than developing a regional hegemony as strategy of foreign policy and national security.

Is the Iranian Leader a Realist?

The dominant view in the United States and among its regional allies is that Iran’s main motive to enhance its role in the region is to increase its relative power in the broader Middle East. Its objectives and strategies are, therefore,

defined and evaluated as maximalist, expansionist, opportunistic, and generally ideological.⁽²¹⁾ Since general strategic policies of the system in foreign policy, as well as its defensive-military doctrine determined and announced by Ayatollah Khamenei, it is necessary to theoretically and practically explore the nature of Supreme Leader's defensive-strategic thinking?

Ayatollah Khamenei believes that “in jungle-style circumstances in the world, if the Islamic Republic merely goes after negotiations and economic exchange, and even science and technology, without having defense capacity, will even small governments not allow themselves to threaten the Iranian nation. The enemies are consistently strengthening their military and missile power. Under such conditions, we cannot say that the time of missiles has passed. [Our] times are times for everything; otherwise, the nation will see its rights trampled on easily and overtly.”⁽²²⁾ Accordingly, he believes that “security is completely objective and tangible, which cannot be provided just by subjective mindset.”⁽²³⁾ Consequently, as Ayatollah Khamenei states, “security is a foundation for all advances of a nation. Without security, there will be no economy, culture, personal and public prosperity.”⁽²⁴⁾ In fact, he argues that “when a nation is threatened by its enemy, first and foremost, it is the duty of its leaders to maintain its security and sovereignty. Such security can be preserved in different manners; one manner is through using military power and strengthening military power.”⁽²⁵⁾ Then, this question arises that according to Ayatollah Khamenei's military and strategic thinking, is this policy and obtaining military power “offensive” or “defensive?” And generally in the present knowledge-based defense, what is the place of dimensions of this thinking and its evaluation on a global scale and where does the ethical aspect become prominent?

Iran's regional behavior after 9/11 and the insecurities caused by the U.S. and NATO in the war against Afghanistan and Iraq indicated that according to Tehran's view, security is the most significant concern. Indeed, at the first place, the roots of Iran's defensive policy can be attributed to its natural characteristics of power construct, politics, geopolitical situation, and cultural geography which have emerged under such conditions as geopolitical changes caused by threats in its immediate security areas due to the War in Afghanistan and the War in Iraq, as well as those caused by U.S. and Israeli threats related to the

nuclear program, Syrian crisis, rise of ISIS as well as the crisis in Yemen. Therefore, Iran assumes it will react only when it feels there is some threat against it. This reaction is often for creating balance and preventing one who makes the threat. Only if the security dilemma becomes very serious, it will react more rigidly. In other words, Iran tried to develop its influence and enhance its power in the region as it felt that insecurity in its western and eastern borders had been increased.⁽²⁶⁾

Undoubtedly, compared to the Shah's period, Iran is considered to be a more serious and independent actor in the region. However, such an increase in influence and role has not been obtained through bellicose or militant measures. In all his statements and commands on gaining military power, Ayatollah Khamenei talked immediately about the essentiality of such capacities for protecting and enhancing Iran's security rather than gaining military supremacy to achieve maximalist objectives and interests. For example, in his statements in 2008, he emphasized that "armed forces are the fortification of national security, however, the very existence of armed forces or their strengthening does not mean militancy."⁽²⁷⁾ This was also emphasized in a report by the Pentagon.⁽²⁸⁾

Strategic Suppositions

Since 1979, "Iran's military strategies have been generally a reaction to the regional dominance of the U.S. and the behavior of its allies. In the absence of a strategic powerful alliance, Iran invests its time and capital for enhancing its military power and prompting its operational arts in order to decrease the power of the United States and its alliances in the region. Nevertheless, Iran is not an unpredictable country behaving in an illogical and opinionated manner, but rather it is simply a country which is not accurately understood by the West."⁽²⁹⁾ Thus, Ayatollah Khamenei's decision, apart from its nature, is dependent of Iran's strategic environment based on realist principles. These principles can be explained in the context of "balance of power,"⁽³⁰⁾ "balance of threat," "interconnected security"⁽³¹⁾ and "offense-defense" strategy.⁽³²⁾ External factors can considerably influence them and make their outcomes better or worse.

