



## Iran's strategic culture: the 'revolutionary' and 'moderation' narratives on the ballistic missile programme

Mohammad Eslami  and Alena Vysotskaya Guedes Vieira 

Department of Political Science and International Relations, University of Minho, Braga, Portugal

### ABSTRACT

Drawing on an analytical framework that combines strategic culture theory with narrative analysis, this paper explores the recent evolution of Iran's ballistic missile programme (BMP) (2015–2019). Iran's strategic culture attributes a key role to the BMP but nevertheless allows room for manoeuvre in Iran's security policy, which explains multiple and sometimes contradicting visions of the BMP. We demonstrate that Iran's approach towards the programme is enveloped by political discourses, which shift with the direction of Iran's international relations and domestic politics. We distinguish two competing narratives – 'revolutionary' and 'moderation' – and demonstrate how they define the opportunities and constraints of Iran's military behaviour in different ways. Finally, we demonstrate a move towards a more confrontational approach, reflected in the consolidation of the 'revolutionary' narrative. This article contributes to a more fine-grained understanding of Iran's policy towards its BMP, which remains central to Iran's strategic culture.

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## Introduction

Iran's ballistic missile programme (BMP) dates back to 1977 and currently provides the country with the largest number of missiles in the Middle East. The BMP has always been a subject of controversy, while its more recent development from 2005 onwards has been referred to as an event of 'shattering geopolitical significance' (Walt 2012, 1). The ballistic missile test conducted by the Iranian Revolutionary Guard Corps (IRGC) in 2015, just three months after the signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) and using a missile inscribed with the words 'Israel should be destroyed' ('Israel Must Be Wiped Out' 2016), underscored the regional volatility, which was further heightened by the declarations of General Mohammad-Ali Jafari, Head of the IRGC, regarding the existence of a hidden underground missile base in 2017 (Jafari 2018).

Despite mounting regional tensions, Iran's recent employment of their BMP is limited to two instances.<sup>1</sup> In June 2017, the IRGC attacked ISIS bases and headquarters in Syria's Deirazur in response to the ISIS terrorist attack on Iran's Parliament. In October 2018, IRGC used six medium-range missiles to target Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) bases in the Eastern

Euphrates in Syria as immediate retaliation against the ISIS attack on the Khuzestan of Iran. More recently, in June 2019, the Iranian air defence system shot the Global Hawk RQ4, an advanced surveillance drone. Brian Hook, US Special Representative to Iran, condemned Iran's act as a 'mistake', prompting Iran's further diplomatic isolation, while President Trump stated that 'the US was cocked and loaded to retaliate against Iran on Thursday, but I changed my mind 10 minutes before planned strikes' (quoted in Marcus 2019).

Just 10 days before the drone-downing incident, Brian Hook had issued a statement conveying a different perspective of Iran's missile capabilities. Referring to IRGC statements regarding the existence of underground missile bases, he claimed that 'Iran has photo-shopped images of missile launches to try to show its increased missile capabilities' (Hook 2019). In response to Hook's comments, Iranian Foreign Minister Zarif claimed, 'we will see about that' (Zarif 2019g); thereby bringing Iran's BMP, once again, to the top of the international agenda.

The present contribution aims to explore Iran's BMP by combining the analytical perspective of strategic studies, and in particular strategic culture theory (SCT) (Taremi 2005, 2016), with Iranian studies (Adib-Moghaddam 2012; Takeyh 2003, 2004). Scholars of Iran's strategic culture are unanimous in their assessment of the BMP's central role for Iran's foreign and defense policy, including Iran's 'path dependent' military doctrine. Still, they identify a 'significant diversity' (Tabatabaei-Nejad 2019) of views within Iran, including on such critical aspects as the range of the missiles. To explore what is behind such diverse – and changing – views on the BMP, the present contribution employs narrative analysis (Riessman 2008). This allows us to account for multiple perspectives on the BMP, a strategy that is in line with the 'duality' of Iran's foreign policy and complexity of Iran's 'corporate and social identities' (Akbarzadeh and Barry 2016, 614; see also Colleau 2016). The Iranian studies literature has established several concepts that capture these features of Iran's identity and its international actorness, such as 'pragmatism' versus 'conservatism' and 'revisionism' (Takeyh 2003; Terhalle 2009; Yazdani and Hussain 2006); the opposition between 'normalisers' and 'hardliners' (Rezai and Khodaei Moshirabad 2018); or between the 'revolutionary' and 'liberal' positions (Adib-Moghaddam 2012; Akbarzadeh and Barry 2016; Colleau 2016).

The present contribution thus adopts a constructivist perspective, in which interests and objectives of individual states are a result of these states' norms and identities (Wendt 1996; Hurd 2008) within a particular social, spatial and historical context. This allows for a theory-informed analysis that aims to contribute to the current debate on the BMP, which is often dominated by empirically oriented contributions produced by think tanks and research institutes (Elleman and Fitzpatrick 2017; Eisenstadt 2016).

