



Iran vs. The World:
A Look at the Middle East's New Regional Power

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Abstract

In these pages I explain the phenomena of Iran becoming a dominant regional actor in the Middle East. I use a three pronged approach to explain Iran's new regional role: (1) an analysis of Iran's capabilities and geostrategic location, (2) attaching Iran's behavior with Neorealist theories, and (3) examining domestic commitment in Iran (which is the unique portion of my research). I then synthesize my argument by showing that Iran's capabilities and geostrategic location place it as the dominant regional power in the Middle East, their behavior matches what theorists suggest a regional power should look like, and the Iranian people are committed to the regime, infusing it with the inherent strength needed to actually assume a role of dominance in the Middle East. In order to explain domestic commitment I have gathered election data and public opinion polls in Iran, combined with accounts from the literature to show that Iranians support and trust the government. Lastly, I ponder the implications of Iranian power, including the possibility of war, especially between Iran and Israel, or Iran and Arab states, and the threat of even greater escalation (regional or world-wide conflict).

Acknowledgments

I would like to express my greatest gratitude first and foremost to my advisor, Professor Victor Magagna, whose knowledge and expertise proved to be an invaluable resource along every step of the writing and research process. Next, I would like to thank Professor Babak Rahimi who I spent quite a bit of time discussing various ideas related to my thesis with, and who was always accessible to help along the way. I would also like to thank Professor Michael Provence for his help reviewing my material, and for talking through some ideas with me.

I am also very grateful to Professors Darren Schreiber and Samuel Kernell who helped teach me how to get my "grand ideas" onto the page and provided me with the opportunity to actually undertake this project.

Lastly, I would like to thank my entire Honors Thesis class for being supportive and helpful throughout the year, as we all struggled equally to produce this work.

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Table of Contents

Abstract	2
Chapter 1: Iran in the Spotlight	4-13
Chapter 2: What's That Literature Say?	14-30
Chapter 3: Balance of Power & Theories of War	31-45
Chapter 4: Together As One	46-63
Chapter 5: Synthesizing-Agent	64-82
Chapter 6: Iran vs. The World	83-95
Chapter 7: Iran. A Menace to Society?	96-97
Bibliography	98-101

Chapter 1: Iran in the Spotlight

I. The Middle East as a Political Hotbed

The Middle East is becoming one of the most important topics of discussion in the field of political science. Now more than ever, the internal politics taking place within the region will profoundly affect the entire world. The Middle East is home to a majority of worldwide oil reserves as well as natural gas - and with today's global economy and infrastructure being largely run by petroleum, political scientists, governments, and political novices around the world are taking a heightened interest in the politics of the region. Of particular interest is the balance of power in the Middle East. The region is filled with a myriad of religious and ethnic influences, all who are viewed and behave differently on the world stage. Israel is largely pro-Western and sponsored by the United States and Europe, Arab states such as Saudi Arabia although being criticized abroad for their religious fervor, have been largely pro-Western in their actions; while Iran has oftentimes been at the opposite end of the spectrum, being a loud proponent of anti-Western rhetoric. As a result, the world has taken great interest in the power plays taking place within the region.

Ever since the end of World War II and the creation of Israel as a state, the balance of power has largely been bi-polar; with Israel on one pole, and a bloc of Arab-Islamic states on the opposing pole. Within the past five years however, a very interesting, albeit disturbing to some, shift in the regional balance of power has occurred. Iran has emerged essentially from the shadows to begin assuming the role of dominant regional power¹, perhaps even moving along the path towards hegemony. Today, Iran boasts one of the largest economies in the Middle

¹ A dominant regional power is one that controls most of the power and influence in a region and is able to "dominate" other actors. However, it is not quite hegemonic in that it does not possess a preponderance of power.

East, with a GDP of over \$750 billion by 2007 estimates², one of the largest oil and natural gas reserves, one of the largest and most technologically advanced militaries in the region, a large centralized location, and I would argue, a population, also one of the largest which believes that the historic greatness of ancient Persia can be attained once again, and is supportive of the government's ambitions and desires for a role of regional prominence, an idea called domestic commitment.

This leads to an important question: Why Iran? The Middle East is a large region, home to over three hundred million people and dotted with many states that one could argue have the potential to take on a regional role of power. States such as Saudi Arabia and Turkey have the economic strength, the landmass, and vast populations, while Israel on the other hand has one of the highest standards of living in the region, a highly advanced military, and most importantly, strong strategic allies in the United States and Western European countries. None of these countries however, I would argue, display all of the qualities and characteristics necessary to adequately and actually assume a role of dominant regional power. The question remains though, what separates Iran from other countries in the region, why is it that most news flooding the Western world about the Middle East centers around the actions of Iran and its President, Mahmoud Ahmadinejad? Why is the prospect of a nuclear Iran so daunting to the United States and the governments of other Middle Eastern countries, Israel, Egypt, and Saudi Arabia especially?

Although there is no unified belief in the existing literature that Iran is becoming the region's dominant power, the evidence I would suggest, is striking and hard to ignore. Through analyzing not only the physical capabilities of the Iranian state; its size, population, natural resources, economy, and military, but also looking at factors such as actions taken within the

² Figures taken from the CIA Factbook

region as well as internationally, influence of other actors in the region, and perhaps most importantly of all, the domestic commitment of the Iranian population to see the government's agenda of actualizing its role as a dominant regional power through to completion, I hope to make the case that Iran *is* becoming a dominant regional power, if it has not already done so and might even become hegemonic in the region.

II. The Puzzle - Why Iran?

Once again, when initially examining the political landscape of the Middle East and realizing that seemingly Iran was taking on the role of a regional power, the first question that occurred to me was: why Iran? Of all the countries in the Middle East Iran seems to have had the most volatile and turbulent experience in the 20th century, especially since the end of World War II. Iran was wrought by two revolutions; the Constitutional Revolution of 1905-1911 to establish a constitution for the state of then Persia, which was also the first event of its kind in the Middle East, and the Revolution of 1979 which was led by Seyyed Ruhollah Khomeini and dethroned the Shah, creating the Islamic Republic of Iran which still stands today as one of the only theocracies left in the world. Furthermore, Iran suffered at the hands of imperialism throughout nearly three fourths of the 20th century at the hands of Britain and later the United States. In the 1950's, Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq who was a champion of Iranian nationalism and fought fervently against Western influence by nationalizing Iranian oil was removed from power through a coup d'etat orchestrated by a combined effort of American and British secret operatives. Lastly, in 1980, Saddam Hussein's Iraq invaded Iran in the largest major war fought since the end of World War II. The Iran-Iraq war which lasted eight years caused over a million Iranian casualties; the effects of Iraqi chemical weapons are still being felt by some Iranians. Further, Iran's production capacity for oil was heavily damaged and has yet to fully recover.

Given its turbulent past, how has Iran managed to transcend these difficulties and emerge so quickly as a dominant force within the region? The answer to this question is complex. The existing literature helps to paint the picture of Iran as a new dominant regional power and perhaps even hegemon and gives a multitude of reasons for this emergence. For example, a comparison of the capabilities of Middle Eastern countries would reduce the list of potential powers in the region essentially to three; Saudi Arabia, Iran, and Turkey. I would argue that Iran rather than Turkey, Saudi Arabia, or even Israel is the ascending regional power because of a combination of its raw capabilities coupled with the recent invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq by the United States which removed two of Iran's largest rival powers, quickly propelling Iran to a power position in the region. Finally, the domestic commitment of the Iranian people is the proverbial icing on the cake; even though Iranians do not universally accept or support the Islamic Republic Government, especially about the current state of the economy, one thing is certain: when it comes to Iran's role in the Middle East, Iranians can sense that their time to emerge as a great power is coming to pass and will support the regime in its designs to gain regional dominance. The Iranian people must be understood as rational actors who understand the costs and benefits of giving their compliance to the regime.

III. The Achaemenid Empire and Persian Glory

Today, many have forgotten that at one point Persians were masters of the known world, ruling an empire that rivaled in size the Han Chinese Empire and the Roman Empire. The ancient Persian Empire, or Achaemenid Empire, founded by Cyrus the Great in approximately 550 BC conquered the mighty Lydians and the whole of the ancient Babylonian empire, making it the largest Empire at the time. The Persian Empire was remarkable not only for its size and military capabilities, but the astonishing fact that the Persian Kings were able to unite a vast and diverse group of ethnicities and religions - in fact the first known acknowledgment of the

concept we now call human rights was by Cyrus the Great in a bas-relief displayed in the United Nations in New York³. Under King Darius I the Persian Empire reached its zenith - the Persian empire controlled North Africa and India, and from the Aral Sea to the Persian Gulf, overall stretching 2,900,000 square miles. The Persians built a canal between the Nile and the Red Sea, constructed the first postal system called the Royal Road, and was one of the first to introduce a universal system of coinage throughout the empire, known as the daric and shekel, gold and silver, respectively. Persepolis, the capital of the Persian Empire, was built under the reign of Darius and was arguably one of the grandest cities in the ancient world. When the Persian Empire finally fell to Alexander the Great in the 300's BC, he sacked and burned Persepolis to the ground, sending a message that the greatness of Persia was at an end...

Persians have one of the longest and richest histories of any people in the world, having been at one point *the* pre-eminent power the world had seen to being conquered by Macedonians, Mongolians, Arabs, and subjected to the imperialist designs of Britain, Russia, and the United States. Iranians remember these stories that their mothers, fathers, and grandparents have told them about their glorious past, and they exemplify the Persian spirit. The spirit of Iranians has always hearkened and pined for the glory days of Empire and the world-wide respect given to the Persians in ancient times. The pride Iranians feel for their past is a driving force behind their politics in the present day and can perhaps explain the current phenomena of Iran rising once again, from a state of destitution to becoming a regional power.

IV. Laying out the Framework

In order to make my case for Iran as a regional power I will first begin by examining the current literature on the subject in Chapter Two, which does a great job of a quantitative

³ The bas relief was not exactly a declaration of human rights, but more of an imperial decree. It is now recognized as acknowledging concepts that today are associated with human rights, and is the first recorded document to do so.

analysis of its capabilities. I believe that a great picture of the current political landscape has already been painted by esteemed scholars such as Ted Carpenter, Trita Parsi, and especially Vali Nasr. While these great scholars lay out a great framework and construct solid arguments that conclude Iran is becoming a regional power - I will try to fill in the critical point that these scholars seem to have overlooked or ignored; most importantly the domestic commitment argument. Next, in the Third Chapter I will examine various Balance of Power, War, and Hegemonic theories expounded by thinkers such as Waltz, Mearshiemer, Copeland, and summarized by Doyle. Through looking at these various theories I hope to be able to attach the capabilities and qualities of Iran successfully to them to make stronger the case that Iran is becoming a regional power; most of the literature does not focus on attaching or comparing Iran to a theoretical model of regional power or hegemon. After looking at Balance of Power theories, I will move on to the unique portion of my thesis, analyzing the domestic commitment of the Iranian people in Chapter Four. Margaret Levi's works are seminal for understanding domestic commitment⁴, and I hope to show that Iran has a level of domestic commitment that will allow it to realize its regional designs.

The integral factors I will look at in order to determine Iranian domestic commitment are as follows: public opinion polls taken in the past several years by large well-known polling organizations. Questions such as: "approval of the job of the current President" and "what role would you prefer for Iran to take in the region" will help make the argument that Iranians have a high level of domestic commitment. I will also examine several sources I have found polling Iranians on domestic issues such as environmental policy. Through examining the views of Iranians on these types of issues, for example: finding that Iranians would be willing to work

⁴ Margaret Levi never actually uses the term "domestic commitment" – it was coined by Professor Victor Magagna, who drew heavily on the works of Levi to formulate his theory of domestic commitment, which is largely based on consent and compliance.

together to solve environmental problems, the argument can be made that they have a high level of domestic commitment. Finally, I will look at Iranian culture in general and the domestic atmosphere inside Iran. By examining factors such as literacy rates, education, cultural tendencies, I will try to show that Iranians are vibrant and excited about the future, especially when it comes to them taking on a more important regional role.

In Chapter Five I will synthesize my arguments – examining how the literature and empirical evidence of Iranian power attaches to Balance of Power theories, and how domestic commitment provides the glue to hold the argument together. I hope to show that the theories provide a clear indicator of Iran as a regional power, and that domestic commitment allows for Iran to actually achieve that status. The Sixth Chapter will focus mainly on the implications of Iranian regional dominance. I will try to answer the questions that might come up when considering Iran as a regional power; what does this mean for regional politics? For oil? Will regional war break out? Will there be even worse consequences?

V. The Paradox of Domestic Commitment in Iran

Domestic commitment is a key to the stability and success of any state. It is this aspect of Iran that I will focus my attention. Much of the existing literature does not do justice to this idea – instead it focuses purely on Iran’s capabilities or what much of the literature widely available in the United States says; that Iranians are still backwards, oppressed, and demanding change. This is a widely held misconception that leads to an entirely different picture of Iran’s power than what is really the case. The literature that believes Iran is becoming a dominant regional power is correct in that through analyzing its capabilities, one reaches the conclusion that Iran is reaching this status. However, without the domestic commitment of the population, no state can achieve a state of power anywhere in the world.

This leads to an apparent paradox in the literature. The literature that gives the impression that there is widespread discontent in Iran and the literature that says Iran is a regional power are fundamentally at odds. Iran cannot become a regional power if there is low domestic commitment; likewise, it is hard to argue that there is low domestic commitment if Iran is in fact becoming a regional power. It is this paradox that I will attempt to resolve; through my analysis of Iran's capabilities along with my unique research in finding out whether or not the Western misconception is in fact a misconception, or if it is true. The results will go a long way towards proving the literature that claims Iran is a dominant regional power in the Middle East. I hope to show that although Iranians do want change, they are still fundamentally committed to the regime and will work towards the change they desire as well as supporting the government in its designs for increased supremacy in the region.

VI. Why Should You Read This? The Implications of Iran's New Regional Role

The question to answer now is: what is the importance of studying Iran as a regional power for political science, and even for political novices? Why should anyone care about these issues? The implications of Iran becoming a dominant regional power are vast and possibly even terrifying. Iran is a leading opponent of American politics, and the ascendance of Iran could embolden other anti-American states or organizations. Depending on the extent to which Iranian power grows, it could gain control of a vast percentage of OPEC's oil production and be in a position to almost directly influence to world supply of petroleum, giving them powerful leverage and negotiations abilities. Iran could unite and possibly already is the Shi'a of the world into an "Iranian Crescent" giving them a great deal of power and support in the Muslim world.

A darker analysis points to the prospect of warfare in the region. The growth of Iranian power could cause adverse reactions that may lead to warfare between Iran and Sunni Arab

states led by Saudi Arabia and Egypt. The outbreak of war between Sunni and Shi'a could threaten to bring the entire region into a bloody conflict - and the possibility of a nuclear Iran or perhaps even Saudi Arabia, not to mention Pakistan who already has access to nuclear weapons could put the entire region on the brink of total destruction.

Perhaps equally frightening is the possibility of an Iran-Israel war. Think of an old Western movie, with two cowboys facing off for a final showdown to determine who will run the town once and for all. As the two meet on an emptied street and the tumbleweed blows coolly in the wind, the townspeople glance worriedly out the windows, scared of what is soon to transpire. An eerie quiet pervades the entire town at this moment as the two cowboys' hands hover about their holsters. The words "this town ain't big enough for the both of us" are bound to be uttered - and in this case, this statement bears a chilling reality. Ultimately, these showdowns turn into full-on shootouts and the town itself is rocked to the core. Oftentimes innocents are killed, buildings damaged, windows shattered, and fear invades the hearts of all the people in the town until at last only one cowboy is left standing.

Unlike this old Western scene however, the actors will not be Clint Eastwood and Andrew Robinson⁵, but rather, a stand-off between Iran and Israel. This conflict is unlikely to be an isolated incident between these two gun-slinging cowboys. The chilling fact of this potential conflict is that because of a complex and deep string of alliances, regional war and perhaps even world war is almost certain to be borne out of such a shoot-out. It is this possibility that makes studying and learning about Iran's rise to regional dominance so important. Coming to terms with Iran's new status and dealing with them as equals will be of utmost importance when it comes down to preventing such a terrifying scene from playing itself out on the world stage and becoming a reality that nobody wants to face.

⁵ The protagonist and antagonist in Dirty Harry

Chapter 2: What's That Literature Say?

I. An Introduction to the Literature...

In this Chapter I will focus mainly on reviewing the literature currently existing on the topic of Iranian regional dominance. Given the scope of this project it would be illogical and even impossible to have embarked on my own forays into Iran to gather data and come to all the conclusions already reached in the literature, so it is important to draw from what already

exists in order to strengthen my hypothesis and create a more narrow field of research which would then create the possibility of having a more complete picture of Iran as a regional power than when I began this project. Furthermore, I wish to show that any significant reference to domestic commitment is absent from the literature. Some scholars such as Hooman Majd , give some accounts of Iranians having a committed fervor to the regime; however there is little focus on that aspect of Iranian strength. It is my contention that no picture of Iran as a regional power can be complete without also examining domestic commitment, which the literature fails to do, and is what I will attempt to tackle in the fourth chapter.