Theoretically, Iran has four alternative responses to tackle the regional

and international threats and the adverse trends noted in the region:

Balance of power

The realist scholars believe that governments seek balance in order to increase their chance for survival against a centralized power. Also, threat to their survival can only be removed through gaining and sharing some portions of military power compared to other governments, or through making coalitions.⁽³³⁾ This means that countries consider their place in balance of power as being highly important, and that they try to be somehow more powerful than their rivals, since such supremacy in power will enhance their security and survival prospect.

Ayatollah Khamenei, however, believes that it is unwise and unreasonable to accomplish such a goal through war and invasion. Because he largely has a critical view on balance of power in military terms. With a historical mindset, he considers this type of balance of power as American strategy through the Iraq-Iran War, which has decreased the power of both countries and as a result, a kind of negative balance has been established. Accordingly, after the first Persian Gulf War in 1991, and Saddam's defeat, the U.S. prevented the Ba'ath regime from being overthrown in order to maintain the balance of power between Iran and Iraq. Apart from this, Ayatollah Khamenei is fully aware that due to many years of arms embargoes against Iran, as well as a lack of defensive budget, Iran will not be able to compete with its neighbors. Objectively, Iran has not had considerable military capabilities to expand its influence abroad. Following the victory of the Islamic Revolution, Washington stopped its technical and logistic support to Tehran. Apart from its capability in the missile sector, which is considered as its only defensive instrument, Iran has spent most of its resources for reconstruction and development.

In contrast, while it has a population about one quarter of that of Iran, Saudi Arabia's military budget is five times more. In this regard, in its most recent report, published in April 2016, on military costs of different countries around the world, Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI) declared that Saudi Arabia's military budget is more than 87 billion dollars. This was more than Russia's defensive budget, and stood at the third place after

China. Meanwhile, compared with the UAE with a military budget that amounts 22.8 billion dollars, and Israel with a military budget of about 16.1 billion dollars, Iran's military budget, 10.3 billion dollars, is significantly lower, though Iran has a larger population than these countries. According to this report, the military budget of Saudi Arabia from 2006 to 2015 had a 97% increase, while Iran's defensive budget, during the same period, experienced 30% decrease.⁽³⁴⁾ On the other hand, presently, it is discussed by military-political authorities in Tehran that if Iran's claim for nuclear threat has been removed by JCPOA, then why does Israel need hundreds of nuclear weapons? If there is no nuclear threat, then there will also be no need for nuclear deterrence. Why should Israel be the only government in the Middle East that is exempted by the U.S. from the membership in the Treaty on Non-Proliferation of Nuclear Weapons (NPT)?

Understanding this reality and considering Iran's restricted accessibility to protected water routes and lack of strategic bombers, Ayatollah Khamenei regards the ideal option for active deterrence to be ballistic missiles, since he believes this is necessary to create balance. Iran's leader referred to this point where he stated, "by accelerating their advances and enhancing their preparedness, the armed forces must show such a great might that enemies cannot even imagine invading Iran."⁽³⁵⁾ Therefore, Iran evaluates other countries' intentions and treats them based on its power and geographical proximity. Then, it embarks on a strategy for internal balancing (i.e. strengthening and increasing its abilities) and external balancing (in the form of military coalitions and alliances). Therefore, on basis of internal balance, Iran seeks to increase its power and counteract threats by relying on its national capabilities unilaterally. According to him, "Iran needs to continue its advances in weapons and military preparedness. Rational logic tells us we should follow this way."⁽³⁶⁾ In other words, Iran seeks to create a balance against the countries that are considered an immediate existential threat.

Without sufficient defensive facilities, Iran's behavior with respect to following up and enhancing its missile plan, qualitatively and quantitatively, such a plan can be examined based on Iran's attempts for creating balance with Israel and countries along Persian Gulf, which heavily invest highly in the acquisition of arms.⁽³⁷⁾ Ayatollah Khamenei's most important purpose is to

prevent an increase in the power of other countries, and to avoid disturbance of balance in Iran's loss. Thus, the first concern of Iran's leader is not to maximize power, but rather, it is to preserve Iran's position in the regional and global system. The focus by Iran's chief commander of armed forces on the "importance to enter unknown military fields and new initiatives,"⁽³⁸⁾ due to long term arms embargo against Iran and its inability for buying advanced military equipment, can be discussed as a confirmation for the importance of internal balancing.