We argue that Iran's strategic culture creates room for manoeuvre for two approaches on Iran's BMP: the 'moderation' and 'revolutionary' narratives. We identify both of them in Iran's policy towards the BMP, and demonstrate how, following the US withdrawal from the JCPOA, Iran has increasingly relied on the 'revolutionary' narrative underpinned by the central role of deterrence, the aspiration to fight 'global arrogance', and the reliance on self-sufficiency, in contrast to the equal weight of the two narratives before that (2015–2018) (see Table 1). We demonstrate how the shift towards the 'revolutionary' narrative became consolidated after the downing of the US drone, concurrently reinforcing the already central role of the BMP in Iran's strategic culture.

This paper is structured as follows. The section below presents the analytical framework, followed by an analysis of the role of the BMP in Iran's strategic culture. The third section

**Table 1.** The 'revolutionary' and the 'moderation' narratives on the ballistic missile programme (BMP).

	Revolutionary narrative on the BMP	Moderation narrative on the BMP
History	Iran–Iraq war as a 'catalyst event', precedent of Iran's vulnerability BMP is non-negotiable	
Threat and deterrence	BMP quintessential to Iran's self-sufficiency (Only) BMP can prevent war	International cooperation along with the development of the BMP as the best guarantee of Iran's security Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action can prevent war
Identity	Shia as a 'revolutionary' peacemaker: (military) confrontation considered a means to achieve peace Iran versus 'global arrogance': BMP as a symbol of 'superior counter-discourse'	Shia as a peaceful religion, refuses military confrontation Iran as a part of an international system that can promote Iran's development

Source: Authors' compilation.

focuses on Iran's narratives on BMP, in the time periods 2015–2018 and 2018–2019, while paying special attention to the June 2019 drone incident. The centrepiece of this paper is the analysis of 62 official statements of Iran's high officials, delivered between 2015 and 2019. Attending to Iran's 'polycentric political order' (Rezaei and Khodaei Moshirabad 2018, 114), we have investigated statements by the officials belonging to the main centres of power in Iran: the Supreme Leader, the President, Iran's Foreign and Defense Ministers, and the IRGC officials. Aiming at a more comprehensive narrative analysis and a broader coverage, and especially in cases when the statements of the Supreme Leader, the President, the Foreign and Defense Ministers and IRGC officials were missing or insufficient, we also considered the statements of Members of Parliament and Imams of Friday prayers as well as influential public figures, political strategists and experts. All statements were retrieved from the official websites of Iranian institutions and of national and international newspapers.

## Analytical framework

The present contribution draws on an analytical framework which combines SCT and Iranian studies while also employing narrative analysis. The SCT pays special attention to internal, non-material factors that shape the identity of state elites and the population, allowing for a better understanding of the driving forces affecting the course of foreign policy in individual countries (Gray 1999; Snyder 1990). This allows the SCT to explain the puzzle of countries with similar material structures choosing different defence strategies. Recognised as a 'vital starting point for understanding the probable actions and decisions' (Knepper 2008, 457) of a state, strategic culture represents a country's 'set of shared beliefs, assumptions, and modes of behavior, derived from common experiences and accepted narratives that shape collective identity and relationships to other groups, and which determine appropriate ends and means for achieving security objectives' (Strain and Colonel 1996, 19). The SCT views strategic behaviour as not exclusively underpinned by material and structural factors, but rather influenced by how the country's political elites and public define their national interests and strategic priorities (Wendt 1996; Das 2009; Booth 1990; Babiarz 2015; Libel 2020; Gray 1999; Snyder 1990; Johnston 1999, Bloomfield 2012).

In the analysis of strategic behaviour, the SCT emphasises the importance of unique experiences and language for justifying certain state actions, including the acquisition,

production, testing and military employment of ballistic missiles. These unique experiences and language amount to 'culturally endowed ways' (Kartchner 2009, 60), which define the costs and benefits of certain decisions, and which create their own rationality. Certain alternatives or results eventually emerge as the only appropriate options, under their specific terms, as a 'corridor of "normal" or "probable"' (Meyer 2005, 528) states' behaviour.

Moreover, we adopt a specific analytical perspective on strategic culture. To borrow the terms of Glenn's typology, the present contribution views strategic culture as a 'meaning' rather than a 'form' or a 'toolkit' (Glenn 2009). In this perspective, strategic culture is an ongoing interplay between discourse and practice, while the language is a site where a struggle for meaning is taking place. Such an interpretivist analytical perspective, which remains underdeveloped in contemporary strategic culture debate, is valuable to strategic culture studies to the extent that it allows us to account for change in an individual strategic culture.

Finally, the present paper employs narrative analysis. The latter does not assume objectivity but rather privileges positionality and subjectivity. This allows us to provide a comprehensive account of the behaviour of individual actors (Riessman 2008) and their understanding of the world in which political action takes place, by focussing on the (re)construction of a shared meaning of the past, present and future (Miskimmon et al. 2014). Narrative analysis is promising given its potential for unpacking the process of construction and evolution of an individual strategic culture, which seems suitable in the light of the findings of Iranian studies emphasising the aforementioned 'duality' of Iran's foreign policy and the complexity of Iran's 'corporate and social identities' (Akbarzadeh and Barry 2016, 614; Colleau 2016).