There has been much said about why Iran has quickly become a regional power and I believe it is absolutely integral for one wishing to understand the current balance of power in the Middle East to understand what preeminent scholars in the field have said about Iran. The bulk of my research has focused on the body of literature that concludes Iran is or already has become a dominant regional power however I will also give weight to the counter arguments, those who believe Iran is not becoming a power in order to hopefully refute them.

My analysis of the literature will focus on several key factors that are given by scholars to help explain how and why Iran has become a dominant regional power. First and perhaps most obviously will be Iran's capabilities, most comprehensively laid out by Nikola B. Schahgaldian in her work *Iran and the Postwar Security in the Persian Gulf*. By looking at how Iran's capabilities equal or surpass every other country in the region the argument for Iranian regional dominance will be strengthened. Next I will turn to the "Shi'a" argument, most notably expounded by Vali Nasr's *The Shi'a Revival*, which postulates a Shi'a movement throughout the Muslim world with Iran acting as the steward and protectorate of Shi'a groups throughout the region. A study of contemporary Iran would not be complete without looking at its nuclear

program and how many scholars such as Ashton Carter believe a nuclear Iran would give it a greater level of power and credibility to exercise regional dominance. In Barry Rubin's *Rise of a Regional Power*, he argues that the American invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan are one of the important factors that allowed Iran to become a dominant regional actor. Lastly, I will examine other possibilities – literature that believes Iran is not becoming a regional power, or that Iran might be a regional power now, but is leading itself to its own destruction. It is my hope that by looking at both sides of the literature a clearer and more accurate understanding can be reached and that the missing pieces of the puzzle will become more apparent in terms of explaining Iran's new regional status.

II. An Analysis of Iran's Capabilities

I believe a great starting point for a look into Iran's capabilities is Nikola B. Shahgaldian's work, *Iran and the Postwar Security in the Persian Gulf*. What is most interesting about this book is the date at which it was written – 1994. Being written just after the first Persian Gulf War, I believe it acts as a strong predictor of the present day situation in Iran and the region. As Shahgaldian points out, "Iranian leaders remain united not only in seeking to become key players in the future developments of the Persian Gulf Region... but also in considering this role as a natural Iranian right."⁶ Shahgaldian further outlines Iran's capabilities, stating that Iran is the second largest country in the Middle East, the most populous, the second highest producer of oil, one of the top three producers of natural gas in the world, has more industrial muscle than other countries in the region, is the religious center of the Shi'a world, and have large ethno-Iranian minority groups in many other countries in the region⁷. These aspects of Iran make it a natural force in the region, and an integral player in its politics.

⁶ Shahgaldian: 1994,12.

⁷ Shahgaldian: 1994, 15-16

A deeper look into Iran's military capabilities shows that Iran has the military might to potentially dictate other actors in the region and will allow them to orchestrate policies with its neighbors if need be. On the other hand, its military could be used as a deterrence force, allowing them to pursue its goals of regional dominance unhindered. Iran has over 500,000 troops in its standing army with over 350,000 in reserve, making it the largest army of all Middle Eastern countries. Furthermore, Iran has more battle tanks, ships, and combat aircraft than its main rivals, and has vastly superior military technology than any other state in the region with the exception of Saudi Arabia and Israel, although Iran is the only state with long-range missile capabilities⁸. While Saudi Arabia has an advanced military, it is not as large and the Saudi government is plagued by instability and domestic insecurity and cannot by itself challenge Iran⁹.

Although the Iranian economy is struggling by their and other Western definitions, with a GDP of over \$750 billion by 2007 estimates¹⁰ Iran is second only to Turkey in economic might. Iran's daily output of oil is one third below its peak production in the 1970's and only forty percent of its crude oil is exported, leaving considerable room for improvement and growth¹¹ Although before making significant economic gains Iran has to curb its unemployment and inflation rates which currently sit at 11% and 14.8%, respectively¹². However, as Alidad Mafinezam and Aria Mehrabi point out in Iran and its Place Among Nations, Iran has signed large scale trade agreements with China; over \$100 billion for oil and natural gas exports over

⁸ Gonzalez: 2007, 98-99

⁹ Gonzalez: 2007, 78

¹⁰ Data taken from the CIA Factbook

¹¹ Gonzales: 2007, 93-97.

¹² Ted Carpenter, *The Iraq War and Iranian Power* pg7

the next three years¹³. Furthermore Iran has several favorable trade agreements with states such as Turkey and India, with whom Iran has made natural gas deals, with planned pipelines to be built from Iran to Turkey, and Iran to India and beyond, which will allow them to export large amounts of natural gas¹⁴.

The literature shows that Iran is a regional powerhouse in terms of its capabilities, with a large and comparatively advanced military, a struggling, yet still quite powerful economy, and many large scale and very favorable trade agreements with surrounding countries and other major players on the world stage such as China and India. The following data taken will further help to clarify and validate the literature claims made by the literature I have examined:

Table 1.0: Select Middle Eastern countries and their capabilities:

Capability	Iran	Turkey	Israel	Saudi	Egypt	Syria	Pakistan	Lebanon	Jordan
Size (sq km)	1648000	780500	20770	215000	100145	18520	803000	10400	92300
Pop (millions)	65.8	71.89	7.1	28.14	81.7	19.7	172	3.9	6.2
Pop Growth (%)	0.792	1.013	1.713	1.954	1.682	2.189	1.99	1.154	2.33
GDP (billions)	762.9	853	185.8	546	405.4	90.37	411.9	40.4	28.45
GDP Growth (%)	6.2	4.5	5.3	3.5	7.1	4.3	5.3	3.6	6
Labor Force (millions)	28.7	23.5	2.894	6.56	22.1	5.46	48.23	1.5	1.56
Unemployment	12	10	7.3	13	9.1	9	5.6	20	13.5

¹³ Mehrabi: 2008, 53

¹⁴ Mehrabi: 2008, 53-58

t (%)									
Military	20.2	20.2	1.7	8.54	18.15	5.25	42	1.1	1.8
Potential (males/millions)									

As Table 1.0 shows¹⁵ Iran is among the leaders in nearly every category, with the exception of unemployment which as the literature itself has stated, is one of Iran's fundamental problems and road blocks. Iran has one of the largest potential militaries¹⁶, the second highest GDP Growth, the second highest GDP, the second largest labor force, the second largest land mass, and the third largest population. Clearly when looked at from a purely numerical and objective viewpoint, one cannot dispute that if there is indeed a regional power, Iran would be at least one of three logical choices with the others possibly being Turkey and Saudi Arabia¹⁷.

III. The Shi'a Movement and the "Iranian Crescent"

The next body of literature deals with the "Shi'a Crescent" or as Gonzalez would deem it; an Iranian Crescent¹⁸. This idea gives Iran's uniting of various Shi'a groups across the Middle East as one of the primary reasons they are becoming a regional power. The main argument is twofold: (1) that the fact that Iran is able to exert its influence over other regional actors shows that Iran is becoming a dominant regional power, and (2) that because Iran is taking on a protectorate type role, these various Shi'a groups such as Hezbollah will prove to be valuable and lasting allies, further enhancing Iran's regional designs. In fact, Vali Nasr places Iran squarely

¹⁵ Data taken from the CIA Factbook

¹⁶ and it has already been shown to have one of the largest standing armies

¹⁷ Subhash Kapila in, *The Middle East: Unfolding Strategic Dynamics* discusses what he believes to be the three potential powers in the Middle East.

¹⁸ Gonzalez: 2007, 103

at the center of the Shi'a Revival, noting that, "the Shia ascendancy in Iraq is supported by and is in turn bolstering another important development in the Middle East: the emergence of Iran as a regional power."¹⁹

Vali Nasr describes how Iran is at the center of the Shi'a world. For example, he points out that one of the main religious centers of the Shi'a tradition is Qom, a major Iranian city. Aspiring Shi'a scholars, preachers, and teachers travel from all over the

Middle East and congregate in Qom, learning Shi'a traditions from Iranian Ayatollah's and mullahs, then travelling back to their own countries and spreading the influence²⁰. There are nearly three hundred million Shi'a spread throughout the Middle East, with major Shi'a groups existing in Lebanon, Iraq, Syria, and even Saudi Arabia, among others. Iranian influence in these areas is spreading like wildfire it seems²¹. In fact, the American invasion of Iraq was singlehandedly responsible for deposing Saddam Hussein's regime and allowed for a Shi'a government to be installed in its place, although this specific issue will be discussed with more detail later in the chapter. Iran's growing influence throughout the region can be thought of as being analogous to Bismarck's Prussian movement, which began uniting the German speaking world and eventually led to Germany becoming hegemonic in Europe²².

Iran is a major supporter of Shi'a organizations and movements, most notably Hezbollah in Lebanon. However they also support: Sipah-I Muhammad in Pakistan, the Badr Brigade and the Mahdi Army in Iraq, to name several others²³. It cannot be argued that Shi'a groups

¹⁹ Nasr: 2008, 212

²⁰ Nasr: 2008, 217

²¹ Barry Rubin, *Iran: The Rise of a Regional Power*

²² Nasr: 2008, 220

²³ Nasr: 2008, 225-240

throughout the Middle East are becoming more prominent and gaining in stature which is largely due to Iranian support. For example, Hezbollah's victorious conflict over Israel could largely be seen as an Iranian victory as well²⁴. Iran directly funded, trained, and supported Hezbollah in its conflict with Israel; sending a resounding message throughout the region and even to the United States that Iran is able and strong enough to support groups such as Hezbollah successfully and that its victory was in large part due to Iranian aid²⁵. The brief Hezbollah-Israel conflict also served another purpose: to further bolster a growing image of Iran as a champion against Israel in the minds of Arabs throughout the Middle East.

Barry Rubin argues that one factor causing Iran's outgrowth of power is the weak leadership of Arab states and the decline of Arab nationalism. He opines that the declining power of Arab states has created a vacuum in which Iran is the only state who can not only offer something substantial ideologically; Shi'ism and anti-Western, anti-Israeli rhetoric, for example, but also has the ability to project its influence outward²⁶. He also points out that no Arab state really has strong influence over another – Egypt has continually turned inward, Syria is isolated, and Iraq no longer defines itself as Arab²⁷. As such, Iran has used Shi'ism to build ties with its neighbors, and the Sunni-Shi'a divide has only helped to further unite the Shi'a. The Egyptian President, Hosni Mubarak, in an interview on April 8, 2006 pointed out that Iran has strong influence over the Shi'a in Iraq, and concluded that "The Shiites are always loyal to Iran. Most of them are loyal to Iran and not to the countries in which they live."

IV. A Nuclear Iran; Fact or Fiction

²⁴ Who "won" the conflict is debatable, however it was a victory in that it served to dispel the aura of invincibility that had previously surrounded Israel in the minds of the Arab and Islamic World.

²⁵ Nasr: 2008, 269

²⁶ Barry Rubin, *Iran: The Rise of a Regional Power*

²⁷ Barry Rubin, *Iran: The Rise of a Regional Power*

Iran's nuclear program is one of the hottest topics in political science pertaining to the Middle East today. With the wild claims of Ahmadinejad and Iran's sponsoring of so-called terrorist organizations such as Hamas and Hezbollah, there is great fear among the world community of what Iran's nuclear program might entail. One of the biggest fears is that Iran will allow a nuclear weapon to fall into the hands of terrorists, or that it will use a bomb in a time of desperation. Iran has maintained that it is pursuing nuclear technology for peaceful purposes and does not desire to make nuclear weapons – but the fact remains that this is a possibility, and in the near future Iran will be able to construct one if it so desires. Doing so would place them among very elite company, as one of the few nations that possesses the technology, further evidence of its power in the region.

According to Barry Rubin, there are several factors that can help explain Iran's nuclear program: (1) Iran is surrounded by potential enemies; most notably Israel and possibly Saudi Arabia, not to mention the United States, and nuclear weapons would serve as a strong deterrent, (2) they have a right to obtain nuclear weapons, and (3) it is cheaper and easier to build nuclear weapons than to develop a top notch conventional military²⁸. The results of Iran acquiring nuclear weapons would be to give them a huge strategic leverage over other states in the region, especially because Iran is the only actor in the Middle East who possesses long-range missile capabilities. In addition, that Iran would construct nuclear missiles in the face of American threats could serve as an inspiration to other states in the region or other radical movements to develop their own nuclear programs or to pursue their own interests without necessarily fearing the response of the United States or another non-sovereign entity, thereby increasing the popularity of Iran²⁹. However there could be negative consequences; with the

²⁸ Barry Rubin, *Iran: The Rise of a Regional Power*

²⁹ Mehrabi discusses this. It is also evidence of the influence and popularity of Iran in the Middle East.

volatility of the region, there is the chance that a nuclear weapon made by Iran could fall into the hands of a terrorist organization, or that one might be used in a time of desperation or rage³⁰.

Ashton Carter, an expert on nuclear issues, goes into more detail about Iran's nuclear program in a conference titled: The Middle East: Between Progress and Conflict. He explains that Iran currently has enough raw materials to produce enough enriched uranium to construct one nuclear missile. The United States could theoretically destroy this facility and cripple Iran's nuclear ambitions. However, he points out that it would only take one year for Iran to regain the position they hold today and concludes that the bombing of Iran's nuclear facilities would lead to more harm than good. Negative consequences would be the complete and utter destruction of diplomacy, the souring of Iranian opinion towards the United States, and most dangerously, Iranian sponsored terrorist organizations could be turned towards American or other interests. Carter concludes then that Iran's nuclear program cannot be ended by force; the costs of doing so would be too great while the benefits would only be a one year's delay in the program³¹.

A nuclear Iran would allow it to be more aggressive in pursuing its policies and agendas and perhaps even change the balance of power³². Vali Nasr illustrates how Iran might become more aggressive by examining the India-Pakistan case. He points out that there has not been a war since Pakistan acquired a nuclear weapon but it has been much more aggressive in its dealings with India; with an increase in skirmishes and random violence since Pakistan's acquisition of the bomb. Similarly, Iran acquiring nuclear weapons would allow it to do the same: Iran could put more pressure on Israel, could increase their anti-Western rhetoric, or

³⁰ Barry Rubin, *Iran: The Rise of a Regional Power*

³¹ Ashton Carter, *The Middle East: Between Progress and Conflict Part 3*

³² Vali Nasr, *The Middle East: Between Progress and Conflict Part 2*

could pressure the governments of Iraq and Afghanistan to adopt more pro-Iranian policies, for example³³. Carpenter agrees with Nasr's assertion that Iran's nuclear program would allow it to "strengthen the regime's negotiating posture"³⁴.

V. The Helping Hands of America

Next I will turn to the United States' invasion of Iraq and Afghanistan, which many scholars believe served as sort of a sling shot, catapulting Iran to regional dominance in the Middle East. In his article *Iran and the Regional Balance of Power*, Farzad Pezeshkpour states that "Iran currently has something of an upper hand in the region"³⁵ noting that the ousting of Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq and the Taliban in Afghanistan have effectively removed two of Iran's closest and most boisterous opponents in the region. Not only have Iranian enemies been removed from power but pro Iranian regimes have been established in their place, doubly impacting Iran's rapid rise³⁶. In fact, as Pezeshkpour points out, the new Iraqi president is a non-Arab who is proud of his knowledge of Farsi and who has a long history of friendship with Iran.

Iraq and the Taliban were opposed to Iran ideologically as well as physically. The Taliban imposed a very radical and fundamental form of Sunni Islam while Saddam Hussein's Sunni Iraq was a major proponent of Pan-Arabism. With Iran being neither Sunni nor Arab, Afghanistan and Iraq were Iran's prime rivals in the region. The Iraqi invasion of Iran in 1980 clearly showed that given the opportunity, Saddam Hussein would try to destroy Iran. With major ideological enemies surrounding it, Iran would not be able to spread its influence very far in the region. The pre-2000 era could be likened to pre World War I Europe, with Germany as the natural

³³ Nasr discusses at length the effects of the withdrawal of US presence in the region

³⁴ Ted Carpenter, *The Iraq War and Iranian Power* pg5

³⁵ Pezeshkpour, *Iran and the Regional Balance of Power*

³⁶ This could also serve to increase sentiments of fear among its remaining enemies, Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Egypt for example.

hegemon in the region being isolated by potential enemies on all sides; France to the West and Russia to the east. The American invasions of Afghanistan and then Iraq effectively changed the balance of power in the region, for better or for worse.

Vali Nasr confirms Pezeshkpour's assertion, stating that the US-led invasions of Afghanistan and Iraq effectively eliminated an axis of states, Taliban-Saudi Arabia-Pakistan to the East of Iran and Iraq in the West that kept Iranian power in check³⁷. The American occupation in Afghanistan and Iraq has created tension among the Arab world as American influence throughout the region has decreased and public opinion has largely turned against it³⁸. Iran has been able to benefit from this, using anti-American sentiments coupled with a depletion of US resources to fund, support, and gain widespread approval and influence over Shi'a in Iraq and Afghanistan³⁹. Nasr points to the symbolism of Kharrazi's, who was the Iranian Minister of Foreign Affairs through 2005, journey to Iraq to welcome the new Prime Minister as Iran embracing their new regional role⁴⁰.