Meanwhile, through external balancing, Iran seeks to form coalitions and alliances, and to create a balance of power by adopting a multilateral strategy. The "Look to the East" policy, designed to promote the relations with China and Russia, as well as seeking official membership in the Shanghai Cooperation Organization, can be perceived as an example for Iran's external balancing in order to counteract and neutralize threats caused by the U.S. and some of its neighbors. For example, Ayatollah Khamenei, in meeting with Xi Jinping, President of the People's Republic of China who traveled to Iran just after the JCPOA, emphasized that "Iran always seeks to develop its relations with independent and reliable countries, such as China, and therefore, the agreement between the two countries for the 25-year Comprehensive Strategic Partnership is absolutely right and wise."⁽³⁹⁾

Russia's military collaboration with Iran in the Syrian war, and Iran's permission to allow Russian bombers to use the Hamadan military base, is defined as another aspect of Iran's approach for contrasting the threats.⁽⁴⁰⁾ There is some criticism and doubts, however, about the dimensions and quality of this aspect of balancing in Iran.⁽⁴¹⁾ Nevertheless, it is vitally essential, in his eyes, for Iran's political-military authorities to expand ties with China and Russia. Thus, one of the most important behavioral patterns governing Ayatollah Khamenei's defensive foreign policy thinking is balancing.

Balance of threat

Some scholars in the defensive realism camp focus more on the "balance of threat" issue than the balance of power. For them, threat is "a composition of offensive power, military capabilities, geographical proximity and probable offensive intentions of the government. In other words, what is important is

relations between governments and their perception of each other as threat, not merely their power.”⁽⁴²⁾ Accordingly, instead of creating a balance toward power, the countries create balance against countries that are considered particularly dangerous for them.

In addition to the United States, whose military bases are located around Iran, and consistently threatens Iran by saying “all options are on the table”, Israel is also located in Iran’s geographical proximity, and has often threatened it explicitly. In recent years, Israel has planned multiple scenarios for military attack on Iran. The new run of such threats began in 2011 when many controversial debates were proposed about probable reaction of the U.S. and Israel towards Iran’s peaceful nuclear activities.⁽⁴³⁾ But, the threat propaganda used by Washington and Tel Aviv increased when Israel invaded surreptitiously the Al Kibar nuclear base in Syria on September 6, 2007. It had also attacked the Osirak nuclear base in Iraq on June 7, 1981. Preparing the desired atmosphere against Iran, it was supposed that a similar action would be taken against Iran, if deemed necessary.⁽⁴⁴⁾ This strategy, known as the Begin Doctrine, is summarized in this phrase: “the best defense is forceful preemption.”

At that time, to answer such conditions, Ayatollah Khamenei emphasized, “military threat or military attack against Iran is no longer possible in a hit-and-run form. Anyone who attacks Iran will experience consequences of that attack. It means that there is no unreacted attack against Iran and everybody contemplating attack should also consider its consequences.”⁽⁴⁵⁾ However, discussions on the balance of threat were actually added to Iranian military and strategic literature when the Supreme Leader, during an important speech at Imam Ali Military Academy in 2011, stated that “We never want to attack any nation or state. We never seek bloody war. The Iranian nation can prove it. However, we are a nation that will react decisively and powerfully to any threat. We are not a nation to see and watch those materialist powers threaten Iran.” “We threaten against any threat.” Anybody thinking of attacking the Islamic Republic of Iran should prepare himself or herself to receive iron fists and firm slaps. It is no longer the time of hit-and-run, it will not be possible for you just hit and then run. Absolutely not, you will be entangled and we will pursue you.”⁽⁴⁶⁾

In 2006, he also explicitly proposed a balance of threat, and stated, “[T]he Americans must know that if they attack Islamic Iran, it will damage their interests at any point where it is possible.”⁽⁴⁷⁾ However, this was after his statements in November, 2011 at Imam Ali Military Academy, that this strategy was seriously considered in the agenda of Iran’s defensive strategy, and these statements as “new defensive strategy” and “threat against threat strategy” was emphasized by executive authorities of armed forces and in particular by Brigadier General Hossein Salami, the deputy commander of IRGC. He also declared revising defensive doctrine of Iran, and, following threats against threat strategy, stated that “such a revision will meet all our requirements for a powerful deterrence and reliable defense.”⁽⁴⁸⁾

