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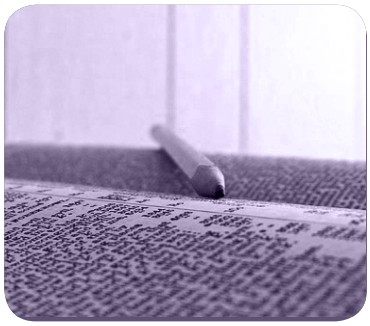

# Evaluación del papel del conflicto renovado como explicación de la supervivencia del Irán revolucionario: La crisis siria como estudio de caso

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# MÁSTER EN ESTUDIOS ÁRABES E ISLÁMICOS CONTEMPORÁNEOS

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**Título del trabajo:**

***Assessing the role of renewed conflict in explaining the survival of revolutionary Iran: The Syrian crisis as a case study.***

**Evaluación del papel del conflicto renovado como explicación de la supervivencia del Irán revolucionario: La crisis siria como estudio de caso.**

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**Abstract:**

How does *renewed conflict* explain the durability of revolutionary regimes? One of the pillars of regime cohesion is the constant state of conflict in their revolutionary foreign policy as it reinforces leadership, elite cohesion and nationalism. This constant state is a diversionary strategy to maintain regime cohesion internally, as it strengthens institutions, unites factionalism and activates revolutionary ideology. Drawing the case of the Islamic Republic of Iran, it will be argued how the current regional presence in Syria can influence regime cohesion. This investigation will add on to the literature regarding the survival of revolutionary regimes throughout time and how a confrontational stance can be a source of stability for these regimes.

**Key words:** Iran, Syria, renewed conflict, revolutionary regimes, durability, stability.

**Resumen:**

¿En qué medida el *conflicto renovado* explica la durabilidad de regímenes revolucionarios? El estado constante de conflicto en la política exterior revolucionaria es uno de los pilares clave para la cohesión del régimen ya que refuerza el liderazgo, el nacionalismo y cohesiona las elites. Este estado constante es una estrategia de diversión política para mantener la cohesión del régimen internamente, ya que fortalece las instituciones, une el faccionalismo y activa la ideología revolucionaria. Tomando el caso de la República Islámica de Irán, se argumentará cómo la actual presencia regional iraní en Siria puede influir en la cohesión del régimen. Esta investigación se sumará a la amplia literatura sobre la supervivencia de los regímenes revolucionarios a lo largo del tiempo y cómo una postura de confrontación puede ser una fuente de estabilidad para estos regímenes.

**Palabras clave:** Irán, Siria, conflicto renovado, regímenes revolucionarios, durabilidad, estabilidad.

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## Introduction:

Since 1979, the durability of the Iranian regime has been dependent on its revolutionary condition. While there is a wide literature regarding Iranian pragmatism or moderation throughout time and the importance of regime's ideology (Mozaffari, 2009: 1; Rakkel, 2008: 144; Buchta, 2000:11; Asraf, 1990: 115), recent investigations put emphasis on how regime cohesion can be ensured through a state of conflict (Harris, 2016; Terhalle, 2015; Borszik, 2015; Levitsky and Way, 2013; Kneuer, 2011; Terhalle, 2009; Levy and Valiki, 1993; Levy). Two main conflicts have shown how its foreign policy has adapted in a way to ensure the survival of the revolutionary regime. The first one, the eight-year war with Iraq and the second one, the recent nuclear crisis, confirming a pattern of *renewed conflict*[1] (Levitsky and Way, 2013: 14) which leads to the presumption that the current presence in Syria is another strategy to maintain regimes survival.

Previous crisis in Iran were solved by pragmatic[2] approaches, confirming that the distinction between regime and national interest is low when facing crucial threats (Mozaffari, 2009: 8). Ending the war with Iraq was regarded as drinking "poison" and based only on the interest of the Islamic republic (Mozaffari, 2009: 20). The recent nuclear deal was signed due to economic hardships and sanctions that made the country vulnerable in key sectors of the regime (Terhalle, 2015: 595) which pushed and hurried for a comprehensive agreement to lift sanctions. Through conflict, the Iranian regime has reorganized and reinforced its leadership (Borszik: 2015), elite cohesion (Terhalle, 2015: 595) and nationalism (Maller, 2010: 61). There is a wide academia regarding the use of conflict and its relationship with regime cohesion in both, democratic and non-democratic regimes (Kneuer, 2011; Levy and Valiki, 1993). Kneuer (2011) refers to this strategy as "output legitimacy" resource. According to Kneuer, the use of conflictive foreign policy is carried out not to only ensure internal cohesion, but to make the cause legitimate within the public opinion and key political elite groups to sustain itself. Making the national interests dependent on the regime survival becomes legitimate and

[1] According to Levitsky and Way (2013: 14), "an alternative – and far riskier – basis for cohesion is renewed conflict. Continued conflict… might be explained as an effort to re-create an atmosphere of conflict…". They put emphasis on how conflict is articulated to face the disappearance of revolutionary generation and, along with a development of institutionalized mechanisms of leadership succession, the role of conflict enabled continuous stability in revolutionary regimes.

[2] Ending the war with Iraq was drinking "poison" and based only on the interest of the Islamic republic (Mozaffari, 2009: 8). The recent nuclear deal was signed due to economic hardships and sanctions that made the country vulnerable in key sectors of the regime (Terhalle, 2015: 595).

thus is carried to avoid fragmentation (Kneuer, 2011). In the case of Iranian involvement in Syria, the regime has called it a matter of national interest and regime survival (Ansari and Bassiri, 2016: 4).