The United States' removal of Iraq essentially paved the way for Iran's growing influence⁴¹; thanks to their efforts, Iran has been given two more allies in the region. Iran's goals in Iraq are twofold; (1) to tie down coalition forces in counter-insurgency in order for the United States to not be able to focus on Iran, and (2) to deepen political and economic influence over Iraqi Shi'a⁴². Increasingly, it is doing just that; in Afghanistan as well, much to the benefit of Iran. For example, Iran could gain pseudo control over a majority of Iraqi oil production in the coming

³⁷ Nasr, 2008: 220-230

³⁸ Subhash Kapila in, *The Middle East: Unfolding Strategic Dynamics*

³⁹ Nasr, 2008: 269

⁴⁰ Nasr, 2008: 211

⁴¹ Ted Carpenter, *The Iraq War and Iranian Power* pg2

⁴² Ted Carpenter, *The Iraq War and Iranian Power* pg6

years; the majority of oil in Iraq resides in the southern areas such as the Majnoun oil fields of which the majority of Iraqi Shi'a reside⁴³. Iran also has major influence in the Southwestern regions in Afghanistan according to Barry Rubin. With the removal of Hussein and the Taliban, Iran is free for example to more easily conduct shipping and trade throughout the Middle East. Major pipeline deals with India to export natural gas might not have been possible, or would have been much more difficult with the Taliban still in power.

Finally, the American occupation of Iraq and Afghanistan has made the United States "short of breath" – as Vali Nasr puts it. Nasr's argument is as follows: the United States will not be able to maintain its presence in Iraq and Afghanistan indefinitely; the massive economic strain of maintaining two occupations coupled with negative political feedback, especially with respect to Iraq, will cause the United States to end its occupation⁴⁴. The United States has overextended itself in the region and even its attempted buildup of the GCC states'⁴⁵ militaries will be a lengthy process. As a result, Iran will be free to act virtually unopposed once the American forces are withdrawn, thereby giving it the perception that it can influence its neighbors and assert its influence however it pleases.

VI. Examining the Counter Literature

For my last bullet point, I will address some other possibilities or beliefs held in the literature. Those include: arguments stating that other states rather than Iran are becoming a regional power and arguments which assert that Iran's growing power will be counterproductive, eventually leading to its downfall. Other states that have been viewed as the dominant power in the region are Saudi Arabia, Israel, and Turkey. For example, Subhash Kapila

⁴³ Baer, 2008: 134

⁴⁴ Vali Nasr, *The Middle East: Between Progress and Conflict* Part 2

⁴⁵ The GCC states include: Saudi Arabia, Bahrain, Kuwait, Oman, Qatar, and the United Arab Emirates. It was formed in 1981 to provide increased security and cooperation.

argues that Turkey rather than Iran or Saudi Arabia is becoming the regional power in the Middle East for four reasons; (1) it has strong strategic links with the United States and Europe, (2) it has a partnership with Israel, (3) it has begun diplomatic initiatives with both Syria and Iran, and (4) is progressive, democratic, moderate, and more accepted globally than either Iran or Saudi Arabia⁴⁶.

Kapila argues that the balance of power in the Middle East is bi-polar: with the United States, Israel, Turkey, and Egypt on one pole; and Iran, Russia, and Syria on the other pole. He notes that Saudi Arabia and other Gulf-Arab states are sitting on the sidelines but leaning towards supporting the US-backed pole. He argues that the three potential powers in the region are: Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Iran. Saudi Arabia, although having a large landmass and abundant resources and technology, is limited by its population and cannot become a significant player⁴⁷. Iran has the potential to be a major player in the region especially if it continues with its nuclear program, Kapila argues. However, Iran's adverse relationship with the United States will hinder its ability to assert itself in the region – American sanctions and other measures severely constrain Iran economically. Furthermore, unlike other scholars who believe Iran will be the center of a new Shi'a movement and allow them to influence the various Shi'a majorities in states such as Iraq, Syria, and Afghanistan, Kapila argues that it is because Iran is Shi'a that it cannot assert itself as the dominant regional power. Arab states are now frightened of Iran's role in the region and risk an Arab coalition being formed to counter Iran⁴⁸.

Turkey, as Kapila opines, is the state that will emerge dominant in the region. Turkey has always been a powerful player in the region, which according to Table 1.0 seems like a plausible

⁴⁶ Subhash Kapila in, *The Middle East: Unfolding Strategic Dynamics*

⁴⁷ Much of the literature also points to its chronic instability as another big weakness.

⁴⁸ Pezeshkpour, *Iran and the Regional Balance of Power*

assumption, but has not been actively involved in the affairs of the region. Recently however, Turkey has begun taking a more prominent role, and is more powerful than Iran and Saudi Arabia. Seemingly confirming Kapila's argument, Turkey has recently announced that it is willing to act as the middle man or arbiter in negotiations between Iran and the United States to try and come to a consensus on Iran's nuclear program⁴⁹. Turkey is a democratic and moderate country, therefore making it more stable and less susceptible to radical or violent domestic movements that might disrupt the plans of the regime. Perhaps the strongest asset of Turkey is the fact that it has strong strategic ties to the United States as well as Europe⁵⁰. Perhaps a testament to this fact, Turkey is attempting to become the newest member of the European Union. A large, economically and militarily mighty Turkey, with support of Western powers surely would seem to be able to more easily assert itself as the dominant power in the region, rather than Iran.

Another argument states that Iran is becoming a power but it will have a counter-productive effect and cause a backlash and actually weaken Iran in the future. Carpenter suggests that one of Iran's greatest weaknesses is the very real possibility of Arab states uniting against them⁵¹. Gonzalez also cautions of a potential conflict with Arab states such as Saudi Arabia and even with Israel, especially with Iran continuing its nuclear program, which could prove disastrous for Iran⁵². Because Arab regimes are afraid of Iran's growing power and influence over Shi'a groups, it is likely they will attempt to form a coalition, and the United

⁴⁹ Robert Tait, *Iran Sought Turkey's help to mend links with US, says Erdogan*: <http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2009/feb/24/turkey-iran-erdogan-interview>

⁵⁰ Subhash Kapila in, *The Middle East: Unfolding Strategic Dynamics*

⁵¹ Ted Carpenter, *The Iraq War and Iranian Power* pg7

⁵² Gonzalez: 2008, 105

States would move to support and arm that movement in order to check Iranian power⁵³. Egypt has as large of a military as Iran, with 15.5 million troops and a half million-man standing army⁵⁴, and Saudi Arabia along with other GCC countries have smaller but fairly advanced militaries. On the face this seems like a strong balancing tool; Pezeshkpour recognizes this and strongly urges caution on Iran's part. The backlash of Iran's growth in power can be devastating if it does not act kindly and generously towards its Arab neighbors in order to dissuade their fears about Iran's designs in the region⁵⁵. Iran's rapidly increasing power in the region risks the incitement of instability and paranoia which could lead to Iran's collapse.

VII. Great, But What's Missing?

After reviewing the literature, it becomes clear that Iran is becoming a dominant regional power in the Middle East. However, the literature does point out some weaknesses and holes in the argument in favor of Iran's new regional position that must be dealt with in order to accurately state that in fact Iran **is** or already has become the dominant power in the Middle East. First, I will examine various Balance of Power theories in order to determine precisely what a dominant regional power, or hegemon might look like. In order to accomplish this I will examine Waltz's Theory of International Politics, as well as The Tragedy of Great Power Politics by Mearsheimer and also look at Copeland's The Origins of Major War⁵⁶. My hope is that being able to attach Iran to a sort of "model" of what a regional power or hegemon looks like will further enforce the assertion that Iran is a regional power.

⁵³ Gonzalez: 2008, 104

⁵⁴ Ted Carpenter, *The Iraq War and Iranian Power* pg8

⁵⁵ Pezeshkpour, *Iran and the Regional Balance of Power*

⁵⁶ Copeland outlines a theory of major war, but also includes useful and relevant discussions on Balance of Power Theory

Next, I will turn to the more unique portion of my research – determining domestic commitment. Without the commitment of the domestic population to support the designs of the regime, no amount of economic might or military technology will suffice to catapult a state to regional dominance. Therefore, it is necessary to determine that Iran **has** the domestic commitment of its population. I will rely heavily on Margaret Levi’s work and my own research in order to first explain the concept of domestic commitment, and then show that Iran has the necessary domestic commitment to pursue its goals of regional dominance.

These two factors, in conjunction with what has already been said will fully and accurately portray Iran as the dominant regional power. I believe the recognition and understanding of this fact is vital to any thoughts about the balance of power in the Middle East, and any dealings a state might have with Iran.

Chapter 3: Balance of Power Theory

I. What is the Balance of Power, and who are the Neo Realists?

After having examined the literature surrounding Iran's new regional role, two questions were left unanswered. First: but what of the Iranian people and domestic commitment? None of the literature really examines Iranian power as it stems from the population itself; this issue will be explored in the following chapter. This chapter deals with the second question: how can Balance of Power theory help to clarify, enforce, and more accurately frame the assertion made by the literature that Iran is becoming a regional power?

I will attempt to answer this question by looking at how neo-realist theorists such as Waltz and Mearsheimer perceive and characterize the balance of power⁵⁷. Waltz's Theory of International Relations and Mearsheimer's Tragedy of Great Power Politics are the two seminal neo-realist works and are widely regarded by International Relations scholars as the most important works of today's generation with respect to the balance of power. I will begin by outlining basic neo-realist theory; how the international system is characterized, what is the balance of power and how is it measured, and who are the powers in the system. Both Waltz and Mearsheimer have similar view points with respect to these initial issues. However upon

⁵⁷ For some reason I was never able to locate a copy of Waltz's Theory of International Relations. Richard Little's The Balance of Power in International Relations provides a clear and comprehensive analysis of both Waltz and Mearsheimer. I drew heavily on this book for my theoretical analysis.

delving deeper into balance of power theory – each come to different conclusions as to how states act and behave and how the system itself functions.

I will then look specifically at Waltz's theory of the balance of power, often called "defensive realism", which essentially states that states only exist to perpetuate themselves and that one can predict the actions of a state based on this idea. Next I will examine Mearsheimer's "offensive realism", which rests upon the idea that states exist not just to survive, but to expand their power and dominate the system. Mearsheimer then, talks heavily of hegemonic power and regional dominance, which Waltz does not consider. With these two theorists I hope to further enhance the claim of Iran becoming a regional power in the Middle East.

Finally I will look at the prospect of war. Throughout history, war and power are two concepts that go hand in hand and I believe it is fitting that any discussion of the balance of power should also include discussions on war. Copeland's The Origins of Major War sheds light on the issue of warfare – how can it be determined when states will go to war, are multipolar or bipolar systems more stable, and what will the result of a major war be? His dynamic differentials theory can help not only to give the tools for predicting when states will go to war, but he also includes relevant and important commentary on the balance of power in a system in his discussion.

It is my hope that after looking at balance of power theories I can arrive at a conclusion that will hopefully support the claims made in the literature. These claims state that Iran has increased its power, its capabilities, and its influence in the region – and that it has become a dominant regional power, and a possible hegemon.

II. Waltz and Balance of Power Theory

Although as Waltz points out, there is no unified definition of what exactly the balance of power is, neo Realist theory begins by characterizing the international system⁵⁸ as being in a state of anarchy⁵⁹. The term anarchy however, might be misleading – it does not attempt to suggest that there is a complete absence of all rule and order; anarchy means that there is no overarching governing body that controls the actions and power of all states in a system. Essentially, states are free to do whatever they want – however the reality of the system can and will constrain them in certain cases. For example, Austria’s order of general mobilization against Russia at the onset of the First World War caused a system-wide response, the mobilization of France and Russia, which led to German mobilization, which caused regional war, and later world war, to commence⁶⁰.

The balance of power in a system can be thought of in terms of a simple economic market⁶¹. If the balance of power is like perfect competition there will be many states of approximately equal power, with no one state wielding significant influence over another. If the balance of power is like an oligopoly, there will be a small number of states who control a significant amount of power and can easily influence other smaller states – and must constantly be aware of the relative power of themselves and the other “great powers”. If the balance of power is like a monopoly, the system will become hierarchical rather than be in a state of anarchy since one state will be able to dominate the entire market, or system. Waltz argues in favor of the balance of power as an oligopoly. In almost every historical case any “system” has only a few great powers and sometimes many smaller ones. For example in pre-World War One

⁵⁸ A “system” is just a group of states, or a location. It can be the entire world, a region, a city, or a family.

⁵⁹ Little, 174

⁶⁰ David Fromkin, Europe’s Last Summer

⁶¹ Waltz discusses this in his Theory of International Relations

Europe; Germany, France, Great Britain, Russia, and perhaps Austria-Hungary were great powers, with all other states being largely insignificant on the international level. In ancient Greece, Athens and Sparta were great powers, and other states were smaller. Following these examples, Waltz argues that power then can be measured in the impact one state has over others, defined by the distribution of capabilities⁶².

But how is power measured? Waltz gives many examples of power variables: population and the size of one's territory, resources; natural resources for example, economic capability, military strength, and political stability and competence⁶³. In order for a state to become a "great power"⁶⁴, states must possess capabilities across all key dimensions⁶⁵. However as Waltz points out, since power is a scarce resource, it can only be calculated in terms of relative power. This means that as the power of one state increases, the other states in a system will lose power, or the more states there are in the system the less power each will have individually. As a state gains more power, Waltz suggests that the feeling of safety will increase and permits a wider range of actions as well as having a bigger stake in the system and the ability to act for its sake⁶⁶. The United States is almost universally⁶⁶ considered as a hegemonic power in the Americas and as such it can essentially act as a leader in the region. It can easily mediate disputes and has a large say in many of the international policies such as trade relations between states in the region.

⁶² Little, 182

⁶³ From Waltz's Theory of International Relations

⁶⁴ "Great Powers" are states that control most of the resources and "power" in a system. They are able to influence other actors and dictate policy.

⁶⁵ Little, 183

⁶⁶ Little, 188

Next, the balance of power in a system can be thought of in one of two ways: a multipolar system, or a bipolar system. A multipolar system has at least five great powers – and politics is like a zero sum game; one state gaining power will hurt the other states in the system⁶⁷. According to Waltz, multipolar systems are characterized by uncertainty of the future; they cannot be sure what other states will do, but they do know that the relative power of each state in the system will change, although they cannot predict exactly how it will change⁶⁸. The best example of a multipolar system is pre-World War One Europe, as there were five great powers: Great Britain, France, Russia, Germany, and Austria-Hungary. Russia, France, and Germany were all increasing their power in the years leading up to the Great War and as a result, Austria-Hungary was losing relative power. Again, as Waltz would predict – this created a sense of fear and uncertainty which led to Austria-Hungary taking actions that would eventually lead to the onset of the War, most notably an ordering of general mobilization⁶⁹. Waltz therefore suggests that a multipolar system is very unstable, especially because the more great powers there are, the more complex and interlocking potential alliances become⁷⁰, the more uncertainty pervades the system, and the greater the chance that one state will initiate a conflict results⁷¹.

A bipolar system on the other hand, Waltz argues, is more stable because since there are only two great powers cooperation is easier. Decisions made in a bipolar system can be

⁶⁷ When referring to “states” in this and almost every context, Waltz is only considering the Great Powers in a system since lesser powers are insignificant and do not impact the larger functions of the system itself.

⁶⁸ Little, 196

⁶⁹ David Fromkin, Europe’s Last Summer

⁷⁰ Waltz creates a formula to determine the number of possible alliances in a system: (write formula here)

⁷¹ Little, 196-202

thought of in terms of a prisoner's dilemma⁷². States can either choose to cooperate, or cheat. Although cheating can yield a potentially higher payout, if both parties cheat it could prove disastrous for both. Cooperating on the other hand will lead to both states benefitting, which is what Waltz suggests will happen most of the time, since the main function of states is to perpetuate their own existence⁷³. In addition, Waltz opines that a bipolar system is less complex because there are no intricate alliances since there are only two great powers, and alliances between lesser powers, or of great powers with lesser powers does not affect the makeup of the system because lesser powers are insignificant. Relative power is also easier to calculate and judge. If there are several great powers, each one needs to keep tabs on the others, which is often difficult from a logistics perspective and can lead to incomplete information, which in turn could result in erroneous actions such as a preemptive attack that is not necessary. With only two powers it is much easier to calculate power since presumably these two states will control a vast majority of the capabilities in the system, making a stable balance more likely⁷⁴.

Overall, Waltz makes three primary assertions: (1) anarchy is persistent in the international system, and the balance of power is the best explanation of these phenomena, (2) the nature of politics in multipolar and bipolar systems are inherently different, and (3) stability and peace are more likely to occur in a bipolar system. He lays out an easy to understand way to think about the power of individual states in a system through analyzing their capabilities⁷⁵ and posits that by knowing the capabilities in the system, the great powers and the overall balance

⁷² Little, 206

⁷³ This begins one major disparity between Waltz and Mearsheimer. Mearsheimer disagrees and asserts that states exist to perpetuate and maximize their power.

⁷⁴ Little, 207

⁷⁵ The Capabilities Waltz outlines are: population and the size of one's territory, resources; natural resources for example, economic capability, military strength, and political stability and competence.

of power can be determined. One of the most versatile features of Waltz's theory is the fact that it can be used in almost any system – from the worldwide international system to smaller units such as cities and towns, and even to the family.