On the other hand, when Israel’s threats against Iran were at its highest, Ayatollah Khamenei explicitly stated that “Iran supported Hezbollah of Lebanon and the Islamic Resistance of Palestine during 22-day and 33-day wars. It will also support anybody fighting against Zionists.”⁽⁴⁹⁾ It was the first time that Israel faced with consequences of threat against threat strategy in the strategic domain, and in terms of strategic literature, this statement contained this signal that Iran has not become inactive by threats, but rather it has prepared itself for long-term intensive conflict. The next phase of this strategy was on March 1st, 2013 during the Supreme Leader’s speech in Mashhad, where he emphasized that “if the Zionist Regime makes any mistakes, Iran will completely destroy Tel Aviv and Haifa.”⁽⁵⁰⁾ Explicit emphasis on the destruction of Haifa and Tel Aviv was considered to be a reciprocal valid threat that Iran has defined any attack to its nuclear installations, or any invasion of its borders, as an end for Israel’s entity.

Although the fact is that Ayatollah Khamenei has a harsh stance on Israel, the historical evidence shows that in following its purposes, Iran acts with high caution and in a fully defensive manner. While Iran supports Hezbollah of Lebanon and the Hamas movements, it has never encouraged them to begin a complete war against Israel and has always considered the outcomes of its measures. For instance, Kenneth Pollack from the Brookings Institute, stated that “we have not seen [the Iranians] pushing Hezbollah to do crazy things.” Iran wants Israel’s leaders to know that, via its proxies, it can bloody the Jewish state. But Iran also restrains those proxies so as not to allow its feud with the

only nuclear power in the Middle East to get out of hand.”⁽⁵¹⁾ In January 2015, for instance, an Iranian military commander, Mohammad Ali Allahdadai, and the son of the previous Hezbollah military commander, Imad Mughniyah, were killed during Israel’s air attack on the Syrian Golan. According to a Haaretz report,⁽⁵²⁾ Israel appealed to Iran for restraint, and Hezbollah limited its retaliation, thus keeping the conflict from spiraling out of control.

Balance of threat strategy is also the case toward Saudi Arabia. When President Hassan Rouhani came to office in 2013, he has followed up direct dialogue between Iran and the United States in the nuclear issue. Iran’s nuclear negotiations with P5+1 group was faced with serious opposition by Saudi Arabia, since the most terrible nightmare for new rulers in Riyadh is that it may lose its position and popularity by the American authorities. It is afraid that if Western opinions toward Iran improve, then Riyadh will lose the support provided by the West in its controversial foreign policy approaches, which mostly aimed at containing Iran.⁽⁵³⁾ Saudi officials believe that America’s shift towards Iran might mean an interruption in Washington’s support for their measures in Yemen.⁽⁵⁴⁾ Thus, as Saudi Arabia has changed from a “serious rival” into a “serious threat,” in May 2015, Ayatollah Khamenei, by referring to the balance of threat strategy stated that “our enemies and some of ignorant officials in the Persian Gulf region must know that if there is any intrigue and if they want to bring the proxy wars into Iran’s borders, then the Islamic Republic of Iran will react harshly.”⁽⁵⁵⁾ The main addressee of that statement was Saudi Arabia. Thus, according to him, “threatening the enemy is completely natural and compulsory.”⁽⁵⁶⁾ Due to expansion of this physical and mental atmosphere of threat around Iran’s borders, Ayatollah Khamenei always believes that “since there is a threat and threat is general, [on one hand] its solution is to keep and enhance power elements within the system”⁽⁵⁷⁾ and on the other, the threat should be able to change other party’s behavior through the so-called “balance of terror”. Indeed, he argues that “when a nation shows its iron fists and powerful arms in its armed forces, it will not allow the enemies to make fool of it, and the enemies will settle their own accounts.”⁽⁵⁸⁾

Therefore, Iran’s Commander-in-Chief included the balance of threat model, as well as balance of power and balance of security, in the agenda of the armed forces in order to develop a reaction model for Iran against any probable

behavior in military domain, so that the U.S., and its regional allies have clearly understood that Iran's military performance has not made any computational mistake. Indeed, by stating that "we threaten threats," Ayatollah Khamenei has supposed that Iran's behavior is actually dependent on the other party's behavior, indicating a defensive approach, and he has also included a "second conventional strike" which is largely on the basis of defensive dimensions and responding to serious threats in his agenda as a part of Iran's national security strategy prospect. The balance of threat strategy is therefore another main elements constituting Ayatollah Khamenei's strategic thinking for deterring offensive intention of adversary states against Iran's political independence and territorial integrity.