To sum up, we subscribe to the analytical position that regards strategic culture as an especially persistent though not immutable narrative, which informs the strategic policy and behaviour of individual states. At the same time, we maintain that Iran's strategic culture as a narrative is 'nested' – that is to say, embedded – into (an) overarching metanarrative(s). It is in the latter, superordinate, shell of Iran's identity where the (re)conceptualisation of a state's identity/'self' and the definition of 'other' is taking place, which eventually informs more specific identarian dynamics unfolding in the realm of strategic culture.

### The role of the BMP in Iran's strategic culture

The development of the BMP is central to Iran's foreign and defence policy (Olson 2016; Tabatabai and Samuel 2017; Taremi 2014). While Iran's first attempt to build ballistic missiles dates to 1977, the turning point, a 'catalyst event' (Tabatabai and Samuel 2017, 155) in Iran's post-Revolution history, was the Iran–Iraq war (1980–1988). During this war, and particularly between 1984 and 1988, Iran's towns and cities were attacked with missiles (Stanley 2009; Olson 2016; Tabatabai and Samuel 2017), causing a high number of casualties. This so-called 'war of cities', referred to as 'Holy Defence' and celebrated with an annual military parade, has exerted a constant and powerful influence on Iran's position towards the BMP (Taremi 2016), by fuelling the country's position with motives that immediately bring history to the present. Examples of this include statements referring to 'cities showered with missiles' (Zarif 2016b) or that 'Saddam Hussein attacked six-metre alleys with nine-metre missiles' (Seddighi 2016). The enduring importance of the Iran–Iraq war is apparent from the following assertion by Alamal-Hoda, the Imam of Mashhad: 'unlike the other countries, we are not celebrating the end of war, we are celebrating the beginning of the war' (Alamal-Hoda 2019). Moreover,

given the fact that the 'war of cities' had been largely ignored by the international community, within Iran's strategic culture, the BMP became closely connected with ideas of self-reliance and underpinned by a distrust towards the West/US. At the same time, since Iraq's military actions were driven in part by a goal of containing the Iranian Revolution, the 'revolutionary' state foundation became closely related to the missile programme (Tabatabai and Samuel 2017).

The subsequent position assumed by Iran's leadership was to begin systematically investing, from 1984 onwards, in their own missile technology. Such a strongly pro-BMP position, exacerbated by the sanctions imposed on Iran, resulted in an 'unlimited non-nuclear missile defence strategy' (Dehghan 2015), which included technical and technological assistance from and cooperation with Brazil, China, North Korea and Libya. Since then, Iran's BMP has evolved very rapidly. From 1991–1992 onwards, Iran has possessed liquid-propellant missiles (Oghab and Shahab, Fajr group, Khorramshahr and Zelzal/Earthquake) and, from 2006 onwards, more advanced solid-propellant missiles. In 2005, Iran produced the fastest ballistic missile at that time, the Ghadr, with a range of 2000 km (Elleman 2010; Elleman and Fitzpatrick 2017; Bahgat 2019). In 2016, according to the Stockholm International Peace Research Institute (SIPRI), Iran had the 'largest inventory of ballistic missiles in the Middle East' (Fitzpatrick 2019, 32).

The special position of the BMP in Iran's strategic culture is thus connected with the (inglorious) past in which Iran was a victim, becoming instead a matter of national pride:

our missiles are able to hit [a] target [with an accuracy of within a few yards] from a distance of several thousand kilometres. We got this with power. We keep it upright. Because it is the source of national pride. Because it is the source of legitimacy. (Khamenei 2017a)

In addition, Iran's BMP is also closely critical to Iran's aspiration to attain self-sufficiency at all levels (Eisenstadt 2011).

The central role of the BMP in Iran's strategic culture remains determined by deterrence. Developed as a means to retaliate against Iraq's attacks in the 1990s (Takeyh 2003), the BMP maintained its central position after the Iran–Iraq war, due to Iran's persistent security dilemma, and was now aimed at deterring Israel and the US (Rezaee 2019). Israel, not recognised by Iran as a country, or a member of United Nations, is considered an occupier of Palestinian territories, killing Palestinians who constitute an organic part of Iran's 'body' and 'liver' (Khamenei 2017b). From this perspective, the constant and persistent infiltration and interference of the Zionist lobby in international politics has been associated with 'global arrogance'.<sup>2</sup> Since Israel allegedly intends to destroy Islam, and the Shia religion specifically, it represents an imminent existential threat, a 'cancerous tumour' (Khamenei 2015b). Iran's missile capability thus stands as a critical means of deterrence: being surrounded by US and Israeli military bases obliges Tehran to improve its military capabilities, such as the BMP, to defend itself (Eisenstadt 2011). The central role of the BMP has more recently been reinforced by the Israel–Lebanon war (2006) and by the emergence of terrorist groups in the region since 2001, including ISIS.