For example, the modern family can be thought of as having a bipolar balance of power, with the mother and father acting as the great powers and children acting as lesser powers. No one power can dominate the system, both mother and father must cooperate in deciding how to raise their children, or formulate policy. One power attempting to take too much control of the system can lead to various degrees of reprisal – ranging from being exiled on the couch for several nights to a divorce. Similarly, the children, being lesser powers, are not in a position to influence the system and as such are at the whim of their parents and generally must adhere to their policies. Just like the balance of power in an international system – a lesser power that goes against a great power will face damaging repercussions, or in the case of the family, being grounded.

III. Mearsheimer: Let's Talk Hegemony

Waltz gives a powerful and insightful foray into the balance of power – characterizing the system as being in a state of anarchy in which a balance of power is created to give some semblance of order. However Mearsheimer, although agreeing with Waltz on some basic precepts of the organization of the international system and the balance of power, departs from the Waltzian point of view. While Waltz suggests the primary motivator of states is survival, and the actions they take in the balance of power are directly related to ensuring this end, Mearsheimer develops a theory that is often deemed “offensive realism”. His theory is that states in a balance of power exist in order to maximize their own power and become hegemonic. It is this idea of hegemony that I will focus on, because I believe Mearsheimer's

discussion of hegemony is directly related to the current situation in the Middle East and in fact is highly pertinent in other areas of the world as well⁷⁶. In addition to talking about hegemony, Mearsheimer also considers regional balance of powers. He places a great emphasis on regional politics and believes that there are different spheres – a world-wide balance of power, regional balances of power, and local balances of power. A state must first become a regional hegemon before it can attempt to become a global hegemon; and not all states can become global or even regional hegmons.

But what is a hegemon? According to Mearsheimer a hegemon needs to have the most formidable army and the most latent power in a region⁷⁷ as well as being the only great power in a system⁷⁸. In order to help clarify what a hegemon is – think of a bully. Nelson Muntz from The Simpsons is a perfect example of a bully. He is the biggest and strongest kid on the playground and is able to essentially do whatever he wants. If he wants your lunch money, you will give it to him or fear being beaten up. The fact that he can beat up any of the other students is analogous to having the largest and most powerful military, which in turn is used to influence other actors in the system, or students in this example. Bullies however, like all hegemonic powers, are not entirely safe. There is always the fear of a hegemon being too coercive, in which case the other actors in the system will form a large counter-hegemonic alliance and attempt to destroy the hegemon⁷⁹. In fact this exact situation occurred in an episode of The Simpsons – with an alliance of all the school children led by Bart Simpson. They engaged Nelson and the conflict eventually

⁷⁶ For example, China becoming a regional hegemon in Asia, the hegemony of Russia during the Cold War, or the United States' continuing hegemony today

⁷⁷ Mearsheimer: 2001, 45

⁷⁸ Little, 247

⁷⁹ Doyle, Ways of War and Peace : he gives a good analysis of realist theory and counter hegemonic alliances

resulted in a truce and a reduction of Nelson's power, while still retaining the right to be known as a "bully"⁸⁰. In more contemporary and relevant terms – the United States today is the most well known example of a regional hegemon. In the American region – it has by far the largest and most advanced military, as well as the largest latent power, which Mearsheimer defines as a combination of size, population, and resource capabilities. None would argue the United States' dominance in the region⁸¹.

Mearsheimer's theory rests on the fact that states aspire to become hegemonic (Little, 231). While Waltz suggests that states simply wish for their own survival, he also states that the decline in power of a state will cause fear that might lead to war. Mearsheimer counters by stating that if a state is only concerned with survival – it would not be characterized by fear and uncertainty about the future⁸². In a balance of power that is either multipolar or bipolar, the chance of a great power being outright eliminated is small, so why would one state fear a decline in its power. The fact that this fear exists, Mearsheimer suggests, is proof that states do not aim simply for their own survival – but wish to maximize their power. By taking actions that will increase the power of a state, fear and uncertainty will be lessened and eliminated, in the case of a state acquiring hegemonic status⁸³. As such, great powers in a system adopt an aggressive stance, hence the term "offensive realism".

The two main strategic aims of great powers therefore are (1) gaining power and (2) becoming hegemonic⁸⁴. Strategies states employ to gain power are as follows: blackmail, which

⁸⁰ The Simpsons, Season 1 Episode 5: Bart the General

⁸¹ Little, 217

⁸² Mearsheimer: 2001

⁸³ Little, 224

⁸⁴ Little, 236

is one state threatening war in order to gain more power. For example, Iran has repeatedly used violent rhetoric against Israel in order to increase its power and influence in the Middle East – despite the fact that Iran would not actually engage in a military conflict with Israel directly, at least in the foreseeable future. Another method states use to gain power is what Mearsheimer terms “bait and bleed” – which is where one state watches two others fight without getting involved. Iran has persistently pursued this strategy and it has produced very favorable results. The US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan are perfect examples⁸⁵. Iraq was Iran’s greatest rival in the Middle East and without lifting a finger; Iraq was removed as a great power in the region, thereby allowing Iran’s relative power to greatly increase. Lastly, states engage in bloodletting, which are actions taken by one state to help perpetuate a conflict without getting directly involved. Again, Iran has been involved in many bloodletting activities – through sponsoring groups such as Hezbollah and training their fighters they helped to foster the Hezbollah-Israeli war which served not only to dispel the aura of Israeli invincibility but also positioned Iran as a champion of anti-Israeli sentiments, which empowered Iran in the minds of Arabs throughout the region. Another option, although less preferable, is to actually go to war⁸⁶. By going to war and weakening another state – the initiator thereby increases its power. Most recently, Israel invaded the Gaza strip – which served to directly weaken Hamas and empower Israel.

Lastly, Mearsheimer considers nuclear hegemony. Nuclear hegemony can be achieved when a great power acquires nuclear superiority over its rivals. Currently Israel is a nuclear hegemon in the Middle East – possessing nuclear weapons. However, Iran is encroaching on Israeli power in this area: working on a uranium enrichment program, and in addition Iran will

⁸⁵ Vali Nasr discusses the importance of the US invasions of Iraq and Afghanistan on bolstering Iranian power in *The Shifting Balance of Power*

⁸⁶ Little, 237

soon have a functioning nuclear power plant⁸⁷. Many believe that Iran will also acquire nuclear weapons in the near future. At this point both Iran and Israel will form a bipolar nuclear balance of power. This development will prove to be one of the most important issues facing International Relations in the coming years – and how the issue plays out is of interest to the entire world, since a potential nuclear war between these two states would be disastrous.

IV. War! Copeland's Sage Analysis

It can be argued that International Relations as a science was originally conceived to answer two questions, one of international trade, and one of war. Dale Copeland considers why wars start in *The Origins of Major War*. He examines three theories, classical realism, neo realism, and hegemonic stability theory. Neo realist theory asserts that major wars are likely to start in a multipolar system and that bipolar systems are more stable⁸⁸. Copeland then outlines a theory he calls dynamic differentials theory to help explain the origins of major war⁸⁹. An analysis of Copeland's theory not only will help later in this project when considering the possible implications of Iran's new role – the most pertinent of which is the prospect of regional warfare, but also it provides an interesting commentary on neo realist theory itself. For example, Waltz suggests that a bipolar balance of power is more stable than a multipolar system. Copeland on the other hand argues that a bipolar balance of power is more unstable and chances for major war erupting in a bipolar balance are more likely.

⁸⁷ News from CNN: <http://www.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/meast/02/24/iran.nuclear/>

⁸⁸ They are more stable, Waltz suggests because there are only two great powers, each one can more easily measure and gauge the other, and cooperation is easier.

⁸⁹ Copeland, 3

The basis of Copeland's dynamic differentials theory rests on the fact that major war is likely to begin when a state in a system fears decline⁹⁰. It therefore important to examine power differentials in order to predict which state would possibly instigate a major war. Copeland argues that a declining state with little power will not risk war, because the result of failure would likely lead to the destruction of the state. On the other hand, a powerful state fearing decline would contemplate starting a war, since even if the effort is a failure the state is likely to still survive⁹¹. Next, Copeland outlines different forms, types, and situations in which a state will decline. One such example is the deterioration of a state's economic and social base relative to other states in the system. Europe in 1618-19 was wrought with economic stagnation and Spain felt compelled to take a more aggressive foreign policy, which eventually led to the Thirty Year's War⁹². One state strong in military power but weak in other forms of power might fear further decline and take actions that will lead to major war. Iraq in 1980 is a great example of this – Saddam Hussein's Baathist regime had a very large and powerful military relative to other states in the region, but had a struggling economy and was rife with social problems. Fearing further decline, Hussein opted to invade Iran and eliminate its largest rival and increase its power. Next, power oscillations caused by arms racing or short-term policies will cause the decline of power which then threatens the decline of the entire state. This in turn will favor hard-line actions that risk the onset of major war⁹³. Luckily this did not lead to major war in the case of the Soviet Union declining.

⁹⁰ Copeland, 4

⁹¹ This is because the other states in the system are too small to severely challenge a great power, even if it suffers heavy losses.

⁹² Copeland, 6

⁹³ Look at it from the state's point of view: if you do not act, your power will continue to decline, and other states might perceive weakness and attack you. However, since you are still powerful, perhaps a quick attack will weaken opposing powers and therefore buy more time to stave off state-death.

Copeland's dynamic differentials theory has three main assertions: (1) a dominant but declining military great power is likely to start a major war, (2) constraints differ in bipolar and multipolar systems; in a multipolar system only when a state has a significant military advantage will it attack, and in a bipolar system a state can attack even if it are not the stronger of the two powers. (3) The chance of war increases if decline is deep and inevitable⁹⁴. Contrary to Waltz, Copeland therefore asserts that a bipolar balance of power is more unstable. In a bipolar system there is only one other state to worry about so a bid for hegemony is easier to achieve. Even if there is a stalemate, or the aggressor actually loses the war, it will likely not face the loss of too much power in the system since lesser powers are practically insignificant. Therefore, war is less risky and costly in a bipolar system⁹⁵. A multipolar system on the other hand is such that there are several large states all with approximately equal power, and as such no state will attempt to make a hegemonic bid. Launching a war is irrational because of the possibility of a coalition formed against the aggressor by the other great powers; in a multipolar system, states prefer alliances to war. Only when a state is clearly superior to every other state will it contemplate a hegemonic bid⁹⁶. The second Sino-Japanese War is an example; Japan perceived itself to be vastly superior to all other states in Asia and attempted to make a bid at hegemony by defeating China in order to secure its vast resources.

Two questions Copeland helps answers are as follows: is major war more likely when great powers are equal or unequal in power and can major war happen between states seeking only security, or are aggressive motives needed? The answer to the first question, Copeland asserts depends on the polarity of the system. In a multipolar system, a state needs a

⁹⁴ For example, Austria-Hungary prior to World War One

⁹⁵ Copeland, 17

⁹⁶ Although it can be argued that if one state is so much more superior than others, it is already a hegemon. Copeland, 16

preponderance of power in order to start a major war. This is because of a possible counter alliance by the other great powers should one state take an aggressive stance. If it has a preponderance of power⁹⁷ the state can essentially act in whatever manner it chooses. In a bipolar system however, even if one of the two great powers is weaker, starting a war is still more beneficial because there is less risk involved – failure will not likely lead to state death. Think about ancient Greece for example. Ancient Greece was a bipolar system with Athens and Sparta at the poles. If Athens feels its power is declining, attacking Sparta could prove to be a “quick fix” to its struggles. Even if its attack fails, Athens will still retain great power status in the system, although it will be weaker. On the other hand, Austria-Hungary’s actions in World War One resulted in the dissolution of the state itself, since the balance of power was multipolar.

V. There’s Still Something Missing... Domestic Commitment

Although the balance of power theories outlined by Waltz and Mearsheimer have strong predictive qualities and present an object method of calculating and understanding the balance of power, I would contend that both theorists ignore a crucial factor in determining power – domestic commitment. Regardless of the military or latent power a state possesses, without enjoying the domestic commitment of its population no state will be able to utilize the power resources at its disposal. In World War Two, Hitler enjoyed a very high level of domestic commitment at the outset of the war. Germans were excited to become a world power and were willing to advance the cause of the regime. However as the war drew onward and Hitler’s coercive rule grew too oppressive, the population withdrew its domestic commitment. Late in the war, the German army was rife with desertion and non compliance. Although industrially powerful and having a large and advanced military, without domestic commitment, the German war machine broke down. According to Waltz’s theory, one would have predicted Germany to

⁹⁷ A preponderance of power is a clear and vast superiority over other states

win the war because of the fact that its capabilities far surpassed those of other European powers, and similarly Waltz and Mearsheimer would have predicted Israel's existence as a state to be short lived because it has a small army and little latent power⁹⁸ but on the contrary it has survived to this day and is one of the strongest states in the region. These apparent anomalies can best be explained by examining domestic commitment. Israel has a very strong level of domestic commitment which has allowed it to make up for having smaller capabilities, while Germany suffered despite having a large proportion of capabilities because of a lack of domestic commitment. In the next chapter therefore I will examine the idea of domestic commitment and apply the theory to Iran. The literature has shown that Ira's capabilities rank it as arguably the strongest state in the region – therefore Waltz would agree that Iran is at least a great power, and Mearsheimer's theory, focusing on the Middle East as having its own balance of power, would argue that Iran could become hegemonic in the region because of its military and latent power. Although an objective analysis of capabilities would suggest Iran is the dominant power in the region – as I have shown, just having capabilities is not enough to predict a state's actual power. If I can show that Iran has a high level of domestic commitment, the argument in favor of its being a dominant power and possible hegemon will be hard to ignore.

Chapter 4: Together As One

I. What is Domestic Commitment and Why is it Important?

Domestic commitment is essentially a population or citizenry's commitment to supporting its regime's policies and actions. In other words, if a government needs an army, a domestically committed population would be willing to join the military to further the cause of the regime. Understanding domestic commitment is vital if one wishes to understand the real reason behind government authority. The citizens and population of a state are the pistons that

⁹⁸ Israel is a small state with a small population

power any governmental engine; if the government does not do its part to maintain the machine, it will fail to function properly.

In any argument for regional superpowerdom it is important to look at the domestic commitment of a population. A government that does not enjoy the domestic commitment of its people, no matter how big or powerful it may seem, will not be able to actualize its dreams of regional dominance. All superpowers throughout history have had a high level of domestic commitment among their populations; I would argue that none have achieved their power through coercion alone. As a result, an objective analysis of the capabilities of Iran yields findings that suggest it is a superpower in the Middle East, but without looking at the domestic commitment of the Iranian people the picture remains incomplete; this is what I will attempt to investigate in this chapter.

Before turning to domestic commitment in Iran, it is important to examine what exactly domestic commitment is and how it can be analyzed. To begin the journey, I will look to the works of Margaret Levi, the foremost scholars on consent and compliance. Domestic commitment⁹⁹ draws heavily on Levi's work, which looks at democracies and citizen compliance to government policies. She also compares levels and likelihood's of compliance in democratic systems and non democratic systems. Specifically, Levi looks at military conscription as a prime indicator of levels of compliance; states that use forms of conscription require the compliance of citizens in order to create militaries, and higher rates of conscription point to a higher level of compliance, or domestic commitment, and vice versa.

After exploring exactly what domestic commitment is and how it can be measured through looking at Levi's works, it will then be my task to examine domestic commitment in Iran.

⁹⁹ Although the term is not actually used by Levi, her studies of consent and compliance are the backbone of domestic commitment, a phrase coined by Professor Magagna.

This does present quite a challenge however, as specific data from Iran is difficult to obtain. However, I will be using a compilation of sources and case studies to show that Iran has a high degree of domestic commitment. The sources I will examine include: data on voter turnout in elections in Iran, public opinion polls taken in Iran on a variety of subject matter, and testaments taken from the literature suggesting domestic commitment and compliance. I will also include two short case studies to further enhance my research: a look at the Iran-Iraq war, which saw mass amounts of voluntary conscription to serve in the Iranian military, and secondly a brief look at Iran's treatment of minorities and the extension of rights to them. It is my hopes that by looking at their more cordial treatment of minority groups, Iran has gained new subsets of the population committed to the regime.

Through looking at domestic commitment in general and then examining Iran's domestic commitment I hope to be able to formulate a powerful argument for Iran's ascendancy to a dominant regional role.

II. Understanding Domestic Commitment

Domestic commitment is a term coined by Professor Victor Magagna; it draws almost completely from the work of Margaret Levi, although she never uses the term herself. In analyzing the politics of warfare, Professor Magagna uses domestic commitment to explain why citizens consent to essentially risk their lives for the state. In Margaret Levi's work, especially in Consent, Dissent, and Patriotism, she analyzes citizen compliance to military conscription in order to show how governments gain the consent of their population to enact policies such as fighting wars and how citizen consent is largely based on their trust in the government¹⁰⁰. In brief, Levi introduces domestic commitment as being like a double sided coin: on one side, the government must prove itself to be "trustworthy" by showing citizens that they have access to

¹⁰⁰ Levi: 1998

their government and that their opinions are being considered when formulating policy; on the other side citizens give their consent to policies such as taxes and conscription while also agreeing to the punishments and fines for failing to comply. A successful state must have both elements and in some senses one side cannot exist without the other.