Interconnected security

Ayatollah Khamenei principally believes that removing Iran's security threat is the most important principle for creating stability and cooperation in the region. Most of Iran's policies in the region dates back to the U.S. security threats, particularly during the neoconservative period which has also continued, more or less, during Obama's presidency. On this basis, the interconnected security procedure in Iran's defensive strategy will be based on the statement that "creating any insecurity for Iran will be translated into insecurity for the region." This is actually a response to the constant military threats by the U.S. and its regional allies against the IRI. It was shown in the leader's strategic view that the "Islamic Republic of Iran considers security as the greatest divine bounty, both for itself and for others, and it stands for and defends protecting security."⁽⁵⁹⁾ For example, Ayatollah Khamenei believes that "if the security of Persian Gulf is provided, we have control of most of coastal lands in the Persian Gulf, so we can mostly benefit from the security in this region. If the Persian Gulf is not occupied by foreigners, since we have many interests in the region, then we will attempt to establish more security there."⁽⁶⁰⁾ "We have frequently protected security. Our security naturally includes the security of the region. It means that we have sought not only our security, but also the security of the region, since they cannot be divided. Our insecurity equals insecurity in the region. When Iran enjoys security and peace, the region will also be in peace."⁽⁶¹⁾

As a result, the philosophy behind the interconnected security strategy is that during the past four decades, due to its presence in an insecure environment and being located among several instable regional subsystems, such as Southwest Asia, Central Asia, Caspian Sea and the South Caucasus, Iran had to sustain many security costs. Therefore, continuity and reproduction of instability in order to decrease Iran's power and regional influence all make immediate security circles as insecure. Such an insecure environment has allowed for potential expansion of regional competitions, military involvements, new crises and as a result military presence of trans-regional powers. Therefore, a major part of Iran's political-security energy has been spent on counteracting such security challenges in the region. The permanent need for effective and powerful military forces to protect the country's territorial integrity, results from this fact that according to Ayatollah Khamenei's defensive approach, it is necessary to connect the interests of the country to the security matters of the region, to focus on newly emerging security threats, and to reduce enemies' risks for attacking Iran. By employing this actively defensive strategy, Iran seeks to warn the countries in the region that their assistance to the U.S. and Israel in the case of a military attack on Iran will result in more insecurity throughout the region.

Offense-defense policy

Offense-defense policy is proposed by reducing the possibility of war by adopting defensive approaches, and not expressing offensive behaviors. Moreover, it is also designed for "reducing the possibility of defeat," and enhancing military capabilities and warfare equipment.

Ayatollah Khamenei at Imam Khomeini University of Naval Sciences of Nowshahr on October 2015 emphasized, "your preparedness, as the armed forces, does not simply mean that you win the fight against enemy, but rather it means that you should defend the country from the enemies' malicious intents. If you are prepared, the enemy will not dare to take any wrong step toward you."⁽⁶²⁾ To him, this means deterrence power and reduction of possibility of a war occurring.

Furthermore, according to the basic model of this approach, one of the main factors for dominating offense over defense and disturbing their balance