This explains Iran's reluctance towards negotiating the BMP: regardless of the international concern stemming from the connection of the BMP to Iran's nuclear programme, and of the attempts to include the BMP in the JCPOA, Iran's resistance proved too difficult to overcome (Izewicz 2017). Beginning in 2006, Iran was prohibited from importing technologies linked to the development of its BMP, and in 2010, United Nations Security Council

(UNSC) Resolution 1929 imposed further restrictions on Iran, banning the testing of ballistic missiles. According to UNSC Resolution 2231 (2015), the sanctions on Iran's BMP remain in place, and Iran continues to be banned from importing or exporting sensitive technologies. The BMP has remained virtually unaffected by sanctions, except for the short period of time when Iran was involved in the nuclear agreement negotiations. The IRGC has continued its ballistic missile tests, even after the conclusion of the JCPOA. According to General Amir Hatami, Iran's Defense Minister, '40–50 tests per year are carried out' (Hatami 2019). The Iranian leader Ayatollah Khamenei also maintained that 'Iran does not need permission for the tests in the future' (Khamenei 2019b).

Iran's BMP has provoked strong criticism from some members of the 5 + 1 and Israel, claiming that Iran has violated the JCPOA and urging the UNSC to impose further sanctions on Iran. While the US responded with the deployment of a navy group in June 2019, Iran considered the tests to be beyond the framework of UNSC Resolution 2231 (2015). According to Iran's leadership, this is due to the fact that missile tests have been carried out for defensive purposes only and that only conventional weapons were used, while the framework of UNSC Resolution 2231 solely prohibits the development of ballistic missiles capable of delivering a nuclear warhead. Iran never admitted the missile debate to enter the 5 + 1 negotiations and made every effort to keep the BMP outside the framework of the deal (Zarif 2016b). While US negotiators hoped that the missile programme would be subject to the next round of negotiations, these hopes were dashed upon US withdrawal from the JCPOA.

### Iran's BMP: the 'revolutionary' and 'moderation' narratives

We argue that there are two distinct narratives on Iran's BMP, which stem from two distinct interpretations of Iran's history, Shi'i identity, and the sense of threat as well as deterrence. To advance our argument, we use as a point of departure the distinction between two main currents of thought, namely the 'revolutionary' and the 'liberal' (Adib-Moghaddam 2012). Each adopts its own specific approach to domestic and international issues. The Iran–Iraq war, for instance, in its 'revolutionary' interpretation, is considered a gift to the Iranian people, to the extent that it provides an opportunity to fight for God and strengthen people's faith; while the 'moderation' narrative tends to emphasise the ensuing human and material destruction as well as the loss of economic resources. In a similar vein, the 'revolutionary' view on the sanctions is of a 'golden opportunity' for strengthening Iran's independence, self-sufficiency and resilience of Shi'i regime from 'others', corresponding to the anti-liberalist, anti-imperialist and anti-Zionist posture, while the 'moderation' perspective views the sanctions as contributing to Iran's international isolation and thus the greatest threat to the Shi'i regime, which is expected to cooperate with all actors, even enemies.

Relying on the Iranian studies literature and the existing accounts of Iran's strategic culture, one can expect two narratives to be present in Iran's policy towards the BMP as well, with a different meaning assigned to Iran's history, its identity and, specifically, cooperation with the West (and also to Iran's anti-imperialism, support for the *mustazafin*, and anti-Zionism), and with a different perspective on the existing threats to Iran and the role of the BMP in Iran's deterrence.

### *The 'revolutionary' narrative on the BMP*

The 'revolutionary' narrative on the BMP derives from a 'metanarrative' on Iran's revolutionary national identity, which relies on its own particular ontology and the complex set of narratives supporting it. Adib-Moghaddam (2012, 287) has portrayed the essence of this metanarrative as 'linked, with the help of an intellectual vanguard, into a strident, ideologically charged counterculture that would simulate the viability of a temporal break with everything that "is"'. The 'revolutionary' narrative closely links the BMP to the narrative targeting Iran's narrative international standing, transforming the programme into a symbol of 'superior counter-discourse'. As the resulting BMP narrative is embedded within a 'stringent, ideologically charged counterculture' (Adib-Moghaddam 2012, 278), it leaves no room for negotiation.

First, the 'revolutionary narrative' emphasises the theme of 'deterrence'. Following the downing of the US drone in June 2019, Imam of Isfahan interprets President Trump's alleged change of mind as follows: 'the US wanted to attack Iran, but Israel prevented Trump from doing so. Israel was afraid of being eliminated from the world map by Iran' (Tabatabaei-Nejad 2019). Alamal-Hoda, Imam of Mashhad, has similarly equated the BMP with the indirect possession of nuclear weapons: 'by having the missile, we do not need the nuclear bomb; if Iran decides to confront Israel, a missile strike on the Dimona reactor would be enough' (quoted in Joffere 2019).