Other authors point out the initiation of an external conflict to diverge public attention in time of internal crisis to ensure domestic stability and cohesion (Levy and Valiki: 1993). The so call "diversionary strategy" states that through an external conflict, domestic cohesion will be achieved. By conflict, Kneuer refers to "diplomatic, limited military action or substantial military force" (Kneuer, 2011: 6). However, the relationship between conflict and regime cohesion can lead to confusion as there is no guarantee that this strategy will work. Levy (1989; 1993) shows that there is no clear relationship between the use of conflict and regime cohesion after having gone through a revision of the diversionary theory (Levy, 1989: 282). While the "theoretical and historical literature suggests the importance of the diversionary use of force by political elites to bolster their internal political positions, the quantitative empirical literature in political science has repeatedly found that there is no consistent and meaningful relationship between the internal and external conflict behavior of states" (Levy, 1989: 282). For this reason, "diversionary actions are more likely to occur under some domestic and internal conditions than others" and "of particular interest here are the questions of what kind of elite interests, are more likely to lead to diversionary actions" (Levy, 1989: 282). Why would a revolutionary regime, like Iran, lead a diversionary action, must be read as a matter of survival and authoritarian reorganization to consolidate internal cohesion.

To analyze regime cohesion, it is important to evaluate certain conditions that make it work. These conditions are analyzed by Coser (1956) quoting Robin Williams. Cohesion is likely to be achieved only if "there is a going on concern, has a minimal level of internal cohesion prior to the external conflict, the external conflict must involve a threat that is believed to menace the group as a whole and that is perceived as solvable by group effort" (Levy, 1989: 262). This "going on concern" should be read through the revolutionary ideology of the Iranian regime meaning that the current crisis in Syria is a threat to the regime and revolutionary cause and that only though cohesion

there can be regime survival. Coser puts emphasis on how there will be extra mobilization for it and energy put forward.

Also, other variables determine the diversionary strategy such as the regime type structure, internal conditions that are present in the given country and the timing of the intervention. In the case of Iran, the involvement in the Syrian war is part of a diversionary strategy to be able to adapt internally as the other two sources of stability – institutionalization and economic growth – have shown a lack of adaptability given the peculiarity of the Iranian political regime. Also, its revolutionary condition gives way to a more cohesive procedure on the basis of a "on going concern". The fact that Iran is involving itself in a conflict *prior* regime crisis signals that it is a strategy of adaptability for the future.

Further on, one must look at the nature of the political regime (Mozaffari, 2009) to understand why revolutionary regimes cannot adapt and maintain cohesion if it is not due to conflict. According to Levitsky and Way (2013) institutionalization of leadership succession and economic growth are also pillars for continuation of these regimes. In this case, the Islamic Republic has institutionalized the revolutionary ideology, making it central in the Constitution and providing key institutions to have the power to carry out revolutionary policy (Mozaffari, 2009: 15; Terhalle, 2009: 568). According to Terhalle (2009), the composition of the political system gives upper hand to "revolutionary zeal" as the key institutions – Guardian Council, Expediency Council and Judiciary – are "under the authority of the Supreme Leader" and accountable to him (Terhalle, 2009: 569). The importance of the revolution is consolidated in the Constitution as "The mission of the Constitution is to realize the ideological objectives of the Revolution and to create conditions conductive to the development of man in accordance with the noble and universal values of Islam" (Mozaffari, 2009: 9), "based on ideologized religion" (Mozaffari, 2009: 9), making ideology the glue of the regime's existence and foreign policy.

However, these two other pillars do not explain how Iran remains and will remain revolutionary. This is because its institutions do not adapt to challenges without recurring to the use of repression. This has been seen during protest and the famous case

of the 2009 green movement in which the regime faced a clear challenge to its leadership. Moreover, the institution of the Supreme Leader, the highest position in the Islamic Republic, is the key institution that can act as a regulator for the survival of the system and has suffered controversies. Its succession was a problem after the death of Khomeini as the election of Khamenei did not meet the religious credentials. Moreover, while the regime has been adapting (Halliday, 2000), the institution of the Supreme Leader remains the same. Other key institutions, like the IRGC have developed a strong adaptable institution that can challenge the Iranian supreme leader (Golkar, 2015: 174). In economic terms, the regime can face more problem as economic growth is stagnant (The Economist Economic Report, 2016) and the nuclear deal has opened a door for rivalry over economic resources. Without political reforms and economic policies out of the orbit of the IRGCs and the Bonyads, Iran would not have stable growth despite the oil revenues (Jalivand, 2017: 9).

Since there is a lack of constitutional adaptability, the regime relies on economic and human resources to maintain the Islamic Republic in power in times of conflict, that is through the IRGCs. The creation of the IRGC is key to understand the economic development of the country, its role on stabilizing the regime and its importance in foreign policy (Harris, 2016: 99). During the Iraq war, the role of the IRGC and the revolutionary ideology enabled the survival of the regime by not only fighting the Iraqi forces, but by ensuring political stability inside the country. This was done by the persecution of internal opposition and the reconstruction role of the IRGC during and after the war that enabled "permanent revolution" (Nichiporuk, Wehrey and D. Green, 2009: 21) throughout the years. The end of the war reinforced key institutions (Nichiporuk, Wehrey and D. Green, 2009: 20, Alfoneh, 2013, Golkar, 2015). The IRGC was granted special attention in the constitution since the very early days of the revolution to ensure the continuity of the revolution. The articles 147 and 150 prove how the role of the IRGC is key to the regimes wellbeing developing a symbiotic relationship with the political-clerical elite to maintain the regime's survival through mechanisms of repression and co-option (Gerschewski: 2013, 1). According to the constitution (Constitute Project, 2017) article 147 "In time of peace, the government, in complete respect for the criteria of Islamic justice, must utilize the army's personnel and technical equipment for relief operations, educational and productive endeavors, and the

Reconstruction Campaign (jehād-e sāzandegi), to the degree that the army's combat-readiness is not impaired". Furthermore, article 150 states that "The Islamic Pasdaran Revolutionary Corps, established in the early days of the victory of the Revolution, will remain in effect in order to continue in its role of protecting the Revolution and its achievements. The range of the duties and responsibilities of this Corps, in relation to the duties and range of responsibilities of other armed forces, will be determined by law, with emphasis on fraternal cooperation and harmony among them". This alliance serves as a "power balance" to stabilize the regime and control opposition.