Levi begins by asking the question: how do democracies get the necessary ingredients: money and manpower, to fight wars without relying on coercion¹⁰¹? Levi then asserts that people will give their consent to a government most of the time if they believe it is acting fairly towards them. Her primary focus is analyzing military service to determine compliance since it is oftentimes voluntary and the reasons people resist are well documented. Conscription requires representation and the consent of citizens – votes in elections can imply consent, but a better indicator comes from compliance¹⁰². Compliance is a behavioral response by citizens that will have profound effects on government policies, oftentimes noncompliance is deemed as an attack on policy. Some compliance is undoubtedly brought about by coercion, but most of the time an agreement between citizens and government can be detected. In order to more deeply examine why people consent to government policies, Levi outlines a model of “contingent consent”.

Levi’s model states that a person will comply if they believe the government is trustworthy and that other people are also complying. People also assess the costs and benefits of complying and will almost always comply if the benefits are greater than the costs, which will even to a large extent override the free rider problem¹⁰³. The model outlines quasi-voluntary consent; consenting to a law or policy but also agreeing to accept punishment if they fail to

¹⁰¹ Levi: 1998, 2

¹⁰² Levi: 1998, 17

¹⁰³ Levi: 1998, 19

comply. The two examples Levi always turns to are taxation and military service. Citizens consent to pay taxes and also can face fines and even jail time if they fail to pay; but completely voluntary compliance, for example citizens volunteering to fix roads, is also included in the model.

Levi's hypotheses are threefold: (1) the more trustworthy the government is; the more likely people are to consent to its policies and comply; (2) the more people that comply, the more others are likely to comply; and (3) governments are likely to distribute information about its trustworthiness to citizens¹⁰⁴. Citizens make decisions about the ability of the government to make credible commitments before determining whether or not to comply. A government is "trustworthy" if it follows the following criteria according to Levi: (1) if citizens have the ability to participate in the decision making process, (2) government policies need to be fair to everyone, and (3) that government policies are enforced fairly. In fact as Levi points out, data has shown that citizens will oftentimes give their consent even if they do not particularly agree with government policies as long as they feel as if they have had their voices heard¹⁰⁵. Another important determinant of compliance Levi opines is ethical reciprocity¹⁰⁶, or the belief that people will cooperate with the government as long as others are also cooperating. However, this is more of a structure of assurance than being a zero sum game like a prisoner's dilemma¹⁰⁷.

¹⁰⁴ Levi: 1998, 21

¹⁰⁵ Levi: 1998, 24

¹⁰⁶ Ethical reciprocity is also important for understanding free riding and collective action principles.

¹⁰⁷ A structure of assurance is what the name implies, in this case, people want to be assured that others are also complying since compliance often involves some sort of investment, be it time or money. If others do not comply, nobody will.

Next, Levi turns to some alternative models of compliance¹⁰⁸: the habitual model states that as more developed habits of conformity are created, the more compliance there will be¹⁰⁹. The ideological model suggests that the more a policy is supported ideologically by the population, the more compliance that particular policy will receive. Lastly, the net payoffs model deals with marginal benefits and costs, the greater the marginal benefit is to the population the greater the level of compliance will be. Any government can have elements of all three models, for example the longer a government is in place and the more developed its practices become, citizens will have increased comfort levels in complying, an example of the habitual model; the longer a government is in power it is presumed that citizens would agree with it on an ideological basis and give their compliance; and also a government as it progresses gets better at formulating policies so that citizens would deem that the benefits of complying outweigh the costs, and thus give their compliance.

Lastly, Levi discusses how citizens' perceptions of government can change¹¹⁰. She notes four main catalysts for change: (1) the extension of democratic institutions or the enlargement of the franchise, (2) more experience with specific policies, (3) significance levels of noncompliance, and (4) institutional facilitation of ethical and rational behavior¹¹¹. The first point is simple, as a state becomes more democratic, or more groups become franchised, citizens are likely to give more compliance because trust in the government will increase¹¹². As governments become more experienced, citizens feel more comfortable in its policies and will

¹⁰⁸ Levi: 1998, 38

¹⁰⁹ Levi notes that this model is weak because it is difficult to falsify

¹¹⁰ For example, when will citizens give more consent or when will they withdraw consent?

¹¹¹ Levi: 1998, 208-209

¹¹² A great example is the expansion of the voting franchise to include women in 1919 in the United States

often give more compliance since experience leads to more efficient policies better catered to the constituents. It is also important to examine the significance levels of noncompliance, for example, is an anti-government demonstration an aberration or the beginnings of a serious movement. Usually, if citizens believe the latter, their compliance will decline while if they believe the former, compliance will remain the same. If citizens feel government officials behave ethnically and their government makes decisions rationally they will consequently give consent at greater levels than if they believe the regime is acting irrationally or are run by corrupt, unethical leaders.

III. Domestic Commitment in Iran

Now I will turn to examining domestic commitment in Iran. In order to do this I first must create a framework to guide the analysis. I will begin by examining election and polling data that I have found. It is my hope to show through this data that Iranians are participating in government and that they are willing and able to give their compliance to making the country better, among other factors. Next I will look at literature to attempt to capture what seems to be unique to Iran, something I will call the “Persian Spirit”. This spirit is akin to nationalism in that the pursuit of greatness serves the purpose of being a unifier of Iranian people, even those opposed to the regime. It is unique to Iranians, in my opinion, because of its past. The fact that Iranians draw heavily on the past and look to a time in which Persians dominated the world gives them a strong sense of commitment to the regime today. Finally, I will look at two short case studies; Iran’s extension of franchise to its minority populations, and the Iran-Iraq War. I hope to show that Iran is gaining new subsets of its minority population committed to the regime as opposed to Turkey and Iraq for example, whose Kurdish populations have been oppressed to the point where they are openly seeking independence¹¹³, and that in times of

¹¹³ Iranian Kurds on the other hand have never strongly desired independence, instead they merely want autonomy and more rights as part of the Iranian state. See Yildiz and Taysi’s [The Kurds in Iran](#).

need Iranians will even sacrifice their lives for the regime, during the Iran-Iraq war Iranians enlisted by the thousands to fight against Iraqi forces. I hope that these factors will allow me to construct a mural of an Iranian population committed to the state in ways that has not been properly examined in the literature.

Examining Elections In Iran

Contrary to popular Western beliefs, Iran is one of the most democratic states in the Middle East¹¹⁴ with the exception of Turkey and perhaps Israel. In fact, voter turnout in elections since the Iranian revolution has always been high; with the 1997 Presidential elections breaking many boundaries and expanding the electorate, helping to foment a pro-democracy movement in Iran¹¹⁵. As Vali Nasr states in Democracy in Iran, “the Presidential election of 1997 was the first election after the revolution in which the public will expressed at the ballot box overturned the writ of the conservative leadership”. It is this concept of democracy in Iran that goes largely unnoticed but is becoming a force to be reckoned with. Today, Iranians’ voices are able to be heard in ways that before have never been possible.

In the 1997 Presidential election, voter turnout was approximately 30 million, which was “an overwhelming majority of the eligible voters” and also featured the first time throughout the history of the Middle East that power was transferred peacefully to a new democratically elected ruler¹¹⁶. In the 2004 parliamentary elections, over 24 million Iranians went to the polls. Although this election was a conservative rather than reformist victory, it was important for the fact that around seven million first time voters took the opportunity to cast their ballots¹¹⁷. What

¹¹⁴ Nasr: 2006, vi

¹¹⁵ Nasr: 2006, 128

¹¹⁶ Nasr: 2006, 132

¹¹⁷ Saghafi, *The New Landscape of Iranian Politics* : <http://www.merip.org/mer/mer233/saghafi.html>

is most interesting about the Iranian political landscape from the Khatami period of the 90's through Ahmadinejad's first term in office, from 2005-present, is not that reformism led to conservatism, but the fact that the political process opened; many student activists and intellectuals became much more active in the political process¹¹⁸ – creating movements and organizations to make their voices heard. In the 2005 Presidential election, over 60% of the electorate voted, over 30 million people, and it was the first time a non-cleric had been elected to the nation's highest office¹¹⁹.

Perhaps the most interesting aspect of the 2005 Presidential election was not only that a non-cleric was elected, but how Ahmadinejad won the election. Ahmadinejad appealed to the lower classes, promising a return to Iranian greatness, economic wealth distribution, and subsidies for the poor. He opposed class divides and promised to pursue a populist platform and fight corruption. Between the first and second election rounds, Ahmadinejad gained over 12 million votes and won in a landslide, with 62% of the vote¹²⁰. This was the first time that politicians in Iran could be seen trying to directly appeal to their constituents. The winds of change have been put into motion, as further elections will likely show. Politicians now are aware that they are to be held accountable for their campaign promises, and that the way to win elections is to attempt to unite the largest subset of voters. This gives the Iranian electorate a sense of power and voice they have not felt in decades, and the election helped to confirm the continued popularity of reformism in Iran. Nasr states that the increased urbanization of Iran has had a large part to play in the increased role of democracy in Iran; literacy, education, and women's rights have all increased. The old social classes have declined, and Iran is a country

¹¹⁸ Nasr: 2006, 141

¹¹⁹ Nasr: 2006, 148

¹²⁰ Nasr: 2006, 156-157

filled with a young and vibrant population and as such democracy promises greater representation of Iran's social diversity in its politics¹²¹.

Public Opinion Polling Data In Iran

What are Iranians in Iran actually saying however? The amount of data is rather minimal because Iran is generally closed off to the West and not much data has been released and there is always the danger that what is found has been influenced by the government. However, I have been able to find some public opinion polling data that I believe gives insight into the domestic commitment of the Iranian people.

The World Bank has released a public opinion poll taken in Iran on environmental policies and questions. The survey was conducted in 2004 with approximately 1,200 people in total were surveyed asking about environmental issues, concerns, and the willingness to “do something” about the problem¹²². The most interesting result of the poll was the finding that “people are ready to give time or to organize themselves to take part in a campaign to protect the environment, but they believe that money for environmental protection should come from the government”¹²³. I believe that even questions about environmental policy can be extrapolated to give insight into domestic commitment as a whole. As the poll showed, Iranians were willing to give time and effort to clean up their environment, which is interesting. The fact that Iranians are committed to doing their part for environmental reform is a good indicator that they would also be willing to give their time and effort for other state interests such as the pursuit of increased regional power.

¹²¹ Nasr: 2006, 10

¹²² Tehran is one of the most beautiful, but also one of the dirtiest cities – being rife with pollution. It also has some of the worst traffic in the entire world.

¹²³ Calabrese: 2004, 14 ***

Another poll, conducted by Terror Free Tomorrow¹²⁴ in 2007 has surveyed Iranian public opinion. The survey was conducted in Farsi by native speakers, with a sample size of 1,000, and the results have a margin of error of +/- 3.1%. Some of the most telling results I found were related to questions on corruption and economic position. When asked whether corruption has increased, decreased, or stayed the same after the 2005 Presidential election, 36% of Iranians said that corruption had decreased, while 28% said it stayed the same. The fact that over a third of the survey respondents believe corruption has decreased hints at an increased level of trust in the government, which as Levi states, would point at higher levels of compliance. The poll also examined people's economic situations; when asked if their financial situation had gotten better, worse, or stayed the same since Ahmadinejad took office, over two thirds said their financial situation was either the same or better. When asked about the overall economic situation in Iran, 68% said it was fair, good, or even excellent. These questions also hint to a higher level of trust in the government than many might predict – also it points to a brighter outlook of the Iranian economy than what exists in popular media. Furthermore, when asked about Iranian support of groups such as Hezbollah, Hamas, and Shiite militias in Iraq, most Iranians gave their approval of the government. However, I do not wish to be seen as giving a jaded view of Iran in which Iranians support all government actions – many Iranians believe that President Ahmadinejad has not lived up to his campaign promises of putting oil money in the pockets of the people, and they are concerned over the levels of unemployment and inflation in the country. These issues are going to have to be worked out in order to further increase domestic commitment.

¹²⁴ Terror Free Tomorrow is an organization aimed at raising awareness of issues in the Middle East by looking at public opinion in various countries in the region. Its reports have been used to help policymakers worldwide.

World Public Opinion is another organization which has conducted a public opinion poll in Iran in 2008 with very intriguing results. The sample size of this survey was 710 with a +/- 3.8% margin of error. When asked about their trust in the Iranian government, nearly 50% of respondents said they trusted the government most of the time, and 26% responded that they trust the government some of the time. Only 13% of respondents expressed distrust in the government. Iranians also mostly approve of President Ahmadinejad's job - the poll also notes educational and economic differences, with low income and low education giving much higher approval ratings than those with higher income and education). One of the most interesting questions dealt with how much Iranians believe the country is governed according to the will of the people. People were asked to rate the government on a 10 point scale, with a 10 being complete governance according to the will of the people, and 0 being not at all. The average score was a 5.9, with the "ideal" score, according to respondents, being an 8.4. This question shows a "fairly satisfied" outlook, in my opinion, on the government's responsiveness to the people. Almost 60% of respondents stated that the government should be governed more according to the will of the people.

The next question asked by the World Public Opinion poll is one that I wish to give the most weight to. The question deals with what role people would like to see Iran play in the region. Nearly one third of respondents wished for Iran to be a dominant power exerting the most influence. 48% of respondents opted for Iran to be a part of a cooperative arrangement in which it is one of many countries, while only 14% wished for Iran to adopt a more isolationist policy and stay out of regional politics altogether. I believe this question gives important indicators of Iranian desires for an increased role. The fact that almost one third of respondents outright stated they wish Iran would take on a dominant role is a strong indicator of what I call the "Persian Spirit", and suggests to me that Iranians will give a great deal of compliance to

satisfy their desires of becoming a regional power. Furthermore, I believe that a large proportion of those that stated they wished for Iran to be “one of many” states in a cooperative agreement would not only not be opposed to Iran taking on a role of regional dominance, but would also give their consent to such policies. In my opinion, those who don’t outright wish for regional dominance would have little qualms about accepting such a position if it were achieved.

World Public Opinion took another poll in 2006, with a sample size of 1000 and a +/- 3.2% margin of error. Iranians were asked whether they wished for Iran to take an active role in world affairs and 86% of respondents said yes, Iran should take an active role in world affairs. Another important issue the poll dealt with was Iran’s nuclear program – with over 80% of Iranians stating that they wished for Iran to develop and operate a nuclear program and produce nuclear energy. In addition, 61% of respondents believed that Iran’s nuclear program serves to enhance Iran’s great power status.

Through examining these public opinion polls, I have shown that Iranians trust their government and have a desire for an increased regional role. I have also shown how citizens are supportive of actions taken by the government; Iran’s nuclear program and its support of Shi’a groups such as Hezbollah being two prime examples, all of which enhance my assertion of domestic commitment in Iran. In order to better highlight this, I will turn to my two case studies.

Case Study: The Iran-Iraq War

The first small case study I will delve into is the Iran-Iraq War, which took place from 1980 to 1988. Saddam Hussein believed it to be the time for pan-Arabism to take root, with Iraq at its head. Trita Parsi explains that Iraq was aided by Saudi Arabia and other Arab states in

addition to receiving American aid both directly and indirectly. As a result Saddam posited that his invasion would be a “swift and elegant victory”, but what resulted was a bloody eight year war of attrition which saw over a million casualties. Iraq encountered unexpected resistance from Iranian forces as they were advancing into the country. Despite the Iranian military being poorly equipped and disorganized, “Iranians rallied around their leadership with ferocious zeal. Within two months, an estimated one hundred thousand Iranian volunteers reached the war front”¹²⁵.

To combat Iraq’s superior technology, Iranian forces engaged in what became known as human wave tactics, which consisted of volunteers running through fields, bearing the brunt of mines and fire so that Iranian military forces took less casualties. Large numbers of volunteers were recruited for this purpose, including boys as young as twelve¹²⁶. It was in these battle fronts that Iraqi forces administered the use of chemical weapons, devastating Iranian military and volunteer forces alike. However after two brutal years of fighting, Iran was able to drive Iraqi forces from its borders and go on the offensive, moving into Iraq itself¹²⁷. Axworthy notes that the Iran-Iraq War had an important unifying effect on Iran, and that the sacrifices made by ordinary people enhanced their sense of national identity, citizenship, and commitment to the Islamic Republic. However, the Iranian people did not give their government a blank check, they fully expected to be repaid when the war was over¹²⁸.

The Iran-Iraq War serves as an almost chilling reminder to potential enemies of Iran that the Iranian people will not surrender lightly. Iranians displayed a sense of nationalistic zeal

¹²⁵ Parsi: 2008, 98

¹²⁶ Axworthy: 2008, 268

¹²⁷ Axworthy: 2008, 268

¹²⁸ Axworthy: 2008, 275

similar to the Japanese in the Second World War, freely giving their lives to the regime. The Iran-Iraq War claimed “as many as one million Iranians” and “a whole generation was stamped anew with the symbolism of Shi’a martyrdom”¹²⁹. In dire times of need, Iranians have shown to give almost unheard of levels of domestic commitment.