is to imagine easy victory in the war.⁽⁶³⁾ After the U.S. attack on Iraq in 2003, by entering and actively influencing in it, Iran did not allow an opportunity of easy victory for the Western countries, and as a result it did not let them to attack against Iran. Iran's comprehensive support for Lebanon in 2006 as a response to Israel's attack can also be analyzed within this framework. Thus, the scholars in the defensive realism camp believe that, when it is easy to dominate, it will also more likely a war occur, and even intermediate powers will seek for opportunistic expansionism."⁽⁶⁴⁾ For example, when Turkey actively entered and adopted an offensive approach toward Syria and Iraq changes in terms of the neo-Ottoman doctrine, and when it helped such terrorist groups as ISIS and Al-Nusra Front⁽⁶⁵⁾ to emerge and strengthen by active cooperation of Saudi Arabia and Qatar to expand the range of their regional role and influence at the expense of Iran, it was immediately faced with Iran's response. On the other hand, Iraq, as a neighbor, and Syria, as a strategic alliance for Iran, and a part of the Axis of Resistance, are also considered as the "near aboard" region and two security circles for Tehran, and has been treated by the same offense-defense strategy. According to the Iranian Supreme Leader, the logic behind this approach is that "if Shrine Defenders (i.e. Iranian forces deployed in Iraq and Syria to fight against ISIS and Al-Nusra Front) have not fought, this enemy would enter the country. We would have to fight with them in our own cities."⁽⁶⁶⁾

This strategy is also based on "network deterrence" and "advancing defense" by active presence in the regional security and political movements. In other words, strategic networking is mainly designed to impact different security circles of a country, or its geopolitical and strategic domains or units, so that, in the case of any insecurity, the enemies' costs for action are increased and threats are neutralized in areas beyond the official borders of the country. It is reconfirmed by Ayatollah Khamenei's clear view when he proposed that "the regional influence and might of a nation or a state is a support for its security and independence. We are developing in all of these cases, from security and international influence to dominance over various incidents occurring in the country and the region."⁽⁶⁷⁾

Consequently, in order to protect its political-territorial integrity, Iran has increased its asymmetric defense capabilities and deterrence. However, despite

having such capabilities and due to lack of desired strategic depth, it faces with significant security threats. Iran has maritime and territorial boundaries with 15 countries, none of which is its natural alliance and many of them served as base for anti-Iranian measures by the United States, Israel, and Saudi Arabia. In order to solve this problem, Tehran has established a friendly relationship with countries willing to have relations with the Islamic Republic of Iran. These groups include Shias of Iraq, Lebanon, and Bahrain, Shias and enemies of the Taliban in Afghanistan, the Zaidi in Yemen, Iraqi Kurds, and the Palestinians. During the three past decades, these relations have helped Tehran to assess the measures against itself, and avoid other countries to be used as a base against its security and independence. Furthermore, many groups, as alliances of Tehran, have often won the elections in their own countries, since they are representatives of a population that cannot be neglected and that have lawful claims.

In other words, there is a dominant school of thought in Ayatollah Khamenei's and Iranian executive authorities' mental perception when discussing how to form Iran's military strategy, which cannot be simply ignored. The present approach decisively believes that the U.S. will not endure Iran's independence, and it intends to change the regime. Based on such a mentality, Iran's strong influence in neighboring countries allows Iran to protect its very being against external invasions and military attacks. Of course, such a mental perception has not been shaped in vacuum. Last year, while interviewed by the New York Times, Obama pointed to the origin of this matter, indicating that the leadership perceptions and concerns are legitimate.⁽⁶⁸⁾ Indeed, by experiencing the Iran-Iraq war, the Iranian leadership based the country's military strategy on this foundation, so that Iran can make strong relations in the region through Axis of Resistance, and to make sure that such a disaster will never repeat itself. Therefore, the concern of security, the most essential matter for Iran and leadership's primary and main motive simply means to protect national sovereignty, political independence, and territorial integrity which have been focused on by Iran since 1979.

According to Major General Mohammad Bagheri, the new Chief of Staff for the Armed Forces of the IRI, after the end of the war in 1988, Iran was the six times exposed to invasion of enemies.⁽⁶⁹⁾ No doubt, despite its complexities

and regional and international pressures posed on Iran, the idea of offensive defense has been successful. This theory is considerable with respect to Ayatollah Khamenei's defensive perspective because Iran will more rely on threats than on simple power. It means that Iran often seeks security, so it adopts an offensive reaction only when it is threatened. Thus, the main factor for the balance of security is the balance existing between offense-defense modes.