Highly ideologically driven, the IRGC have increased its importance in direction of Iranian domestic affairs and currently have taken the lead on Iran's foreign policy in Syria (Ansari & Bassiri, 2016: 4). In Syria, the Iranian regime can carry on with its revolutionary pillars as described by Mozaffari (2009): revolutionary character, totalitarian character, imperialist ambitions and its non-Westphalian view of the international community (Mozaffari, 2009: 11).

The Islamic Republic has a vital opportunity to become a major key player in the Syrian conflict and future developments in the region. It is for this reason that the regime knows of the importance of the strategic alliance with Syria (Bazoobandi, 2014: 7). The Iran-Iraq war peace agreement and the nuclear deal where both signed to maintain the stability of the regime, leaving aside the revolutionary ideology confirming the use of pragmatism in its foreign policy (Terhalle, 2015: 603). However, the regime needs another source of conflict to maneuver, reorganize itself and maintain stability inside while having presence in the international field. Thus, it will be argued how the Iranian presence in Syria – since 2011 (Ansari and Bassiri, 2016: 1) - is carrying out a diversionary strategy to ensure the revolutionary regime's survival. The Syrian crisis will add on to political audience inside the regime (Ansari and Bassiri: 2016, 4) and help generate support for the policy inside the country. When governments carry out diversory strategies it is for the stake of maintaining cohesion and unity by externalizing its internal politics (Levy, 1989). By embarking the regime in an exterior conflict, it diverges public attention to the exterior, creating the survival of the regime a matter of national interest. It has been proven that cohesion within the regime in Iran, when it feels threatened it unites factionalism inside the regime and activates revolutionary

ideology (Terhalle, 2015). This unity results in co-option of opposition and of critical voices inside the regime that do not support certain policies.

Also, the strong stance of the IRGC needs to be noted. While domestically acts as a "power balance" to stabilize the regime and control opposition, their regional presence act as a continuation of the regime survival and revolutionary ideals (Nichiporuk, Wehrey and D. Green, 2009: 77). It is this factor which, as "guardians and protector of the revolution" (Alfoneh, 2013: 3) can pressure the political elite to maintain their share of power in the country and act as a regime stabilizer when in crisis.

In this investigation, it will be argued how the Iranian regime strategical presence in Syria is another source of *renewed conflict* for the survival of the regime. With it, there will be an attempt to demonstrate why through this strategical conflict and not through institutionalization of succession of leadership or economic growth can ensure regime survival. While a lot of coverage has been given to internal stabilization mechanism in Iran (Alfoneh, 2013; Golkar, 2015; Nichiporuk, Wehrey and D. Green, 2009), its international dimension has been studied from a more pragmatic (Terhalle, 2009: 568) approach rather than revolutionary. In this research, the study of Iranian presence in Syria will be analyzed from the survival of the regime lenses. The timing of its presence and the current regional crisis reinforces the position of Iran as while in the two other conflicts Iran was in an inferior position; in this one, it is not. Iran has the capacity to mobilize and give solid aid to Assad regime. It is for this reason that this investigation will add on to the study of the revolutionary regime prioritizing revolutionary ongoing for the survival of it. This will add on to the study and policy assessment of how to deal with Iran with the revolutionary paradigm still present.

## Theory:

There is a wide consensus in academia regarding the relationship between the type of political regime and its survival (Geddes, 1999; Cheibub, Gandhi and Vreeland 2010; Alvarez, Cheibub, Limongi and Przeworski, 1996), the importance of institutions, co-option and repression (Levitsky and Way, 2013; Gerschewski, 2013; Boix and Svolik, 2013; Gandhi and Przeworski, 2006; Lektzian and Souva, 1996; Escribá, 2010) for its maintenance. These authors conclude that while personalist regimes tend to last less,

single party regimes and revolutionary ones tend to last longer. Yet, while institutions and co-options are important, the nature of the regimes determines their longevity. According to Levitsky and Way those regimes that come out from a violent struggle resist more (Levitsky and Way, 2013: 7). Also, they point out that these regimes that arise through violence and conflict tend to last longer and show more regime cohesion when facing crisis (Levitsky and Way, 2012: 7). This is because during the struggle, these regimes develop norms, identities and organizational structures that are highly ideological driven which in times of crisis reinforce cohesion and leadership within the regime (Levitsky and Way, 2012: 3).