Case Study: Iranian Treatment of Minorities

Iran is home to a richly diverse mix of cultures, religions, and ethnicities. In fact, it is one of the most diverse states in the Middle East. Iran boasts an Armenian population of about 250,000, which even has two seats in parliament and who are given the freedom to practice their own religion. Additionally, Iran has a Jewish population of 30,000 which makes it the largest in any Muslim country; there are more synagogues in Iran than anywhere else in the Middle East outside of Israel. One third of Iran’s population consists of ethnic minorities, Azeri Turks and Kurds. Kurdish people have lived in Iran for thousands of years and share many cultural as well as linguistic traits. As Aria Mehrabi points out, “Iranian Kurds have felt secure in their place in Iran”¹³⁰.

Iran is not a saint in its treatment of ethnic and religious minorities – its Kurdish population has been heavily oppressed and persecuted throughout the history of the Islamic Republic. Immediately following the Revolution in 1979, a Kurdish rebellion was squelched, and Kurds were brutally persecuted by Khomeini’s regime. Today, Iran’s treatment of Kurds has improved, although being far from ideal, Kurds are given the right to basic organization; they have their own media outlets and television stations as well¹³¹. The government does not however allow public education in Kurdish in attempts to solidify Iranian Kurds in Iran’s national

¹²⁹ Axworthy: 2008, 268

¹³⁰ Mehrabi: 2008, 118

¹³¹ Yildiz, Taysi: 2007

identity. Because Iran treats its ethnic minorities fairly well compared to other Middle Eastern countries, they are in a good position to enjoy popularity in those regions where the minorities are majorities and further expand their influence in those regions¹³².

The Persian Spirit

In beginning to examine testaments from the literature about the Persian Spirit I will look at Marguerite Del Giudice's National Geographic article: Iran Archaeology. She began her journey to Iran looking at Persepolis, the ancient capital of the Persian Empire. She notes the¹³³:

"[A]bsence of violent imagery on what's left of its stone walls. Among the carvings there are soldiers, but they're not fighting; there are weapons, but they're not drawn. Mainly you see emblems suggesting that something humane went on here instead – people of different nations gathering peacefully, bearing gifts... for many Iranians today its ruins are a breathtaking reminder of who their Persian ancestors were and what they did."

This spirit of Iranian glory still lives in Iranians, from the most devout follower of the regime to the loudest political dissidents. One cannot find an Iranian who would not be excited at the prospect of their country returning to greatness. Saeed Laylaz, an economic and political analyst in Iran stated that: "We have a feeling of nostalgia to be a superpower again, and the country's nuclear ambitions are directly related to this desire"¹³⁴. This statement holds true, I believe. In Iran's Security Policy in the Post-Revolutionary Era, Daniel Byman concurs, stating that

¹³² Mehrabi: 2008, 119

¹³³ Giudice, 1

¹³⁴ Giudice, 5

nationalism is a huge driving force behind Iran's regional status and ambitions and that many Iranians believe Iran should play a superior role in the region¹³⁵. Hooman Majd recounts a story of the Iranian Revolution in which his Iranian-Jewish friend could be seen shouting "*Allah-o-Akbar!*" along with the masses of Khomeini supporters. Majd's friend described himself not as a Jew, but as an *Iranian*¹³⁶.

Ali M. Ansari contends that Iran has a "rich and cohesive cultural inheritance whose influence far exceeds the boundaries of the modern Iranian state"¹³⁷. The Persian Spirit was used brilliantly by Prime Minister Mossadeq to fuel the fires of Iranian pride and nationalize Iranian oil for the first time and oust British influence from Iran. Ansari notes that Mossadeq's ability to connect to the public was undeniable¹³⁸. The fervor at which Iranians could be inspired to by their leaders was most evident when Khomeini arrived back to Iran from exile, with as many as three million Iranians welcoming him¹³⁹. The Iranian Revolution was the ultimate upheaval of the people of Iran and was when Persian sentiments reached their heights. That spirit still remains in Iranians of all walks of life, all religions, and all political affiliations. That spirit is desirous of Iran becoming respected as a regional power on the world stage. That spirit is committed to the regime, whether or not they agree with it ideologically, in its designs to become a regional hegemon.

IV. What Can Domestic Commitment Tell Us About Iran?

¹³⁵ Byman, 2001: 6-7

¹³⁶ Majd: 2008, 5

¹³⁷ Ansari: 2006, 3

¹³⁸ Ansari: 2006, 30

¹³⁹ Axworthy: 2008, 260

I began this chapter by analyzing the works of Margaret Levi on consent and compliance. I have tried to depict domestic commitment as being a measurable trait depicting a population's willingness to comply to the policies of the regime in power. Through the model of contingent consent and her other hypotheses, Margaret Levi outlined a framework that stated that as citizens' trust in government increased and as the belief that government is more responsive to their voices increases, compliance and consent will increase simultaneously. I have attempted to show, through my own research; analyzing public opinion polls, taking a brief look at some case studies, and examining in brief some literature, that Iranians are domestically committed to the regime.

Once again, without domestic commitment, regardless of the raw capabilities or geostrategic location of a state it will not be able to achieve the role of hegemon in a region. It is when geostrategic location, capabilities, and domestic commitment are combined that one can accurately claim that a state is becoming a regional hegemon. This holds true with Iran and the Middle East. I would contend that Iran has the capabilities and is ideally situated to assume the role of dominant power in the region. After delving into domestic commitment, I have shown that Iran has a sufficient level of domestic commitment needed to be able to actualize this new regional role. Essentially the Iranian people and its government are together as one in their desire to be recognized as a dominant regional power. In the next chapter I will more thoroughly synthesize my argument – combining all three elements, (1) an analysis of capabilities, (2) an understanding of balance of power theories, and (3) domestic commitment into a seamless and beautiful image of Iran as the dominant power in the Middle East.

Chapter 5: Synthesizing-Agent

I. Setting up the Framework

So far, I have examined the literature that deals with Iran's increased regional role and looked at the capabilities of Iran. I have then delved into Balance of Power theory to see what theorists such as Waltz and Mearsheimer say about the balance of power and hegemony. Next, I pinpointed one important factor both the Balance of Power theory and the literature failed to consider: domestic commitment. Domestic commitment again, is the people's willingness to support the regime in its policies. I believe that no true understanding of the Balance of Power or a state's true power can be garnered without first looking at the domestic commitment of the population of that state. Domestic commitment is required to power a state's war machine, run its economy, and support the regime in power. Without the support of people within a state, no amount of natural resources, size, or military might can be actually harnessed. In the fourth chapter I looked at the domestic commitment in Iran, framed around the works of Margaret Levi.

In this chapter, I hope to synthesize my findings in the previous three chapters into a clear and coherent assertion that Iran is becoming the dominant regional power in the Middle

East, with the possibility of realizing hegemonic designs in the coming years. In the next chapter I will discuss the importance of this realization for Middle Eastern politics, domestic politics in Iran, and its affect on world politics. To begin my synthesis, I will give a brief overview of the literature and Iran's capabilities, Balance of Power theory, and domestic commitment. Next I will attempt to come up with a "checklist" of sorts, or a framework for determining whether a state is a dominant regional power. The key factors, taken from balance of power and domestic commitment theory are as follows: size and geostrategic location, population, military strength, economic might, influence in the region, and domestic commitment. A state's size and geostrategic location are extremely important; a large and centrally located state in a region has more direct access to a larger number of states which gives it increased opportunities for influence and trade. A smaller or less centrally located state would not have these same benefits. Military strength, as Mearsheimer points out, is one of the key power indicators. A state with a large and advanced military will be able to more easily influence its neighbors and deter any potential attacks, while a state with a smaller and less advanced military will not. Economic might takes into consideration current economic status as well as factors such as labor force and natural resources - a state cannot have a large and advanced military or other infrastructure if it does not have the economic might to support it. Another way to gauge the power of a state is to observe how it influences other actors in the system; a state with a large amount of influence can be logically assumed to be more powerful than those states that do not yield much influence. Lastly and most importantly I would argue, is domestic commitment. Without domestic commitment, as I have previously stated all of the other power measures are meaningless. A state's power almost totally hinges on the domestic commitment of its population.

I will use and apply this framework to Iran, Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Israel; the states that every piece of literature on the region I have read believe to be the powers of the region. A state that has all of the key factors I will argue can be shown to be the dominant power in the region. I would argue that Iran has all key factors and is therefore the dominant power in the Middle East. The other states I would argue may have some of the key factors, but no other state in the region possesses every factor. Lastly, I will begin to consider the implications of my findings, although I will go into more depth in the next chapter before concluding.



Figure 1: Map of the Middle East (footnote where this picture came from)

II. Applying the checklist to Iran

I have created a framework from which I will be able to derive accurately who the powers in a system are and which of them, if any, are dominant throughout the system. The

factors once more are: (1) size and geostrategic location, (2) population, (3) military strength, (4) economic might, (5) influence in the region, and (6) domestic commitment. The states that possess several of these key factors can be considered powers in the system, while a state that possesses all of the factors can be considered a dominant power. I will now apply this framework to Iran specifically to see if the assertions made by the literature, and as I am arguing, that Iran is the dominant power in the region are true.

Based on the data from Table 1.0¹⁴⁰ it is clear that Iran is the largest country in the Middle East. Furthermore, as Figure 1 shows, Iran is in a prime geostrategic location, being situated in the middle of the region and directly bordering more than ten different countries. More than any other state I would argue, Iran is in a position to directly influence a vast majority of states in the region and as the literature has confirmed, already is. Similarly Iran essentially serves as an East-West bridge, contemporarily as well as historically, land trade going to and from the Eastern and Western world passes through territory controlled by, or under the influence of Iran. For example, Europe is increasingly considering Iran for its natural gas needs, as Iran has one of the world’s largest reserves and is centrally located. Indeed, almost any natural gas pipelines built between the East and West must run through Iran. Furthermore, Iran is located near the Caspian and Arabian Seas, as well as the Persian Gulf, which is a prime location of petroleum exporting.

Table 1.0: Select Middle Eastern countries and their capabilities:

Capabilities	Iran	Turkey	Israel	Saudi	Egypt	Syria	Pakistan	Lebanon	Jordan
Size (sq km)	164800	780500	20770	215000	100145	18520	803000	10400	92300
	0			0	0	0			

¹⁴⁰ Table 1.0 can originally be found in Chapter 2. I have reproduced it here. The data from this table is taken from the CIA factbook.

Pop (millions)	65.8	71.89	7.1	28.14	81.7	19.7	172	3.9	6.2
Pop Growth (%)	0.792	1.013	1.713	1.954	1.682	2.189	1.99	1.154	2.33
GDP (billions)	762.9	853	185.8	546	405.4	90.37	411.9	40.4	28.45
GDP Growth (%)	6.2	4.5	5.3	3.5	7.1	4.3	5.3	3.6	6
Labor Force (millions)	28.7	23.5	2.894	6.56	22.1	5.46	48.23	1.5	1.56
Unemployment (%)	12	10	7.3	13	9.1	9	5.6	20	13.5
Military Potential (males/millions)	20.2	20.2	1.7	8.54	18.15	5.25	42	1.1	1.8

Next, does Iran have a significantly large and vibrant population? I would argue, yes.

Table 1.0 indicates that Iran is one of the most populated states in the region and is also one of the most educated. Even in countryside and rural regions, literacy rates reach over 80%¹⁴¹. Iran has the highest level of pre-school enrollment in the Middle East¹⁴² and has given women an unprecedented level of educational freedom in the region, with nearly two thirds of new entrants to Iranian Universities being females¹⁴³. The power of Iran’s population does not just lie in its vast numbers of educated individuals but also stems from the extent of individualism and freedom enjoyed by a great many of the people in Iran. Although the government is conservative-Islamist and run by hard-liners who often attempt to censor and oppress dissident thoughts and ideas, it has not halted the spirit of the population, as Gonzalez points out: “independence from outside powers has also been closely tied with independence of thought and democratic civil society”¹⁴⁴. Even though many news papers have been censored and shut down by the regime – there are thousands of others that still operate and the internet is being

¹⁴¹ Mehrabi, 2008: 92-95

¹⁴² Salehi-Isfahani, 2008: 250

¹⁴³ Salehi-Isfahani, 2008: 250-251

¹⁴⁴ Gonzalez, 2007: 92

used at ever increasing rates to give people avenues to express their thoughts and opinions. In fact, more than one third of all the web traffic in the entire Middle East comes from Iran; nearly a 3,000% increase in the period of 2000 through 2006¹⁴⁵ and according to Vali Nasr, Farsi is the third most used language on the internet¹⁴⁶. These factors speak to a power of the Iranian population that is unsurpassed anywhere in the Middle East.

When it comes to military strength there are few, if any states that can compete with Iran. Saudi Arabia has the economic resources, but lacks the population to build and maintain a high-end military. Egypt has a strong military, but is too far from other states in the region for it to be used as an effective deterrent or influencing force. Israel has a highly advanced military backed by the United States and Europe, but its numbers are small. Iran's military consists of over half a million-man strong standing army, with another half-million troops in reserve¹⁴⁷. Iran is the only state in the region that possesses long-range missile technology, being able to launch missiles to almost any location in the entire Middle East. They have succeeded in creating a large and modern, well equipped army, suggested by Daniel Byman in 2001¹⁴⁸. In addition, Iran just launched its first satellite into space (news article), which could be used for military purposes; no other state in the region has been able to accomplish this feat. Iran is also seeking to join the "nuclear club", putting it in a contentious position with Israel, a natural enemy, who already possesses nuclear weapons. This is the only area militarily that Israel has a significant advantage, but in the coming years it is doubtful that Israel will be able to keep it; all of the literature seems to agree that Iran's nuclear program will soon result in the production of a nuclear weapon. And,

¹⁴⁵ Gonzalez, 2007: 92

¹⁴⁶ Nasr, 2008: 213

¹⁴⁷ Gonzales, 2007: 98

¹⁴⁸ Byman, 2001: 13

as Ashton Carter suggests, Iran's nuclear program cannot be stopped short of declaring outright war on the country – it can only be slightly delayed¹⁴⁹.

By Iran's own standards, it has a struggling economy. Most of the population is aware of its economic woes and are disappointed in President Ahmadinejad for not living up to his campaign promises of economic distribution¹⁵⁰. However, it still holds that Iran has one of the strongest economies in the region, second only to Turkey. Iran's GDP is over \$750 billion and it holds the second largest oil and natural gas reserves in the world. In fact, Iran's economy is still in its infant stages, with daily oil output being one third below its peak in the 1970's¹⁵¹, and only 40% of the crude oil produced is exported, meaning Iran is a net importer of gas¹⁵². Iran's non oil exports approached \$12 billion in 2007¹⁵³ and recent economic deals with India, Armenia, and other states in the region and beyond will provide bountiful opportunities for future economic growth. Dr. Salehi-Isfahani provides a surprisingly bright outlook on the future of the Iranian economy – pointing out that its large and continually growing and increasingly educated labor force will pack an economic punch unmatched in the region. He points out that Iran's labor force is growing at a rate of over 3% per year, and although unemployment remains high, net growth in the labor force remains¹⁵⁴. Furthermore, he states that the fact that there is a three to one

¹⁴⁹ Ashton Carter, *The Shifting Balance of Power* part 3

¹⁵⁰ These data are gathered from public opinion polls I examined. See chapter 4 for more details.

¹⁵¹ Iran's oil production capacity was highly damaged by the Iran-Iraq War and is now beginning to recover

¹⁵² Gonzalez, 2007: 94-98

¹⁵³ Vali Nasr, *The Shifting Balance of Power* part 2

¹⁵⁴ Salehi-Isfahani, 2008: 240-244

adult to child ratio¹⁵⁵ bodes well for economic growth since human capital is highly important, more so than physical capital, in having a top rated economy¹⁵⁶.

Today, Iran yields more influence in the region than any other state. It is one of the fundamental and most integral supporters of Hezbollah, Hamas, Sipah-I Muhammad of Pakistan, Badr Brigade and Mahdi Army of Iraq, and most importantly, Iraq's new Shi'a controlled government. Iran has focused on the Sunni-Shi'a divide and continues to build its influence among Shi'a groups throughout the region. In order to accomplish this, reducing Sunni violence against Shi'a is necessary, and by using Israel's and the United States' actions, Iran has effectively turned Sunni attention away from itself, further enhancing its designs of increasing power¹⁵⁷. Iran is also in a good position to make former Soviet republics Armenia, Azerbaijan, Turkmenistan, and possibly Afghanistan dependent on Iran for economic aid, as well as assuming the role of protectorate. These goals are made more feasible by shared cultural and linguistic ties between these states and Iran; Farsi is spoken in many areas of these states¹⁵⁸. Iran also has a very strong influential hold over Syria, widely considered its closest ally in the region. Another factor contributing to Iranian influence is the fact that Iran is regarded as not being influenced by outside actors, such as European nations and the United States. For example, Israel is largely dependent on American economic and military aid, Turkey's foreign policy decisions are largely directed by European interests¹⁵⁹, and GCC countries are highly dependent

¹⁵⁵ This adult to child ratio is caused by reduced birth rates, which will allow the ratio to rise for the next twenty years

¹⁵⁶ Salehi-Isfahani, 2008: 244

¹⁵⁷ Nasr, 2008: 220-268

¹⁵⁸ Mehrabi, 2008: 75

¹⁵⁹ Especially since they are trying to join the EU

on American support and deterrence¹⁶⁰. Iran's position of autonomy from outside powers has empowered it to act more boldly, and Iran is perceived more and more in the region as being a champion of anti-Western and anti-Israeli sentiments.