Also reflective of the emphasis on deterrence are the references to the justification of Israel as Iran's main enemy. Accordingly, the range of existing Iranian missiles is sufficient to deter Israel: 'the reason we designed the 2,000 km missile [was to target] our main enemy, the Zionist regime' (Hajizadeh 2016). Moreover, the 'revolutionary' narrative is resolutely against any notions of restricting or destroying Iran's BMP, as this exposes Iran to a situation of 'whenever the US wants, it can attack us' (Rahimpur 2018a), drawing on the precedent of Libya. This narrative portrays strategic negotiating as a 'poison that kills' (Khamenei 2019c).

Second, the 'revolutionary' narrative is highly sceptical of international cooperation. Accordingly, this narrative holds that 'missiles, not talks' are Iran's future. This narrative allows individual actors such as Ayatollah Javadi-Amoli, one of the most influential religious leaders, to scale up the 'revolutionary' narrative to an ironic-aggressive one, as he did when commenting on Iran's Foreign Minister greeting Barack Obama: 'if you were shaking hands with them, count your fingers' (Zarif 2019a).

A cornerstone of this narrative is the portrayal of the US as highly unreliable and untrustworthy, leaving Iran no choice but to defend itself and the neighbouring countries. Given Iran's antiquated equipment and the impossibility of modernising it under sanctions, the BMP assumes the highest level of importance in Iran's defence and deterrence. Here, the 'revolutionary' narrative connects to the 'global arrogance' narrative and maintains that 'the only way to guarantee peace and security' is to rely on one's own forces, which, in the case of Iran, is the BMP, the logic being that 'if global arrogance understands that you don't have enough power to defend your people, it will be tempted to attack you' (Rahimpur 2018b).

This narrative draws strongly on the history of support and partnership between Saddam Hussain and the US. Drawing on US assistance to Iraq,<sup>3</sup> the narrative develops the idea that the US will 'always find someone' to attack Iran (before, it was Saddam Hussein; now, it is Saudi Arabia's Bin Salman): 'The US and Israel will find a new Saddam and make him attack Iran' (Raefi-Pour 2019).

This makes Iran's BMP non-negotiable: 'Iran will not accept new Western missile negotiation proposals. And no matter how much they insist, Iran will not auction off its national interests and its strategy to defend itself in the world's political marketplace' (Khamenei 2019c). Conveying a strong conviction in Iran's deterrence, the narrative, oriented domestically, sends the message that 'neither a war will happen nor will we negotiate' (Khamenei 2019c). As the 'revolutionary' narrative implies, Iran has an existential need to develop, produce and test ballistic missiles, which it considers 'legitimised deterrence'.

Thirdly, the 'revolutionary' narrative, underpinned by the aspiration of fighting the 'global arrogance', has an expansionist orientation. It portrays Iran in perpetual opposition to the West, its 'other'; moreover, Iran is portrayed as 'the new "superpower" that has been "born"' (Abbasi 2015a). There is therefore a strong link to Iran's identity and its place in the world, resulting in a strong 'missionary' discourse that includes converting 'the White House into a mosque' (Abbasi 2015b). The importance of fighting 'global arrogance', which goes hand in hand with supporting *mustazafin*, has been reflected in the statements of Ayatollah Khamenei, who claimed,

I have to say, even if the US built a nuclear plant in Saudi Arabia and provided it with ballistic missiles, I would not worry because I know in the near future they will be in the hand of Islamic strivers [Houthis]. (Khamenei 2019d)

'Deterrence' as a central theme is also intrinsically linked to the mistrust towards international cooperation in the 'revolutionary' narrative. Thus, the narrative holds that the 'heart of the US' (referring to Israel) has been 'taken hostage in our hand by our missile power' (Alamal-Hoda 2018). The US is portrayed as having an awareness that 'if they attack Iran, Israel will be destroyed in less than 10 minutes' (Alamal-Hoda 2018).

### **The 'moderation' narrative on the BMP**

Iran's moderation narrative, embedded into a 'liberal' stream of thinking, is centred on the idea that the only way to promote national interests is via international cooperation, in line with the provisions of Islam as a peaceful religion (Islam-e-Rahmani) (Khatami, 2013) and with the idea of Iran as a force for good in international politics. It therefore advocates less conflictual relations and a 'carefully calibrated engagement' with the West (Colleau 2016, 34), which is essential to mitigate Iran's security dilemma. It is especially critical of Iran's international isolation, which harms the country's national interest by ignoring its multifaceted links to other global actors, including what has been labelled 'discursive dependency', corresponding to Iran's desire for the recognition of its legitimate interests, as well as 'strategic dependency', related to the convergence of strategic threats and interest to both Iran and other important international actors, such as the US (Colleau 2016, 34). The moderation narrative has acquired tangible expression in the 'Dialogue of Civilizations' proposed by President Khatami in the late 1990s, and developed along with Iran's nuclear negotiation process. Although the 'moderation narrative' was weak during the Ahmadinejad administration, it rose again under Rouhani administration, advocating 'prudence and hope' in Iran's foreign policy. The 'moderation' narrative saw as its main priority the improvement Iran's international position, which was undermined by Iran's international isolation, the sanctions, the regional tensions, the dispute over the nuclear programme and the rise of terrorist groups. According to Rouhani, the way forward for Iran was related to the idea that 'Islam



with its merciful face, Iran with its rational face, the revolution with its human face and the system with its emotional face still create epics' (Rouhani 2013).