The role of foreign policy and regime type has been analyzed by Kneuer (2011). In her paper, she argued that the more defective the input legitimacy (Kneuer, 2011: 2) is, the more need to pursue an output policy and identity, that is, a confrontational stance with the international community. In other words, the less legitimate and secure the regime is, the more likely that the political leadership will pursue conflict. This is done to maintain domestic cohesion through the main elites, by maintain national identity and national interest and unification of the public (Kneuer, 2011: 6). By diversionary policy, it is understood that it is a conflict instigated by a country to diverge public opinion from domestic problems to ensure political control. Confrontational foreign policies have been used by leaders to maintain political control and reorganize themselves to avoid fragmentation with the presumption that by confronting an enemy, there will be a high cohesion. However, the use of diversionary strategies is very controversial in foreign policy as Levy has shown, "there is no correlation between regime cohesion and conflict". Why a state gets to intervene in internal affairs of other states is dependent on various factors. According to Levy (1989), "intervention in internal affairs of weaker states… is increased if there are ethnic, religious and political cleavages in the strife-torn state that provide the external state with ideological as well as power-political motivations to support one internal faction over another one" (Levy, 1989: 270). Adding to this, the timing of the situation is crucial as to know why a state does it or not. Levy and Vakili argue that a state will pursue this policy for the maintenance of internal unity if the benefits are higher than the costs (Levy & Vakili, 1992: 119).

There is a difference between single party regimes and revolutionary ones. While they both create a "collective security" norm in which the only way to access to power is through the establishment, their origin makes the whole difference. It is true that institutions and patronage enable autocrats to remain in power, yet this is not guaranteed during times of crisis and conflict (Levitsky and Way: 2012). During times of peace and stability, co-option, repression and patronage can be effective to ensure the winning coalition. Moreover, these spoils of power can also allow advancement in political careers and institutional power. Nonetheless, these sources may not discourage defection during times of crisis. Single party regimes that are dependent on economic performance for patronage and public support, external support, large-scale protest or serious electoral challenges (Levitsky and Way, 2012: 7) are sources of vulnerability in the long run. These crises can be a source of division and power struggle that force a new winning coalition to ensure stability (Gerschewski, 2013).

In their paper (Levitsky and Way: 2013), they stress that non-material sources of cohesion are the key to understand the longevity. Having reached power through violence and highly ideological driven produce four factors of longevity: it endures partisan identities, partisan boundaries, the presence of a militarized structures and establish military-style internal discipline, capacity of repress and a generation of leaders (Levitsky and Way, 2013: 7). These can be summarized in four pillars of stability that explain their durability on the domestic field: 1. The destruction of independent power centers; 2. Cohesive ruling parties; 3. Strong partisan control over security forces and 4. Strong coercive apparatus. While these legacies come out from either an armed liberation struggle, post-revolutionary state building and the violent conflicts for radical social change, the search for stability after the disappearance of the revolutionary generation is the major concern for alternative bases of stability (Levitsky and Way, 2013: 9).

During times of crisis, partisan identities and the generation of leaders that carried out the revolution tend to unite factionalism and regime cohesion. However, once the generation begins to disappear, revolutionary regimes need to find alternatives to maintain stability. According to the authors these regimes carry out "development of institutionalized mechanisms of leadership succession, economic growth and – the main

concern of this investigation – *renewed conflict"* (Levitsky and Way, 2013: 10). My argument is that, while economic growth and institutions are susceptible for regime fragmentation and division, *renewed conflict* can ensure in the long run cohesion and stability as it can strengthen institutions, unites factionalism and activates revolutionary ideology.

As outlined previously, overreliance of institutions and economic growth are sources of vulnerability. Institutionalization of succession refers to mechanisms that allow a stable succession. With clear mechanisms of how the next leadership is attained, the stability of the regime will remain. Normally this is done by the creation of institutions that grant supervision and division of power (Gandhi and Przeworski, 2007). According to Jennifer Gandhi and Adam Przeworski (2007), the implementation of institutions serves to strengthen regimes in the face of uncertainty and serve to co-opt the opposition through integration into the system. According to the authors, the role of institutions can stabilize the social expectations and also, limit uncertainties regarding the political future (Gandhi and Przeworski, 2007: 4). These institutions should regulate and supervise access to power, the possession of power and the exercise of power (Gandhi and Przeworski, 2007: 5). As result, the uncertainty of transition policies was reduced by a new, broader and more inclusive winning coalition. Nonetheless, during times of crisis, procedures can produce power struggles and divisions over the leadership if these mechanisms do not adapt to the crisis given (Mozaffari, 2009: 22).

The source of conflict is the best alternative for explaining regime survival. *Renewed conflict* is a far riskier alternative yet it is essential to remain in power when there are no other mechanism for stability. Having a conflict can reallocate resources and unify regime cohesion in times of vulnerability. Those regimes that have constant conflicts have proven durable such as Cuba, North Korea and in this case Iran. Strong single parties have proven weak without a source of conflict such as the downfall of the Soviet Union and eastern Europe. It is therefore essential to understand why regimes use conflict for durability.

## Methodology:

The way to approach this investigation is by first exposing why renewed conflict makes sense in the Iranian case and why the other two factors outlined by Levitsky and Wey (2013) – institutionalization of leadership and economic growth – are not bases of regime cohesion for regime survival. Then, renewed conflict will be applied to the Syrian case to justify conflict as a source of regime cohesion, thus survival of revolutionary Iran through the categorization of Coser[3] of domestic stability. By having an "ongoing cause", a minimal level of internal cohesion and regional presence the regime has the capacity of maintaining stability through external action. It can co-opt, maintain elite together and above all, have source of adaptability for its revolutionary credentials to the new generations.

The way to approach regime cohesion will be done considering the argument of Coser (1956). The presence in Syria will be structured as follows: 1. By a "going on concern", that is, the survival of the revolutionary regime embedded in ideology. 2. The consensus prior the Syrian crisis among the political elite to act 3. The regional context and external threats making Iranian presence an essential condition for regime's survival. It is key to understand how ideology influences foreign policy and how it impacts regime cohesion. Once ideology is approached, regime cohesion will be tackled from the consensus perspective *prior* the regime's intervention in Syria. It is essential to understand what is the level of consensus within the elite and how this consensus has been achieved. Lastly, the political framing and narratives of the Iranian regime regarding the intervention in Syria will be exposed to explain why they view the presence in Syria essential for regime survival to make it legitimate within the political elite.