Lastly, Iran has the domestic commitment necessary to make the above claims significant. Without domestic commitment, none of what I have said would matter. However, in the previous chapter I have shown that Iranians are excited and committed to standing behind the regime in most foreign policy decisions. Indeed, although Iranians might disapprove of the regime and find faults with its oppressiveness, when it comes to nationalist pride, Iranians are largely unmatched. Even Iranians who vehemently oppose Ahmadinejad express feelings of great pride and support when considering the fact that Iran is becoming a regional power once again. I have shown through examining public opinion polls that a large proportion of Iranians favor government policies that would enhance its designs at achieving a status of dominant regional power, that they for the most part support the government except on matters of economy and wealth distribution, and that they even support Iranian funding of groups such as Hezbollah. Further, the literature has given accounts of Iranians being nationalistic – exemplified by the hundreds of thousands of Iranians who willingly ran through mind fields to clear the way for the Iranian army during the Iran-Iraq war¹⁶¹.

I have shown that Iran has all the key factors to be considered the dominant power in the region. Next I am going to apply the same framework to Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Israel, three other states mentioned in the literature¹⁶² who could be considered regional powers. If either of these other states also have all key factors it would suggest that Iran is not the

¹⁶⁰ Gonzalez, 2007: 104-105

¹⁶¹ Gonzalez, 2007: 100

¹⁶² Subhash Kapila, *Unfolding Strategic Dynamics*

dominant power, but one of several great powers of relatively equal standing. If however, neither of these states have all key factors it can then be concluded that Iran is *the* dominant power in the region.

III. A Glimpse at Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Israel

Saudi Arabia

My application of the framework to Iran has shown that it has all the major factors – but what of Saudi Arabia, Turkey, and Israel? In this section I will follow the same process I did with Iran with these three states to give an accurate comparison and to act as a measuring stick. If my hypothesis that Iran is the dominant power is correct, none of these three states will possess all the key factors.

I will first examine Saudi Arabia, who along with Egypt has become the strongest Arab states after the demise of Saddam Hussein's Iraq. Based on the map of the Middle East in Figure 1, it can be seen that Saudi Arabia is on par with Iran and Turkey in size, and in fact it is slightly larger than both countries. Furthermore, it is in a very strong geostrategic location, bordering the same bodies of water as Iran and also being in a prime location to influence many Arab nations: Iraq, Egypt, Jordan, Kuwait, the United Arab Emirates, and Yemen for example. Its geostrategic location is reflected in its economic might, as Saudi Arabia has a GDP of nearly \$550 billion. It also holds some of the worlds' largest oil reserves, being the largest exporter of petroleum as well as being one of the leaders of OPEC. Saudi Arabia has a nearly seven million-man strong labor force, and excessive revenue has allowed it to invest heavily in its private sector in attempts to lessen its dependence on oil. Clearly, Saudi Arabia is an economic powerhouse in the region along with Iran. However, Saudi Arabia has a very small population related to its size, consisting of less than thirty million people. Compared with Iran's military

potential of twenty million, Saudi Arabia has less than a ten million-man potential army¹⁶³. Although Saudi Arabia has the economic might to build a strong military, they simply do not have the manpower to be a force to be reckoned with on the battle field¹⁶⁴. Saudi Arabia also does not have access to a nuclear program or nuclear weapons – a factor that Iran is pursuing with great vigor.

What Saudi Arabia really lacks is influence throughout the region and domestic commitment. Although Saudi Arabia does have some influence in the region as a result of its role played in OPEC, this influence is not wide-spread throughout the region and may be declining. As world oil prices have fallen, many OPEC members, especially Iran, wish for production by Saudi Arabia to be cut so the price per barrel rises; Saudi Arabia is content with their production and price. This stance might serve to negatively affect its influence in the region¹⁶⁵. Furthermore, Saudi Arabia is wrought with instability and its population enjoys little freedom. Gonzalez notes that Saudi Arabia is one of the most conservative states in the region, with its government being more rigid and less able to absorb “the shock waves of instability”¹⁶⁶.

Moreover, there is much domestic instability in Saudi Arabia, with many wealthy businessmen and nobles, who are often regarded as being puppets of the West, being the target of domestic terrorist attacks. These militant attacks have served to disrupt the political economy of the state and instill doubt and uncertainty in the minds of Saudis¹⁶⁷. In fact, there is quite a bit

¹⁶³ Carpenter, 8-9

¹⁶⁴ Subhash Kapila, *Unfolding Strategic Dynamics*

¹⁶⁵ Taken from the online article, *Saudia Arabia: OPEC and Stabilizing Oil Output*:
http://www.stratfor.com/memberships/123394/analysis/saudi_arabia_pec_and_stabilizing_oil_output

¹⁶⁶ Gonzalez, 2007: 78

¹⁶⁷ Taken from the online article, *Saudia Arabia: The Perception of Instability*:
http://www.stratfor.com/memberships/68484/saudi_arabia_perception_instability

of tension in the Arab world, and many Arabs feel as if their opinions are not being heard by their respective governments¹⁶⁸. Additionally, Arab states such as Saudi Arabia have weak leadership and Arab nationalism has declined considerably, as Barry Rubin points out. Further, because Arab states such as Saudi Arabia refuse to make demanded reforms in areas of civil rights, economic changes, increased pragmatism, or women's rights, domestic commitment declines as a result.

Although Saudi Arabia has the size and strategic location along with powerful economic might, I would argue that it does not have the population, military, regional influence, or significant domestic commitment to really be considered a great power in the region.

Turkey

Subhash Kapila argues that Turkey is becoming the dominant power in the Middle East. He cites its strong ties to Israel and the Western world, democratic progressiveness, and diplomatic ties with Syria and Iran as evidence that it, rather than Iran or Saudi Arabia, is the dominant power¹⁶⁹. Turkey is comparative in size to Iran and Saudi Arabia, although it is slightly smaller. However I would argue it is not in as strong of a geostrategic position as Iran or Saudi Arabia. Turkey lies at the Western fringe of the Middle East and although having naval access to the Caspian, Mediterranean, and Black Seas, it is not in as strong of a position to directly influence many of the Central and Easterly located states in the Middle East. However, Turkey has a vibrant and powerful economy, being the strongest in the region, registering very high growth rates in the past several years and with a GDP of over \$800 billion. Turkey is also not dependent on oil, with a world-renowned clothing and textile industry as well as being a major

¹⁶⁸ Khouri, *The Shifting Balance of Power* part 1

¹⁶⁹ Subhash Kapila, *Unfolding Strategic Dynamics*

supplier of industrial products such as automobiles. Turkey also has a very large and powerful military, being approximately the same size as Iran's. However, Turkey is not as technologically advanced as Iran and is not a nuclear power, nor do they have access to long range missiles. Furthermore, I would argue that due to its location, Turkey's military is less of a threat and less of an influential force in the region than Iran's for example.

Turkey does wield a great deal of influence in the Middle East. Sinan Ulgen suggests that Turkey's growing influence in the region will make it more attractive to the European Union in consideration for its membership proposal¹⁷⁰. Turkey's recent criticisms of Israel for their invasion of the Gaza Strip are perhaps indicators that Turkey is trying to increase its influence in the region and act as a leader, or bridge the gaps between the Western and Arab Worlds¹⁷¹. In addition, Turkey has acted as a mediator between Iran and the United States in their nuclear talks. It is true that Turkey has wielded influence throughout the region recently however I would contend that its influence is not a powerful indicator of its regional status for several factors. First, Turkey has several domestic issues; most notably its Kurdish issue. Turkey is notorious for treating its Kurdish population worse than every state except Saddam's Iraq and as such Turkish Kurds continue to engage in violent separatist activities that threaten to harm the stability of the state. Another issue that I believe hinders strong Turkish influence in the Middle East is its strong desire to join the European Union and close relationships with other Western nations. Public opinion polls throughout the region show that there is rampant distrust of Western governments in the Arab world¹⁷², and the fact that Turkey has close ties to these

¹⁷⁰ Sinan Ulgen, *Turkey's growing influence in the Middle East*: <http://www.euractiv.com/en/enlargement/turkey-growing-influence-middle-east/article-179523?Ref=RSS>

¹⁷¹ William Choong, *Turkey gunning for more regional influence*: <http://acturca.wordpress.com/2009/02/13/turkey-gunning-for-more-regional-influence/>

¹⁷² Taken from various public opinion polls I looked at in my research. See Chapter 4 for more details.

states will have adverse affects on its influential power. Turkey's geostrategic location also puts it at an awkward position with respect to its influencing power. It can have diplomatic influence and act as a neutral mediator in many cases as I have shown, however it is not quite in a position to directly influence other actors in the region.

Turkey does however, have a high level of domestic commitment. Turkey is one of the only states in the region besides Iran that has a similar level of cultural and nationalistic fervor; as recently as two hundred years ago, the Ottoman Empire was a dominant force in the region, being dissolved after the conclusion of World War One. For seven hundred years the Ottoman's were dominant in the Middle East, being seen as political and cultural leaders¹⁷³. Furthermore, Turkey is one of the most democratic and pragmatic states in the region today; Turks enjoy a great deal of political and social freedoms. According to Bassam Tibi, Turkey is largely a secular democracy, having held "thirteen competitive, national elections in the past half century... Next to Mali and Senegal, Freedom House ranks Turkey the freest majority Muslim country."¹⁷⁴ As such it is no wonder Turkey enjoys a high level of domestic commitment. Turks are relatively free, and have a strong sense of pride when thinking about their Ottoman roots.

As it stands, Turkey is definitely a force to be reckoned with in the region, having a powerful economy, military, and a high level of domestic commitment. It is large and populous, but its geostrategic location puts it in an awkward position when it comes to directly influencing many other states in the region which in turn, along with its amiable relationship with the Western World, causes it to not be as influential as a state such as Iran for example.

Israel

¹⁷³ A great book on the Ottoman Empire is [Osman's Dream](#) by Caroline Finkel

¹⁷⁴ Bassam Tibi, *Islamists Approach Europe: Turkey's Islamist Danger*:
<http://www.meforum.org/2047/islamists-approach-europe>

Israel is an interesting case, according to neo realist theory of the balance of power; Israel should not still exist as a state. It is tiny and surrounded by enemies and has a small population and military. So how has Israel survived, when according to the theories it should have perished long ago? Israel is perhaps the best example of the importance of domestic commitment. Israel has survived for two reasons: (1) Western economic and military aid and support, and domestic commitment. Israel has had a tumultuous history, emerging victorious in armed conflicts ever since the creation of the state in 1948. A league of Arab states invaded Israel soon after its creation and after initial successes Israel was able to create a stalemate and drive out the invaders. Israel was able to win conflicts against superior numbers for so long that a sort of phobia developed among the Arab World, Israel had almost an aura of invincibility.

This aura was dispelled in 2006 with the short Hezbollah-Israeli War being widely perceived as a victory for Hezbollah. Israel's military though is quite powerful, especially because they have access to nuclear weapons and other Western military technology. Israel's army is small but well trained, equipped, and committed. However, the population of the Israeli state is quite small and Israel's economy ranks sixth in the region according to Table 1.0. Furthermore, Israel is a small state and surrounded by antagonistic states, namely Egypt, Saudi Arabia, and Syria. Because it is small and surrounded it does not yield much political and influential might. Further, Israel is ideologically opposed to almost every other state in the Middle East; the Arab-Israeli conflict has been going on for over fifty years and is one of the most sensitive and troublesome issues facing international relations scholars and foreign policymakers throughout the world. Since Israel is cursed with a poor geostrategic location and is surrounded by enemies along with the Israel's aura of invincibility being dispelled, it is not in a position to be very influential in the region.

The recent growth of Iran and Israel’s invasion of the Gaza strip have put it in an even more precarious situation. Turkey, one of Israel’s allies harshly condemned its actions in Gaza¹⁷⁵, and Arab opinion of Israel was further soured. Iran’s growth has also served to diminish Israel’s influence in the region. Iran has championed anti-Israeli rhetoric and has supported almost any group that works to subvert Israel’s strength in the region, such as funding Hezbollah and Hamas. Although Israel has one of the highest levels of domestic commitment in the region, with a population of zealous supporters of Israel’s right to statehood, and a highly advanced military complete with nuclear weapons – Israel simply does not have the other capabilities needed to be a regional power: size and geostrategic location, a large population, and economic might. Furthermore, its influence has gradually diminished and it seems to continually be pushed farther away from being a main force in the region as Iran and Turkey have grown.

IV. And the winner is...

I have applied my framework to four states in the Middle East: Iran, Israel, Turkey, and Saudi Arabia. I have shown that Iran, and only Iran has all of the key factors and as such can be considered the dominant power in the region. I have summarized my findings in Table 1.1, where I hope to clarify the conclusions reached in the preceding pages.

Table 1.1: Determining the Dominant Power

Country	Size & Strategic Location	Population	Military	Economic Might	Influence	Domestic Commitment
Iran	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES	YES
Saudi Arabia	YES	NO	NO	YES	NO	NO
Israel	NO	NO	YES	NO	NO	YES
Turkey	NO	YES	YES	YES	NO	YES

¹⁷⁵ Sinan Ulgen, *Turkey’s growing influence in the Middle East*: <http://www.euractiv.com/en/enlargement/turkey-growing-influence-middle-east/article-179523?Ref=RSS>

Israel and Saudi Arabia are lacking in some of the major categories; Israel in size and economic might, and Saudi Arabia in population and military. Israel's main strengths are its military and domestic commitment, while Saudi Arabia's is its budding economy. Turkey however presents an interesting case to consider. It has a sufficient level of domestic commitment, a powerful army, and a strong economy bolstered by a vast population. I would argue, and my argument can be falsified, that Turkey does not have the same sort of influence Iran has in the region, and its geostrategic location does not put it in a prime position to control the Middle East. Turkey's location allows it to serve as a bridge between East and West, and makes it attractive to European states, however its ties with Europe and the United States may serve to alienate it from Arab states. Turkey right now serves the role of diplomatic mediator in many problem issues in the Middle East, such as Iran's nuclear program. However, simply playing the role of diplomat is not strong evidence for Turkey being the dominant power. To be a dominant power, a country must do just that, be able to dominate, control, or dictate the actions and policies of other actors in the region. I would argue that Turkey is simply arbitrating or mediating disputes as a neutral party rather than dictating outcomes.

Iran on the other hand is doing precisely this. It is a loud proponent of anti-Western and anti-Israeli rhetoric, it is continuing to build and influence the direction of Iraq's fledgling government, as is evidenced by Iraq's new President being proud of his knowledge of Farsi and Iranian culture and the Iranian foreign minister's constant presence in the state¹⁷⁶. Hezbollah and Hamas, as well as Syria act largely according to the wishes of Iran because they receive major military and economic aid and protection from Iran. In fact, the Iranian Revolutionary Guard was largely responsible for training Hezbollah agents. Ahmadinejad represents "both a

¹⁷⁶ Nasr, 211

more aggressive Iranian policy and a new form of appeal beyond Iran's borders"¹⁷⁷. Barry Rubin also talks about how the Arab world increasingly looks to Iran for leadership now that Saddam has been executed and Bin-Laden has been rendered ineffective. Additionally, Iran is located in the middle of the Middle East, and as such has an easier time extending its tendrils throughout the region to directly influence its neighbors.

Not only is Iran the most influential state in the region, but it has the largest and aside from Israel's nuclear weapons, the most advanced military in the Middle East. It has a powerful economy that is going to increase at rapid rates in the coming years as its population increasingly becomes educated and its oil production capacity nears full strength; an increasingly educated country will also increase its non-oil revenue as Iran continues to explore other avenues such as science and technology. The proverbial icing on the cake is domestic commitment. Underneath a slim veil of government censorship and conservatism lies one of the most vibrant civil societies in the region. Iranians are more engaged in discussion and debate now than ever before, and the state is becoming increasingly more democratic, as politicians realize that they must be held accountable to their constituents. Even the conservative elite recognizes the latent power of its population, and in order to keep the Iranian people from rising against the regime, as they have done in the past¹⁷⁸, the state will become more and more democratic.

Iranians everywhere from the most adamant supporters of the regime to its loudest critics support the idea of Iran's dominance in the region and welcome it with open arms. The spirit of ancient Persia still lives inside the hearts and minds of all Iranians and they can sense that at last the time has come for Iran to once again assume a position of power in the region,

¹⁷⁷ Barry Rubin, *The Rise of a Regional Power*

¹⁷⁸ The 1905 Constitutional Revolution and the 1979 Islamic Revolution are prime examples of this.

and they are committed to seeing this dream through to reality. Indeed, it has already come to pass I would argue. Iran has become the dominant power in the Middle East as I have shown in this chapter. Foreign policy analysts everywhere need to address this new fact about the balance of power in the region if they wish to be able to solve and quell the turbulence.

In the next chapter I will examine the implications of Iran's regional dominance at various levels, domestic, regional, and world-wide. Most importantly, I will consider the prospect of regional war breaking out as a result of Iran's increase in power and other states' relative decline in power. The Middle East is a volatile region, even the simplest spark could threaten to cause a wildfire – and as such, the importance of Iran's position must be understood in order to accurately deal with the implications.