On the other hand, following the balance of threat strategy, this approach is presented for explaining the level of threat caused by security challenge and it is mainly on the basis that defensive capability of a country is not simply summarized in its relative power; but rather, there are two variables including "balance in offensive-defensive military technology" and "distinction between offensive-defensive status" in this regard which need to be examined.⁽⁷⁰⁾ Since Iran strongly needs to renew its old air force, surface-to-air missile defense, and many other elements of its arms systems, the Western countries have largely attempted to enhance the military capability of Israel and Arab countries located in the Persian Gulf. They equipped these countries with new technologies with advanced weapons sensors, the ISR system (intelligence/surveillance/reconnaissance) and others. On the other hand, the Persian Gulf countries have overtaken Iran in almost all conventional arms, except for missile power and effective manpower.⁽⁷¹⁾

Due to the same importance and sensitivity, Ayatollah Khamenei is seriously worried about the growing technological gap between Iran and neighboring countries. Thus, on June 30th, 2015 when communicating the general policies of "Iran's Sixth Development Program," he particularly referred to enhancing Iran defensive power into a first level regional power to provide national security and interests in paragraphs 52 and 53. He also pointed out that it is necessary to allocate at least 5 percent of the general budget to defensive power, which has the capacity for producing weapons and major defensive equipment, with a deterrence capability appropriate for all types of threats. This indicates the role and importance of Iran's military technologies in Ayatollah Khamenei's defensive approach.⁽⁷²⁾ Therefore, all advocates of offense-defense strategy agree that technology is an essential variable or factor in analyzing balance between offense and defense.⁽⁷³⁾ In this respect, balances between offense and defense usually weight more for defendant country.⁽⁷⁴⁾ It

seems that Iran has employed its strategy based on this approach, which is occasionally confirmed by the Americans. For example, in the Pentagon's report in 2014, Iran's military strategy or approach is described as "defensive." The report summarized this issue as "Iran's military strategy is defensive, and it is based on deterrence and prevention of attacks, enduring primary attacks, retaliating measures and attacks of invaders, and employing diplomatic solution without granting any significant privileges."⁽⁷⁵⁾ In this context, the threat considered by the United States is indeed within Iran's ability for preventing and counteracting attack. Overall, one can argue that Ayatollah Khamenei's foreign policy thinking is more based on the defensive realism theory, which has Islamic and ethical aspects as well that makes it distinguishable from the current tradition of the West.

Ayatollah Khamenei's Realism

Realism has always been considered an important virtue for a state leader. In this respect and in Western version, a persistent conventional wisdom suggests ethics are marginal to international relations. Yet, the fact is that questions of ethics have always been part of the study of international relations. For example, after many repetitive threats posed by Israel and the U.S. against Iran's nuclear program, some Western scholars believed that, "Iran should get the bomb ... and should Iran become the second Middle Eastern nuclear power since 1945, it would hardly signal the start of a landslide. Israel and Iran would do well to consider this precedent. If Iran goes nuclear, Israel and Iran will deter each other, as nuclear powers always have."⁽⁷⁶⁾

Nevertheless, by issuing a religious verdict, or fatwa, Iran's Supreme Leader has explicitly declared that employing any kind of weapons of mass destruction is religiously unlawful. He believes that "besides nuclear weapons, other types of weapons of mass destruction, such as chemical weapons and microbial weapons are also considered as serious threats against humanity. We take the use of these weapons as illegal and illegitimate and it is a duty for all countries to attempt for saving people from this great disaster."⁽⁷⁷⁾

This disagreement is mainly resulted from the important fact that he is a mujtahid, or cleric, and jurist in Shia Islam, and thus takes a Koranic approach to war and defense. This means that having paid attention to material

issues, such as interest and power, Islam also pays a special attention to value and ethical issues. Therefore, some realist principles do not allow examining the integrity of Ayatollah Khamenei's defensive and strategic thinking in this regard, because he generally has followed defensive realism based on his moral considerations. It means that according to Islamic realism, if a country is weak, then the oppressors will have stronger motives for aggression and developing their hegemonic activities.⁽⁷⁸⁾ It also means that although peace is the main issue, it is also necessary to fight to defend and revive values. Iran's leader believes that "in order to climb summits of material and spiritual perfection and summits of esteem and honor, a nation will require security and peace of mind about enemies' aggression. Without feeling of security, peace, and confidence, no country would be able to advance in scientific terms and no ethical and spiritual condition can achieve the desired end."⁽⁷⁹⁾