The information gathering will come from research and books that have covered the Iranian regime and the Syrian case throughout the years as well as a wide political science academia regarding theoretical framework. The resources will be various and from different time frames that have covered the study of the Islamic Republic of Iran.

[3] By a "going on concern" (1) there must be a minimal consensus among the constituent individuals that aggregate is a group, and that preservation as an entity is worthwhile. (2) There must be recognition of an outside threat which is thought to menace the group as a whole, not just some part of it (Coser, 1956: 93) .

Nonetheless, regarding the intervention of Syria, sources from 2011[4] onwards would be used to avoid confusion in the analysis.

## Why renewed conflict?

In the case of Iran, *renewed conflict* is key and is far much more important for regime cohesion and revolutionary stability. This is mainly because on one hand, institutions have proven that they are a source of instability when in domestic crisis given to its lack of fluidity and constitutional framework and, on the other, economic performance is still low. For it, it will be argued how one of the best sources of stability remains abroad, that is being part of a conflict as history of the revolutionary regime has proven that when in conflict, regime cohesion takes place as seen in the Iran-Iraq war and the nuclear program (Tharalle, 2015: 602).

The reason why leadership succession and economic performance are factors of regime disunity are various making conflict the most useful resource for longevity. In regards to the first one, the lack of adaptability is the main problem. According to Mozaffari (2009), the "political and governmental organization has not changed much. It has retained its main revolutionary characteristics, its revolutionary institutions and its revolutionary ambitions" (Mozaffari, 2009: 18). The institutionalization of the revolution in the constitution and institutions have permitted the regime to continue with the revolutionary rhetoric, however, the succession procedures can threaten it. Vacuum power could occur in the next succession as one main competitor, the IRGC can influence directly the process (Alfoneh, 2013). To avoid divisions, the necessity of a new conflict is needed to grant a minimal cohesion between the regime.

The recent nuclear deal has opened a new chapter in contemporary Iranian politics and has heated the debate within the political elite. One actor – the IRGC– has been clearly against this agreement for various reasons since its economic and political power can be eroded and on the other and it proves to be an attempt to normalized and socialized the Islamic Republic in the international arena after decades of isolation. This poses a threat not only to the rising influence and power of the IRGCs in the political sphere, but to

[4] According to Ansari and Bassiri (2016): "Iran has supported Syrian President Bashar Al-Assad since the first civil uprisings of March 2011, which the Iranian regime defined as a 'foreign-inspired' sedition" (Ansari and Bassiri, 2016: 1).

the regime's ideological revolutionary credentials. It is for this reason that the IRGCs has taken a conservative stand throughout the nuclear crisis and has been a critical outspoken of the deal. For it, the economic growth of the country is highly dependent on the IRGCs (Harris, 2016) and it is for this reason that economics can be more divisionary than unitary given the different power struggles inside the regime.

Following the argument of Levitsky and Way (2013) and the categorization of Coser (1956) of domestic cohesion, the regime can reinforce regime cohesion to avoid domestic challenges and maintain leadership. By having an "ongoing cause", a minimal level of internal cohesion, perceives that the regional presence is vital for regimes survival and that external menace should be tackled through this measure, the regime has the capacity of maintaining stability. It can buy off, maintain elite together and above all, have source of adaptability for its revolutionary credentials to the new generations. By being part of a conflict, institutions are strengthened to the cause of regime survival as seen in the case of the nuclear crisis, where the alliance between the IRGCs and the Supreme Leader were key to maintain the elite together (Alfoneh, 2013). The lack of fluidity in times of crisis can be solved through a high centralization under the assumption of regime survival and thus ensure regime cohesion.

## Case study: the ongoing conflict in Syria:

There is a wide research and academia regarding Iranian and Syrian relations throughout history, acknowledging the importance of its strategic alliance (Ansari and Bassiri: 2016, 2). What makes the Syrian crisis important is due to the political opportunity that has opened to consolidate the Iranian regime as a key player in the region. In regards to domestic politics, the ongoing conflict acts as a unifier of the political elite. It diverges all the debate to the cause of national security and revolutionary resistance. The internalization of the external conflict is a source of cohesion for the regime. It is also important to note that Iranian presence has been calculated. The political resources invested in Assad is by no means a mere action. The intervention fits in the classification of Levy as it is an intervention in the internal affairs of a weaker state due to "ethnic, religious and political cleavages present and reasons to invest in a faction" (Levy, 1989: 274). Iran's sectarian behavior has increased since the fall of Saddam Hussein in 2003 and the Arab Spring. Before these two events, sectarianism was important yet it did not determine foreign policy. It was more of a

pragmatic approach with each state (Ostovar, 2016: 5). Yet, among non-state actors, the use of sectarianism is used intensely. The regime and other Shia groups are grounded in the Shia paradigm and it is their excuse to maintain their leverage of power. By supporting Assad's regime, that is the Alawiite minority in a Sunni majority state and investing political, human and economic resources, the regime wants to ensure its cohesion and decision in a volatile region through intensification of sectarianism. Sectarianism is important, yet, it is not the decisive motive of intervention. Iran acts more pragmatically to ensure the regime's survival.

Considering the argument of Coser (1956), the presence in Syria will follow the structured previously outlined: 1. By a "going on concern", that is, the survival of the revolutionary regime embedded in ideology. 2. The consensus prior the Syrian crisis among the political elite to act 3. The regional context and external threats making Iranian presence an essential condition for regime's survival. This will prove that the diversionary strategy of renewed conflict will serve as regime cohesion given its revolutionary condition and the dimensions.