Iran's 'moderation' narrative on the BMP considers the latter 'one of the enduring policies of the Islamic Republic' (Nobakht 2017), and maintains that the BMP is a key deterrent. It states that 'these missiles are not for use and we will never, never, never use them against anybody unless in self-defence. And we are sure nobody has the guts to attack us again' (Zarif 2016b). Similar to the 'revolutionary' narrative, it maintains that 'Iran does not need permission to build missiles' (Rouhani 2017a). Consequently, 'Iran's BMP is non-negotiable' (Rouhani 2017b). It strongly draws upon the Iran–Iraq war:

In the past 300 years, Iran has only defended itself. You remember when Saddam attacked Iran with chemical bombs? [...] the US provided Saddam missiles to use against us, but nobody provided us any missiles for means of defence, and now you ask me why we develop our missiles? (Zarif 2019f)

At the same time, the narrative holds that cooperation is possible and problems can be solved thorough dialogue and negotiation. The narrative places great importance on economic power and the balance between the economic and military dimensions of Iran's foreign policy, reflected in the following statement: 'only when the wheel of people's lives is spinning is the spinning of centrifuges valuable' (Rouhani 2015). The 'moderation' narrative conveys the idea that 'I wish that instead of missiles and satellites Iran could make bicycles to compete with India and Turkey' (Ziba-Kalam 2019b).

A case in point of the 'moderation narrative' is the critical position assumed by some of Iran's officials towards the ballistic missile tests conducted by the IRGC since 2015, after the signing of the nuclear deal. This narrative, while acknowledging the role of missiles in Iran's deterrence, also argues that the IRGC needed to act with caution, since 'everything has its own time' (Motahari 2018a). The 'moderation' narrative thus stands in contrast with the 'revolutionary' narrative, which emphasises the urgency of developing Iran's most strategically important programme, for which there can be no time constraints; it is, rather, 'now or never'. After the IRGC ballistic missile test in 2015, the narrative has become stronger and conveyed by different political actors, who raised questions such as, 'Has a week gone by that we have not proudly unveiled another of our military achievements? What is the message inherent to the missile test after the JCPOA? Why must we insist so much on showing off our military capability?' (Ziba-Kalam 2016). In 2017, IRGC missile testing was referred to as an 'indiscretion', a position of 'conservatism' that is 'always bad', while noting that 'it is always better to be moderate' (Motahari 2018b).

The 'moderation narrative' is especially concerned with the excessive emphasis on deterrence, which could provoke international actors to impose even more stringent economic sanctions, leading to further tensions and eventually pushing Iran to assuming a more belligerent posture. Adherence to the 'revolutionary' narrative is also seen as giving *carte blanche* to the non-implementation of the JCPOA (Motahari 2018b). Those responsible for the unstable economy of Iran and for the new sanctions imposed on the country are those who tested missiles immediately after JCPOA, effectively preventing the implementation of the nuclear deal (Motahari 2018b).

At the same time, rather than focussing on Iran alone, the 'moderation' narrative also holds key international actors accountable. Accordingly, 'the US is seen as an actor that must

demonstrate its good intentions towards negotiations by lifting the sanctions and returning to the negotiation table' (Rouhani 2019c).

US withdrawal from the JCPOA has changed the 'moderation' narrative, making the theme of international cooperation and Iran's economic development secondary ones. The 'moderation' narrative was re-centred on statements reiterating that 'the missile programme is non-negotiable'; 'we don't sell our security' and 'it is our power of defensive deterrence' (Rouhani 2019b). Eventually, as the 'revolutionary narrative' grew stronger, US withdrawal from the JCPOA pushed the 'moderation' narrative to disappear almost completely.

### ***Downing of the US drone: 'hit and run is over'***

The drone incident (June 2019) has produced a new radical variation of the 'revolutionary' narrative, and the latter has prevailed over the 'moderation' narrative. This contrasts with the pre-2018 time period, where the two narratives co-existed on equal terms.

While both narratives had a comparable weight prior to 2015, ie shortly before, during and after the signing of the nuclear deal, with the 'moderation' narrative being even stronger in the 2015–2016 period, it was the continued US sanctions on Iran that raised the sense of mistrust in Iran and revived the 'revolutionary' narrative during 2016–2017. The weight of the two narratives became similar with the US withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018, but the imposition of new sanctions on Iran in late 2018 and early 2019 reinforced the 'revolutionary' narrative. The latter reached its peak in June 2019 thanks to the US drone-downing incident.