Therefore, Ayatollah Khamenei criticizes absolutely negative or positive attitudes toward military power. For this reason, he does not try to present a generally absolute picture for military power, rather concentrates on both positive and negative dimensions. As such, military power cannot inherently be positive or negative. That is, military power is an instrument in human's hand and if it lets the politicians' instincts to dominate, then it would have no religious value. However, if it is employed to make rational forces superior or in other words, to dominate human temperament, it is worth noting. For example, he believes that "the main goal of arms production in the Islamic Republic of Iran is a defensive goal for opposing oppressive enemies, while its main goal in the West is trading and increasing the wealth of weaponry factories and companies' owners."⁽⁸⁰⁾

In fact, according to Ayatollah Khamenei, the rationality governing Iran's defensive policy is not simply restricted to an instrumental reason based on a cost-benefit analysis which merely acts upon the basis of logic of consequence, since from Islamic thinking perspective, sustainable peace is only strengthened on social justice basis and oppression and inequality are considered as the most threatening factors for the Justice. Thus, Islam prescribes fighting against oppression in order to achieve justly peace. Generally, having Islamic thinking, he is opposed to the hegemonic principles in international relations, and since hegemony will create oppression in the international

system, he considers strengthening defensive vigor just in the fight against the oppressor, and protection of foundation of Islamic Republic of Iran as the primary principle. Thus, he believes that “according to the logic of materialistic powers, military power is an instrument for satisfying their own hegemonic thirst. However, Islamic logic is totally different from this logic. In Islam, to become armed is defending the rights of nations, the weak people, and justice; it means to be a fortification for national security.”⁽⁸¹⁾ As such, at present, Iran is the only country in the Middle East that produces security indigenously.

Another aspect of Ayatollah Khamenei’s realism also discusses the relative security of Islamic World, or Ummah, not just the relative power of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Through examining his statements and views since 2011, one can come to this understanding that from his perspective uprisings in the Arab world has deviated from the main path and the rise of many terrorist groups in the Middle East is rather a scenario for weakening and disintegrating all Islamic countries. For instance, continual decrease in the power of armies in the Islamic countries is a clear outcome of such a procedure. In fact, discursive analysis of his foreign policy and strategic thinking indicates that under present conditions, no country in the region will be able to change the structure of the Middle East in its own favor, and all will be losers, but Israel.

Conclusion

Ayatollah Khamenei’s strategic thinking is based on a defensive manner and generally a function of geographical characteristics and relative position of Iran’s security in an anarchic international system, balance of regional powers, as well as other threats faced by Iran. This policy and its continuity and change can largely be analyzed and explained by three behavioral variables including assertive, competitive, and cooperative behavioral patterns. The anarchic structure of international system, the role played by trans-regional actors and security clefts in the Middle East as three resistant factors, lead Iran to seek to increase its military power as appropriate based on lack of trust in other countries, so that it may enhance its relative security.

Therefore, the delicate structure of power, material capabilities by enemies and potential threats against Iran have affected Ayatollah Khamenei’s defensive behavior through mental perceptions or assumptions. He usually

processes information and evolutions based on historical comparisons and other perceptual shortcuts⁽⁸²⁾ and then he makes his decision. On this basis, he develops a special definition of threat and security and regards gaining and employing military power from a different perspective. Based on the Supreme Leader's aims and principles, behaviors, decisions, and incentives, one can conclude that he has focused on reducing the possibility of war occurrence, and not on decreasing the possibility of defeat in war. Meanwhile, since he has an Islamic approach to being a military force, his perspective toward desired international relations and order is a normative and ethical one, as he stated that the "Army of the Islamic Republic of Iran", and affiliated military forces of Iran is bound to Islamic obligations. It neither revolts during victory time, nor it takes prohibited actions. Such obligations are not common around the world. Armed forces in many countries do not observe such obligations. However, armed forces bounding to Islamic laws observe these ethical principles."⁽⁸³⁾ According to Ayatollah Khamenei, the main instruments of Iran's strategy, besides balancing, have always been preemptive instruments seeking to deter the enemy from attack or aggression by showing strength, thereby discouraging the enemies and rivals to think of initiating any direct conflict with Iran. According to this strategy, Iran is an independent actor having independent defensive approaches based on active deterrence. In this respect, from Ayatollah Khamenei's perspective, with a very small amount of military budget, compared to several countries in the region, Iran could protect its security in the turbulent Middle East region.

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