## 1. The "going on concern": revolutionary survival, ideology and national interest:

It is important to look at the revolutionary ideology of the Iranian regime to understand how much ideology can serve as a source of regime cohesion as a pillar of action and unity. Coser points out that those conflicts in which participants feel that they are fighting for the "ideals of the group they represent, are likely to be more radical and merciless than those that are fought for personal reasons" (Coser, 1956: 118). Ideological alignments tend to occur in structures which are more "rigid than in flexible" (Coser, 1956: 118) ones, making ideology a pillar of stability. Also, Coser points out that objectification of the conflict is likely to be "unifying element for the contending parties" (Coser, 1956: 119) when in disputes over the direction of politics. Through a common objective with a rigid ideology it can eliminate discrepancies and unifies different competing arguments of direction for the stake of survival. This rigidity is seen in the Iranian case given to the importance of ideology in politics (Mozaffari, 2009: 7).

In Khomeini's *The little green book* (1985) there is access to fatwahs which put emphasis on revolutionary ideology. The importance of regime's ideology has been covered by a variety of authors to explain its importance in politics (Mozaffari, 2009: 1; Rakel 2008: 145; Buchta, 2000: 11). However, the fatwahs show the importance of participation, sacrifice, duty, unity and goal. In *Islam as a revolutionary religion*, Khomeini states "that is not only our duty in Iran, but it is also the duty of all Muslims in the world, in all Muslim countries, to carry the Islamic political revolution to its final victory" (Khomeini, 1985: 2). The institutionalization of revolutionary ideology in the political institutions makes it a pillar of action and direction (Mozaffari: 2009). According to Mozaffari, the importance of symbolisms and actions of Iranian authorities as well as texts "possess significant explanatory capabilities" (Mozaffari, 2009: 8). By looking at foundational discourses such as the Constitution of 1979, there is a clear objective "is to realize the ideological objectives of the Revolution and to create conditions conducive to the development of man in accordance with the noble and universal values of Islam" (Mozaffari, 2009: 9). By this, one can understand the regimes foreign policy actions. Its foreign policy has a revolutionary character appealing to the Islamic Ummah, non-Westphalian and strongly valued oriented (Mozaffari, 2009: 9). This explains how unity and cohesion in foreign policy has been present throughout the last two conflicts, the Iraq war and the nuclear program for the stake of national interest as the ultimate reason of the regime remains in its ideology.

In Syria, the "going on concern" of the Islamic revolution is present. The presence in Syria is a matter of national interests and regime survival (Ansari and Bassiri, 2016: 4). For Iran, Syria is important for maintaining a "land bridge to Hezbollah in Lebanon" (Ansari and Bassiri, 2016: 4) and its presence represents a strategic revolutionary imperative against a "foreign inspired sedition in Syria" (Ansari and Bassiri, 2016: 4). By consolidating its position in Syria, Iran can secure its position in the region in Iraq and in Lebanon to combat "pro-American states". These are Saudi Arabia, Afghanistan, Turkey and Israel (Hiltermann, 2017).

The sectarian factor contributes to unite the regime. Iran represents the largest majority of Shia Muslims in the region and it aims to establish direct control of Shia regions in

Syria and in the region (Hiltermann, 2017). It has created a web of connections within the Shia militias not only from Iraq, but in Afghanistan – the Hazaras (Smyth, 2014: 1) - and Pakistan (Eisenstadt, 2015: 1). By doing this, Iran promotes the sectarian conflict to consolidate its dominion and international recognition. By intervening in Syria, Iran has increased the sectarian polarization in the past years and has tried to lead the Shia caused among the Arab states. The development in both Iraq and Syria has enabled Iran to rally the regions 20% Shia population to their side which has given the 75% Sunni Arab a reason to combat Iranian expansion (Eisenstadt, 2015: 2). It is for the cause of regime survival that Iranian forces will not give up on Syria as it can satisfy ideological goals and international decision at the stake of its survival.

The Iranian strategic thinking in foreign policy is directed to ensure regime's survival. It is through this pillar that the foreign policy and strategy takes place (Mozaffari, 2009: 7). The international dimension of the Islamic revolution is a survival strategy designed to maintain the cohesion when in crisis and to act as a deterrence against the "enemies of Islam". Ali Alfoneh uses an editorial by the IRGC to summarize the role of ideology and regime survival and the international dimension:

"In order to achieve ideological, political, security and economic self-reliance we have no other choice but to mobilize all forces loyal to the Islamic Revolution, and through this mobilization, plant such a terror in the hearts of the enemies that they abandon the thought of an offensive and annihilation of our revolution…. If our revolution does not have an offensive and internationalist dimension, the enemies of Islam will again enslave us culturally, politically, and the like, and they will not abstain from plunder and looting" (Alfoneh, 2013: 212).

The strategy of internationalization of the Islamic revolution, that is, the domestic politics of the country, is a strategic effort to influence in the region and to consolidate deterrence against its enemies (Ostovar, 2016: 11). Through military development, political collaboration and operations and economic ties (Ostovar, 2016: 13) Iran aims to ensure its domestic cohesion as well as international influence.