While Iran has traditionally declared that 'our missiles are a means of defence' (Velayaty 2017), after the drone incident in June 2019, an offensive dimension of the 'revolutionary' narrative came to the forefront. Accordingly, while it has usually been stated that 'We will not begin any war, but we will not rely just on the defence anymore', the narrative changed in July 2019. The drone incident was referred to as a 'clever step' by the Vice President of Iran's Parliament (Motahari 2019), and Iran's narrative became closely intertwined with the BMP: 'Our military forces are ready for defence. Missiles can be powers of deterrence' (Motahari 2019). In addition, the themes of 'borders' and 'sovereignty' emerged as a justification of missile employment: 'Our borders are our red line and nobody is allowed to joke with us on our red line' (Hajizadeh 2019a).

An even stronger connection is established between current affairs and Iran's past, reflected in the recurrent statement that 'hit and run is over' (Khamenei 2015a, 2019b). Firstly, the narrative emphasises that Iran's position has been 'supported by God' (Abbasi 2019), as is made clear by Iran's victory over standing military powers like the UK and the US. Secondly, the narrative connects the drone incident (June 2019) to the US Navy attack on Iran Air flight 655 in July 1988,<sup>4</sup> thereby reinforcing the idea of the indisputable necessity for stronger defence and self-reliance, once again reiterating the role of the BMP in Iran's strategic culture. The power of the Iranian navy displayed in the seizure of a British tanker on July 20, 2019 is viewed as further reinforcement of the 'hit and run is over' theme (Khamenei 2015a, 2019a). The seizure of the British tanker happened just a few days after a speech given by Ayatollah Khamenei emphasising the necessity of retaliating against the Iranian tanker incident in Gibraltar.<sup>5</sup> Accordingly, he stated that 'evil England' would 'have to know that the revolutionary faithful troops shall not leave this mischief without response' (Khamenei 2019a). Recalling the difficult past when Iran was considered humiliated and a victim, the narrative now insists that 'if a country hits us, we will hit, if they attack, we will attack and if they seize, we will

seize'. Eventually, Iran's position on the missiles became consolidated, allowing Iranian leadership to state that 'If something happens, we will not ignore it as before; our response to a missile will be a missile' (Rezaee 2019).

The post-2018 narrative thus acquires a clear 'revolutionary' shape. Accordingly, Iran's BMP is celebrated as a symbol of Iran's national identity, reflected in the assertion of President Rouhani:

If we had destroyed this drone with the S300, I would not have been proud of that; however, shooting down an American drone with a completely native missile is a source of national pride. It means we searched with an Iranian radar, we locked on target with an Iranian radar and we finally hit the target with an Iranian missile. (Rouhani 2019a)

Another manifestation of the special meaning attributed to the BMP, informed by the 'revolutionary' narrative, can be identified in President Rohani's appreciation of the BMP, demonstrated as he expressed his readiness to 'kiss the hand of the defence ministry for making the missiles and also the hand of the IRGC forces for their efforts to defend Iran's border and establish security, and also for deploying the weapon in the correct manner' (Rouhani 2019a). Another manifestation of the radical facet of the 'revolutionary' narrative can be found in Ayatollah Khamenei's reaction to shooting down the US drone, namely in the act of Ayatollah Khamenei giving his own ring as an award to the officer who targeted the RQ4' (Tavakoli 2019).

This narrative specifically focuses upon Iran's tensions with the US. Referring to President Donald Trump's statements regarding a 'short war' with Iran (Trump 2019), the dominant narrative portrays such a 'short war with Iran' as 'an illusion' (Zarif 2019d). The 'revolutionary narrative' becomes central while also adhering to the aspiration to fight 'global arrogance', in which the Global Hawk incident is presented as the 'strong fist to the twaddling mouth of America' (Pezeshkian 2019).

The dominant narrative is expelling the 'moderation' from the narrative space. Among the manifestations of this is the shift in the position of Iranian elites, assuming 'revolutionary' as the only appropriate position: 'If the US attacks my country, I will not be the political theoretician. I will be a fighter who takes up a weapon to defend the country' (Ziba-Kalam 2019a).

The shift from the 'moderation' narrative to the 'revolutionary' narrative is associated with a re-interpretation of the role of deterrence as well as threat, identity (fighting 'global arrogance') and history, and reinforcing them as BMP becomes a matter of national pride. The shift has been fostered by the direct sanctions imposed on Ayatollah Khamenei in June 2019 and Javad Zarif in August 2019, as these have been viewed as a closing of all negotiation doors and conveying the idea that 'The time of the discourse of super powers is over' (Zarif 2019e).

As a result, the radical revolutionary narrative has become dominant, outweighing the 'moderation' narrative focussing on economic development, international cooperation and multilateralism, as reflected in the following statement by Javad Zarif:

Imposing sanctions on Iran's Leader and Foreign Minister means that the US does not want to negotiate. [...] Whenever they entered the Persian Gulf, they committed atrocities, the worst of which was the killing of 290 innocent people in an attack on the Islamic Republic Airlines Airbus (655). [...] The UK has blocked our tanker in collaboration with US economic terrorism'. (Zarif 2019e).