## 2. The presence of internal support for external action *prior* the Syrian crisis among the political regime.

There has been a wide consensus inside the regime prior 2011 for the Syrian policy. The main drivers of such policy are the so-called hardliners of the regime – the Supreme Leader institution and the IRGC – yet the intervention has a larger political base within the regime, these are key institutions in Iran with own political audiences that influence policy yet do not determine it. These are the Presidency, the Government and the Ministry of Foreign Affairs (Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, 2014, 15). Sabet Farzan (2013) analyzed the political debate regarding Syria by analyzing Iranian propaganda and newspaper articles in the Iranian media and concludes that there is a high consensus regarding Syria. Sadeghi-Boroujerdi (2014) concludes that within the Iranian political elite -which these can be divided into three main pillars regarding the Syrian crisis: 1. The Guardian of the Jurist: political and religious authority; 2. Presidency, Government and Foreign Minister: diplomatic and soft power; 3. Islamic Revolutionary Guards: military power (Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, 2014: 15) - though there are differences of approach and expression regarding the Syrian intervention this does not mean that they do not support Iranian presence. The differences arise for own political audience of the institutions and cabinets the elites represent (Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, 2014: 15).

In the Syrian policy case, the base of support has been broadened inside the regime to co-opt the debate and opposition at the expense of political concessions. According to Gandhi and Przeworski (2006), those regimes with larger institutions last more given to the capacity to co-opt and use economic spoils. When dictators need more support to carry out their policy or simply remain in power, they rely on institutions to ensure longevity. In their research, they found out that "when they need more cooperation, dictators make more extensive policy concessions and share fewer rents. In turn, when the threat of rebellion is greater, they make larger concessions but also distribute more spoils" (Gandhi and Przeworski, 2006: 1). In the case of Syria, the regime has worked towards cooperation between the elites in the name of national security and regime survival. It is not of a surprise that it has granted the IRGC with the upper hand in Syria and has given voice to the different institutions to carry out not only their political

audience but to approve the policy in Syria. This is a measure of co-option and cooperation within the elite that contributes to regime cohesion.

This political base of support has included new demands of the different actors within the regime and has increased the flow of information within the institutions. While the Government, President and the Minister of Foreign Affairs act as a soft power in the international arena demanding a "political solution", the IRGCs and the hardliners of the regime reinforce the revolutionary ideology. The Presidency and the Government actively call for a political solution without "no preconditions". This strategy aims to include Assad in the Syrian solution as well as elevating their institutional position in the regime. Any political solution which contained the exclusion of Assad, such as Geneva I and Geneva II were not accepted by the regime (Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, 2014: 23). The regimes knows that in the long run a political solution must arise, yet, the regime will only accept it when their regional ambitions are secured, that is, national security and influence in the levant.

The narrative constructed behind the intervention has been regarded as the construction of an "axis of resistance" in the Supreme National Security Council with the final say of the Supreme Leader (Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, 2014: 20). It is a strategy aimed to grant national security against intervention, domination and threats from regional and international enemies (Ansari and Bassiri, 2016: 3). This narrative was heavily influenced by the IRGCs which pressured to intervene in Syria backed by the conservative institutions with the full support of the Supreme Leader. Within the Iranian political elite[5], the differences arise for own political audience of the institutions and cabinets the elites represent. Moreover, the Constitutional provisions give much more decision and authority to the Supreme Leader and Guardian Council, Expediency Council and Judiciary (Terhalle, 2009: 569) undermining the authority of other parts of the establishment that use their limited power for the regime's survival. The importance of maintaining high leverage in Syria – with or without Assad – is highly acknowledge by the different factions and institutions in the country (Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, 2014: 15). The debate regarding Syria was constructed as part of an ideological struggle – ethnic

[5] These can be divided into three main pillars regarding the Syrian crisis: 1. The Guardian of the Jurist: political and religious authority; 2. Presidency, Government and Foreign Minister: diplomatic and soft power; 3. Islamic Revolutionary Guards: military power (Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, 2014: 15).

and sectarian factors – and as a matter of geopolitical competition and national security interests (Ansari and Bassiri, 2016: 5). The regime knows that Iranian presence is vital to ensure regime stability and cohesion through the paradigm of national security, and for that reason has been more inclusive with the institutions. It has diversified the job and duties with the different institutions, creating a *power-sharing* within them to satisfy the demands of each.

Overall, this approach reinforces the institutional framework of the regime and their access to rents. By diversifying the winning coalition, the regime ensures more cohesion and acceptance of the policy. The different perspectives add on to the diversification of duties and it encapsulates different opinions. According to Coser (Coser, 1956: 97), groups that permit expression of dissent and of conflicts draw more cohesion. This is due to "the flexibility" to adapt to the circumstances. The strategy of inclusion of the Iranian regime in the conflict has enable them to create an atmosphere of debate regarding the procedures and expressions of how to deal with the Syrian crisis. This diversification makes more fluid the regime policy. Political solution remains a strategy yet only at the expense of regional security.

## 3. The regional context and external threats making Iranian presence in Syria an essential condition for regime's survival.

The regime frames the "axis of resistance" with three main narratives: the proxy war narrative with Saudi Arabia, fear of foreign intervention and regime change mainly from the US, threat perception of Israel and radical Sunnism expansion and threat and the propaganda against Assad's regime (Sabet, 2013: 5). The first narrative regards to the proxy war for regional dominance with Saudi Arabia and the resistance against the US and Israel for deterrence reasons institutionalizing the conflict in the institutions (Parsi, 2012: 237). These perceptions have been more notable and solid in the opposition against the nuclear program in which the escalation reached its highest levels (Parsi, 2012: 2). Including Iran in the so called "axis of evil", the death of scientist and the international sanctions have only created more concerns for national security (Parsi, 2012: 2. The second narrative deals with the expansion of radical Sunni political Islam (Sabet, 2013: 12) which Iran feels threatened. The regime condemns publicly the Saudi

involvement in this issue. Iran denounces the "sponsoring of terrorism by Saudi Arabia" (Ostovar, 2016: 14) and condemns the constant blockade for dialogue and stability in the region. The third argument is used to accuse the international media that condemns Assad and can delegitimize publicly the actions of the Iranian regime.

This "axis of resistance" aims at safeguarding national security. While enhancing the security apparatus, Iran aims to create a series of opportunities to shape the international and regional politics for their own interests (Sadeghi-Boroujerdi, 2014: 15). By regional presence, Iran grants itself a position to face US and its struggle against Israel. Through political, economic and military presence, the regime can have a say in international decisions and become a major player in future decisions regarding the political future of Syria. Also, by its presence, the Iranian regime can increase its leadership legitimation among the Shia communities. By adopting a hostile stand, Iran grants itself regime cohesion and its revolutionary ambitions as it is only by a firm stand in which the regime can face struggles (Rabi, 2010: 5).

Iran needs the strategic point of Syria to access Hezbollah, for economic, political, intelligence and information operations (Ostovar, 2016: 27). Through Syria, Iran has increased its cooperation with Hezbollah and has consolidated its presence in the Levant. Loosing Syria will mean a defeat for Iran and will erode its relations with Hezbollah and its regional power among the Shia communities and can provoke domestic backlash (Ostovar, 2016). The key strategy is that Iran uses cooperation and political collaboration, economic interdependence and investment in the region. The economic trade and regional operations reflect the "resistance economy" of the regime. The international sanctions have harmed the Iranian economy and aims at continuing with the resistance idea by consolidating a web of interests with Syria. Given the type of regime, the accountability and data of these type of economic transactions are not present. The economic alliance with Syria has strengthened Assad and has opened a door at the Levant for further transactions.

It has also opened a door for the IRGC to have a decisive role in the direction of the Islamic Revolution. Several authors have taken the lead in the study of the IRGC as an independent actor since its establishment (Alfoneh, 2013: 1; Nichiporuk, Wehrey and

D. Green. 2009: 20; Golkar, 2015). The most recent publication is the one of Ali Alfoneh (2013) and has studied the IRGC independently and leads him to the conclusion that "the regime in Tehran, traditionally ruled by the Shia clergy, is transforming into a military dictatorship dominated by the officers of the IRGC" (Alfoneh, 2013: 1). According to Alfoneh, the welcoming of the IRGC inside politics to "ensure the survival of the regime" (Alfoneh, 2013: 2) has enable them to pursue their own interests in both, domestic and foreign policy. While domestically is act as a "power balance" to stabilize the regime and control opposition, their regional presence act as a continuation of the regime survival and revolutionary ideals. It is this factor which, as "guardians and protector of the revolution" (Alfoneh, 2013: 3) can pressure the political elite to maintain their share of power in the country and act as a regime stabilizer when in crisis.

By maintaining a strong position in Syria, outsourcing the IRGC can safeguard the religious elite in Iran and avoid internal competition. As Gandhi and Przeworski outlined, when there is a chance of overthrowing the "dictator", the ruler grants more concessions and rents (Gandhi and Przeworski, 2006: 25). It also ensures revolutionary continuation and stability of the institutions as it is the main pillar of the IRGC and therefore continue positioning regime principles and ideology as a pillar for maneuver in domestic affairs. The IRGC has its influence in Iraq and Lebanon as well and over militias in Afghanistan. According to Sadeghi-Boroujerdi (2014) "IRGC with its major investment in training and organizing numerous pro-Assad militias has ensured that it will retain influence in Syria even in the event of Assad's downfall". Iran has deployed 2,300-2,500 IRGC forces according to Alfoneh and Einstensdat (2016) along with Hezbollah and the Syrian forces to maintain the deterrence against the rival enemies yet leaves the war for the Shia proxies (Alfoneh and Einstensdat, 2016).

## Conclusion:

Diversionary strategies have a clear goal: diverge the attention from domestic debates, reorganized internal cohesion and ensure regime's survival. In this paper, it has been analyzed how a revolutionary regime can ensure its longevity through a state of conflict and has also contributed to study the internal behavior of the regime. The constant state of conflict gives a great source of adaptability for revolutionary regimes to adapt to

different circumstances. Due to their nature, revolutionary regimes will seek agreement before an action within their main institutions and key actors. Since they are not held accountable towards the public, their maneuver of action is increased and can redistribute resource as well as hide data about a given situation or crisis. The Syrian conflict has permitted Iran to pursue a regional policy that aims to secure Iranian interests as well as to ensure regime cohesion within. It has also co-opt internal rivals which have been regarded as political competitors of the establishment such as the IRGC by giving out policy concessions and more leverage for action. By broadening the political support, the regime has achieved a consensus for the objective and has opened the debate for suggestions and procedures without criticizing the nature of the policy, that is, national security. By framing the conflict in terms of national security the regime sets the main goal in the survival of the regime.

Ideology still plays a determinant role in shaping Iranian foreign policy (Mozaffari, 2009: 18). Although the regime has acted pragmatically when it has been challenged, ideology resembles the "point of departure" (Mozaffari, 2009: 22) of the regime in international affairs. There has been an intensification of revolutionary ideology and tensed the Shia-Sunni paradigm around the region since 2011 after the Arab spring (Ostovar, 2016: 1) making the survival of the regime also a matter of regional dynamics which has increased its capacity of action. This situation allows the regime to adapt to the dynamics of not only the conflict, but of the region by integrating proxies to achieve the presence in Syria reinforcing its soft power around the region. Given the special circumstances of the Syrian conflict, the regime has reinforced its ideological foundations and still give credibility to them making it a source of adaptability within the political elite.

The debate regarding Syria has been consolidated as a matter of national security. It is for this reason that the regime has put effort and mobilized economic and human capital for the cause. With this base and this narrative, the political elite can maintain a high degree of cohesion to face further crisis and thus, survive.

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