This gives way to a particular re-interpretation of Iran's defence policy and the BMP (while juxtaposing Iran with Saudi Arabia):

We never bought our security and we will never buy it. Our security cannot be bought and sold, because our security comes from the people. [...] We were not given whatever we wanted during the imposed war [ie the Iraq War]. We were deprived of the most basic means of defending our own people. [...] We stood on our feet and built our defences. We developed our own missiles. We were able to shoot down the most advanced American drone with a fully Iranian missile. Now they ask, why have you made a weapon? The answer is that you cannot prevent Iranian progress through sanctions. Because you are confusing Iran with your servants who buy security from you and obey your orders. Iran is a different breed, you may be God to some but to Iran you have never been and never will be. (Zarif 2019e)

## Conclusions

Aiming at a more fine-grained understanding of Iran's BMP policy, the present contribution has put forward an analytical framework connecting the SCT and insights from Iranian studies on Iran's foreign policy and identity, while also employing narrative analysis. We can conclude that Iran's strategic culture allows for two narratives on Iran's BMP, namely the 'revolutionary' and the 'moderation' narratives, each adopting its own specific interpretation of Iran's history, the Shi'i identity, the sense of threat and the employment of the BMP as a means of deterrence, and associated with drastically different policy outcomes.

In spite of their fundamental differences, the two narratives share a number of similarities, including the view of the BMP as non-negotiable. In both, high importance is attributed to history. In this sense, it is possible to conclude Iran's policy towards the BMP is intertwined with the historical precedent of its vulnerability (1980–1988). Nowadays, surrounded by US military bases and perceiving a constant and imminent threat from Israel and the US, the feeling of vulnerability informing Iran's strategic culture is additionally reinforced by Iran's antiquated air forces, which cannot be modernised under the extensive sanctions. Consequently, the main concern of the Iranian leadership is inevitably directed at creating a powerful defence system, capable of defending its territory in support of Iran's defensive strategic culture.

Where the two narratives differ is in the identification of threat and Iran's identity related to the issue of the BMP. The 'revolutionary' narrative considers the BMP of utmost importance due to its capacity to deter an attack by a 'New Saddam Hussein'. Contrary to the 'moderation' narrative, the 'revolutionary' narrative places the BMP in a 'superior counter-discourse' centred on the aspiration to fight 'global arrogance' as a special obligation of the Shi'i regime, rather than considering any form of cooperation, diplomacy or negotiation, all emphasised by the 'moderation' narrative.

Finally, focussing on the 2015–2019 period, the present article has also demonstrated a shift in the BMP narratives in Iran. While initially, the 'revolutionary' and 'moderation' narratives co-existed on equal terms, a narrative shift has been taking place since the US withdrawal from the JCPOA, and especially after the July 2019 drone incident. Prior to 2018, the Iranian 'moderation' narrative could convey some criticism over the BMP policy, maintaining that while defence, security and deterrence were critically important, economic issues needed to be taken more seriously. Based on the 'moderation' narrative, international

cooperation oriented towards the resolution of Iran's economic problems had been Iran's main priority, outweighing other issues, while negotiation was the best method to ensure Iran's international engagement and cooperation.

US withdrawal from the JCPOA has increased scepticism towards international cooperation among Iran's elites. As a result, the 'revolutionary' narrative has become predominant in Iran. This narrative has always viewed systematic international cooperation with the West/'global arrogance' as a strategic mistake, one that would inevitably result in the country's destruction. According to the 'revolutionary' narrative, strong defensive power needs to be viewed as the utmost priority of a country fighting for its survival, and cannot not be overshadowed by any other issue. Although the narrative shift began with US withdrawal from the JCPOA, the shooting down of the Global Hawk (and the seizure of the British tanker) made the 'revolutionary' narrative grow stronger, and more radical, while the 'moderation' narrative became almost non-existent.

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## Notes on contributors

*Mohammad Eslami* is a PhD in Political Science and International Relations at the University of Minho and a Collaborative Researcher of the Research Centre for Political Science (CICP).

*Alena Vysotskaya Guedes Vieira* is an Assistant Professor at the University of Minho, Portugal, and an Integrated Member of the Research Centre for Political Science (CICP).

## Notes

1. The time frame of the present contribution is 2015–2019, to the extent that an important instance of Iran's missile employment in 2020, namely the attack on the US military bases in Iraq, is excluded from the analysis.
2. 'Arrogance' is the existence of a kind of cultural, political and economic domination, colonisation and exploitation by a limited minority of a poor and weak majority (Musavi-Jashani and Doroudi 2012).
3. In the 1980s, the US government provided Iraq with intelligence information about Iranian force deployments and movements collected by the US Airborne Warning and Control Aircraft that had been stationed in Saudi Arabia and operated by the Pentagon (Adib-Moghaddam 2006).
4. On 3 July 1988, a US Navy ship, the *Vincennes*, shot down Iran Air Flight 655, killing its 290 passengers and crew.
5. An Iranian GRACE-1 tanker was blocked by the British navy in Gibraltar on 4 July 2019 because it was suspected of transferring oil to Syria.

## ORCID

Mohammad Eslami  <http://orcid.org/0000-0003-0283-1839>

Alena Vysotskaya Guedes Vieira  <http://orcid.org/0000-0002-5643-0398>

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