Chapter 6: Iran vs. The World

I. Looking at the implications of Iran's New Regional Role

Now that it has been established that Iran is the dominant power in the Middle East it is my objective to examine the implications of this fact. What does the recent increase of Iranian power mean for Iran at the domestic level, for regional politics in the Middle East, and on a larger scale, for the world? How should nations deal with and approach Iran? Iran becoming a dominant regional power changes all these dynamics. Its newfound dominating posture in the region has changed the balance of power in the Middle East and as such the attitudes of other

states in the region must shift according to this change. Furthermore, the attitudes of the Western world must also shift to accept this new reality in order to deal with Iran on a more equal footing. One of the most important implications of Iranian power however, comes when thinking about the prospects of war. War is a daunting concept, and we can use theories such as Copeland's dynamic differentials theory¹⁷⁹ to predict the likelihood of war breaking out in the Middle East. Perhaps most terrifying is the prospect of an Iran-Israeli war, which I would argue, is not only possible but would threaten the onset of a world-wide conflict.

To begin thinking about implications I will look first inwardly and then move outwards. I will consider the implications of Iranian power inside Iran. What are the implications for civil society in Iran? It's government? And it's economy? Next I will look at the regional implications – how does Iran's new status affect the politics of the Middle East. For one it changes the entire balance of power into a bi-polar balance with Iran and Israel at the poles, or one could argue that Turkey is at the opposing pole. What does this mean however? What does this mean for the other states in the region? What are the prospects of war, with an Arab coalition, and with Israel? Here I will use Copeland's theory to aid my thinking through these potential conflicts. After looking at regional implications I will turn to the largest stage, the implications of Iranian power on the rest of the world. How does the changing balance of power in the Middle East affect Iran's position in world politics? Should the world care about Iranian power? And why? If Iran engages in a war with Israel or regional war breaks out, will the rest of the world get involved, potentially causing a Third World War? Finally, I will suggest some new ways of not only thinking about Iran, but dealing with it.

¹⁷⁹ Copeland discusses his theory in The Origins of Major War. Also see Chapter 3 for a discussion of his theory in more detail.

I believe that it is absolutely important for anyone interested in world affairs and the Middle East in general to have an accurate picture of Iran as a dominant regional power. Understanding this fact will prove vital for any dealings a government such as the United States for example has with Iran. Knowing that the Iranian people are not violently oppressed and on the verge of revolution, but are domestically committed to the regime is another important factor that must be understood in order to properly deal with and confront Iran. It is these issues that I hope to expound upon in this chapter.

II. Implications at the Domestic Level –How is Iran’s role reflected in Iranian society?

I will begin my analysis of the implications of Iranian power by pointing the looking glass squarely at Iran itself. Iran’s new status will have a profound affect not only on Iranian society, but also at the governmental and economic level as well. In order to gain a complete picture of the larger implications it is important to look at the possibilities of what will happen within the borders of Iran. President Ahmadinejad campaigned for the Presidency with two primary slogans: wealth distribution, and returning Iran to greatness. Although as I have shown by looking at public opinion polls, Iranians are dissatisfied with his job handling the first issue¹⁸⁰, his Presidency has been quite a success in the latter issue. Iran in the past few years has dramatically increased its power. How has this affected Iranian society?

Domestically, Iranians are excited about the prospects of the future. I have tried to show that a majority of Iranians feel nostalgic about the greatness of ancient Persia and are filled with a sense of nationalist pride now that Iran has become a dominant regional power. Looking back at Levi’s work on domestic commitment¹⁸¹, the increase of Iranian power will likely have the

¹⁸⁰ All of the public opinion polls I looked at had similar results; Iranians are displeased with the state of the economy and believe Ahmadinejad has not lived up to his campaign promises of wealth distribution.

¹⁸¹ Levi discusses consent and compliance, which domestic commitment theory draws heavily upon.

effect of increasing domestic commitment further in Iran. Although Iranians understand that their society is not perfect and they are not as satisfied with the economy as they would like to be, the future for Iranians is a bright one. One of the most interesting implications to consider is the upcoming Presidential election in Iran. In June Iranians will once again go to the polls to select a new or incumbent President. I believe that President Ahmadinejad¹⁸² will tout his role in helping forge Iran as a new regional power in his bid for re-election. Whether or not he is re-elected will largely depend on how the Iranian public weighs his success with the second half of his platform, returning Iran to a position of power, against his failure to distribute wealth.

The increase in Iranian power will also help Iran's economy greatly. In fact, the benefits can already be seen; Iran has signed a \$1.1 billion steel deal with India¹⁸³ which also includes construction of a new steel-slab plant in Iran. Furthermore, Iran has signed a huge \$22 billion deal exporting five million tons of natural gas per year to India¹⁸⁴. In addition Iran is securing more trade with European and other Middle Eastern countries, which will be discussed further in later sections of this chapter. Now that Iran has achieved a new status of power in the region, the government will be able to focus more on improving the country's economy, which has very striking potential for growth in the coming years. Iran has a growing labor force, annually increasing at a rate of approximately 3% per year, but unemployment is still high. According to Djavad Salehi-Isfahani, a scholar specializing in Iranian economy; "there have been favorable developments on the demographic front that bode well for long term economic growth"¹⁸⁵.

¹⁸² Ahmadinejad has recently confirmed he will run for re-election in the next election. His biggest opponent will be former President Khatami, whose image as a reformist makes him very popular in Iran today.

¹⁸³ Taken from: <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/business/4090890.stm>

¹⁸⁴ From the same article

¹⁸⁵ Salehi-Isfahani, 2008: 244

Salehi-Isfahani points out that in the next twenty five years as Iran's young population grows, Iran will have a huge and highly educated labor force, noting that the primary school population doubled from five to ten million between the period of 1979 through the 1990's¹⁸⁶. There is also a narrowing gap in education in rural and urban areas along with a narrowing gender gap in education. This is a good example of the changing character of the Iranian family, which exists now not just for survival, but for growth. He does note that the growth will not come automatically, but the prospects are indeed bright.

A possible negative implication of Iran's increasing power will be a further growth of the conservative hard-liners in the government. Throughout the reformist movement of the Khatami period¹⁸⁷ and Ahmadinejad's first Presidency, conservatives have gained quite a bit of power in Iranian politics. I would argue however that as a result of the last several elections in Iran the electorate will not tolerate the further entrenchment of conservatives in Iranian politics. The most important lesson of the 2005 Presidential election was that politicians must cater to their constituents; Ahmadinejad was able to win the election by making campaign promises that directly resonated with voters. The principle reason his re-election bid is in doubt is because of his failure to live up to his campaign promises of economic wealth distribution. The prospects of democracy in Iran being strengthened, I would argue, are quite strong and the 2009 election will be the best indicator of whether my assumptions about Iranian democracy and politics are correct.

III. Implications at the Regional Level – Iran and the Arab World

¹⁸⁶ Salehi-Isfahani, 2008: 249

¹⁸⁷ Although Khatami was wildly popular for his reformist policies, the actual result of his Presidency was a further consolidation of conservative power: see Democracy in Iran by Vali Nasr.

The ascendancy of Iran to a position of regional dominance will logically have profound effects on the politics of the Middle East. The most important of these is the literal changing of the balance of power. Arguably since the creation of Israel as a state, the balance of power in the Middle East has been bi-polar, with Israel and a bloc of Arab states at the two poles. Today however, Iran has shifted the balance – creating a bi-polar system in which Iran and Israel are opposing each other. The relative power of Arab states has greatly declined, especially with the US invasion of Iraq in 2003. Along with any changes or shifts in the balance of power come the possibilities of war. In such a volatile region this prospect is even more frightening. Today one would fear the outbreak of a major war much more in the Middle East than in a region such as Europe, for example. In this section I will examine the different regional implications of Iran's new position of power.

First, the growth in Iranian power is in part caused by, but is also playing a huge role in causing, an increase of Shi'a power throughout the region. Shi'a movements in various Middle Eastern countries, most notably Iraq, are taking on more prominence than in previous decades. Saddam Hussein's Iraq was a bastion of Sunni Arab power at its height and was considered Iran's greatest rival and one of the most powerful states in the Middle East. Today, Iraq is run by a provisional Shi'a controlled government, influenced and supported by Iran. Hezbollah in Lebanon has gained a considerable amount of strength as well, with their highly publicized war against Israel in 2006 changing and ultimately eliminating much of the phobia Middle Eastern states felt when thinking of Israel. As much of the literature has noted, Iran is almost directly responsible for funding and training Hezbollah forces¹⁸⁸. An increase in Shi'a power throughout the region will have the natural effect of perpetuating Iranian power.

¹⁸⁸ Vali Nasr and Barry Rubin discuss Iran's influence and funding of Hezbollah at length.

In addition to Iran becoming the religious leader of the Shi'a world¹⁸⁹, Iran is also taking on an increased leadership position among Middle Eastern states. Iran has increasingly played a role in developing the new government of Iraq, and has acted as a mediator in various other issues in the Caucasus¹⁹⁰. Another recent news article discusses Iran's growing relationship with Armenia, and as Robin Forestier points out, "Armenia's unique relationship with the regional power – Iran – is one it cannot afford to abandon"¹⁹¹. Kaveh Afrasiabi, writing for the Asia Times, outlines an increasing relationship between Iran and two other Farsi speaking nations: Afghanistan and Tajikistan. He cites increased political and economic cooperation between these nations, who are depending on Iran, in his article¹⁹². The implications of Iran assuming a leadership position which results from its increased power will help to bolster its economy; will strengthen its base of power in addition to providing valuable allies for the future. However, there are also negative implications. On the other side of the coin, Iran's increased power has led, and might further lead to increased suspicion and fear among Arab states. Egypt and Saudi Arabia are the two states that have voiced loudest concerns about Iran's growing presence in the region¹⁹³.

Perhaps the most frightening implication of Iranian power is the prospect of war in the Middle East. According to Copeland a bi-polar balance of power, contrary to Waltz's assertion, is unstable. Copeland argues that the declining power will be more likely to take actions that will

¹⁸⁹ Vali Nasr's [The Shi'a Revival](#) deals with the sudden increase in Shi'a groups and movements throughout the Middle East, and he places Iran squarely at the head of the new Shi'a revival.

¹⁹⁰ Kaveh Afrasiabi, *Iran Plays up its peacemaker role*:
http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/JI25Ak04.html

¹⁹¹ Robin Forestier, *Isolated Armenia Leans on Iran* : <http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/europe/7514341.stm>

¹⁹² Kaveh Afrasiabi, *Iran woos Farsi-speaking nations* :
http://www.atimes.com/atimes/Middle_East/JE10Ak01.html

¹⁹³ Farzad Pezeshkpour warns of this in his article *Iran and the Regional Balance of Power*

lead to major war because it fears its decline¹⁹⁴. In this situation I would argue, Iran is the ascending power, and Israel is the declining power in the bi-polar balance. As a result, Israel, fearing a deep and decisive decline, but being a strong military power, might see war as a preferable option to peace. War is seen as an attractive option because a victory might stave off the decline of the state, and defeat might not even change the balance of¹⁹⁵.

War in this situation might look strikingly similar to an old Western. In these films there is a good cowboy and a bad one, fighting for control of the town. This is analogous to the state of the balance of power in the Middle East. There are two main cowboys; Iran and Israel, competing for shares of power in the town, the Middle East. Like an old Western, there are oftentimes other minor characters; both cowboys can have their respective gangs. In this case the actors on the periphery are Lebanon, Jordan, Syria, and Saudi Arabia, to name a few. A bi-polar balance of power, just like an old Western however, focuses on the two primary actors. The current scene is of a stand-off, like the calm before the storm. It is a point in the story in which the two actors are standing opposite each other with their hands hovering over their holsters, neither drawing their weapon, but both alert. Like the current situation in the Middle East, the tensions and intensity are running high. Iran has been one of the leaders of anti-Israeli rhetoric and Israel has been one of the loudest opponents of Iran. These two countries have been trading barbs for years now, and with the rising power of Iran, especially with respect to its nuclear program, Israel's posture has taken on a much more aggressive stance. Similarly, as Iran's power has grown in the past several years, their policies and rhetoric have been increasingly aggressive.

¹⁹⁴ Waltz argues that bi-polar systems are more stable, but Copeland disagrees. See Chapter 3 for more information

¹⁹⁵ Since there are only two large powers in the region, smaller powers are largely insignificant, and even if a great power is heavily damaged it is still likely to be more powerful than lesser powers.

In these old Western movies, there is always a shockwave that is felt throughout the town as the action intensifies and the stand-off becomes a shoot-out. In this manner, what may potentially happen between Iran and Israel will reverberate throughout the entire region. In Westerns one of the cowboys always winds up dead and the victor takes the spoils. Will the situation in the Middle East turn out to end this way as well? I believe there are two possible outcomes: (1) outside influences such as the UN for example will prevent this sort of Western type ending from occurring, (2) the outside world will be drawn into the war, causing a world-wide conflict. I believe the prospects of war between Iran and Israel are serious and grounded in theories of the origins of war. Through analyzing the works of Copeland we can make a clear and succinct argument that this is a very real possibility¹⁹⁶.

Another implication, albeit less dangerous than a potential Iran-Israeli war is the prospect of a war between Iran and the Arab world. With Iran's power growing and the drastic decline of Iraq, who had been the leader of pan-Arabism in the Middle East, the Arab world is becoming increasingly afraid of Iran. Most notably, Saudi Arabia and Egypt have expressed concerns about Iranian power in the region¹⁹⁷, and the United States has even begun militarily funding GCC nations¹⁹⁸ in order to attempt to counterbalance Iran's growth in power. Michael Doyle writes about counter hegemonic balances¹⁹⁹, and I believe that there is a possibility of Arab states forming a counter hegemonic alliance to attempt to balance against Iran. This could lead to a conflict between Iran and its allies, and an Arabic alliance headed by Saudi Arabia and

¹⁹⁶ Bi-polar balances of power are very dangerous because the declining power sees war as an attractive option, especially since it has little to lose since it is already in decline, and much to gain.

¹⁹⁷ An Arab coalition against Iran could prove to be disastrous to the stability of the region if regional war breaks out.

¹⁹⁸ Vali Nasr, *The Middle East: Between Progress and Conflict* video conference

¹⁹⁹ Michael Doyle, [Ways of War and Peace](#).

Egypt. However I would contend that although the leaders of these regimes have openly expressed concerns about Iran, public opinion polls have shown that the view of the people of these states does not match the governments concerns, for example much of the Arab world supports Iran's nuclear program and is not afraid of the prospect of a nuclear Iran²⁰⁰.

Understanding the importance of domestic commitment, it becomes less plausible in my opinion, for a very serious conflict to break out between Arab states and Iran because of the domestic issues that would result.

IV. Iran vs. The World?

There are several important implications of Iran's new position in the regional balance of power that will affect politics on a world scale. The most drastic implication is the prospect of a world-wide conflict. However there are other less dire possibilities such as international trade and other relations. For the purposes of this paper I will mainly focus on the possibility for conflict.

There are very real possibilities that should a war break out between Iran and Israel, much of the rest of the world could get involved. Similar to the First World War, as Austria-Hungary ordered general mobilization against Russia, due to interlocking alliances, the rest of Europe quickly got involved in the fray²⁰¹. Iran has and continues to build strong relationships with China and Russia. Their relationships are mainly economic and trade alliances however, but

²⁰⁰ *2008 Annual Arab Public Opinion Poll* :

http://www.brookings.edu/events/2008/~//media/Files/events/2008/0414_middle_east/0414_middle_east_tel_hami.pdf

²⁰¹ See David Fromkin's Europe's Last Summer

they are linked. Israel on the other hand has strong ties to the United States and Western Europe. There is one interesting caveat however, the possibility of a world-wide conflict, in my opinion, would hinge on the nature of the conflict that erupts between Iran and Israel. If Iran acts as the aggressor, or engages in a serious counter-attack to an Israeli offensive, one that would seriously threaten the security and even existence of Israel, world war would be possible.

Because Israel and the United States are so closely aligned, the United States would have a strong incentive to get involved in a conflict should Israel be seriously threatened. If the United States gets thrown into the conflict, it is likely the cause an international uproar. China, seeing itself as a leader of the third world would then have a strong incentive to rally to Iran's aid, since it would be no match for a combined American-Israeli force. This in turn could draw other nations into the conflict and engulf the world in a terrible war.

Another terrifying aspect of such a war is the fact that many of these states have access to nuclear weapons. Iran, although not yet possessing a nuclear weapon, can potentially have one in the next few years. This, coupled with the fact that they have access to long-range missile technology is a dangerous prospect when considering the possible outbreak of a regional or world conflict. Would Iran, in desperation, use a nuclear missile? On the other side of the coin, Israel also possesses nuclear weapons. If Israel is fundamentally threatened, is it possible they would justify the use of a nuclear missile against Iran or another of its aggressors? Even if nuclear weapons are only used inside the region, against other states in the region²⁰², the side effects would impact the entire world. The first use of nuclear weapons sent a shock wave throughout the world, and the damages are still being felt. Another such use, especially in as condensed a region the Middle East is, would be a devastating happenstance for the world.

²⁰² Regardless of where nuclear weapons are used, the very fact of their use is devastating and could kill millions of people instantly.

V. Understanding and dealing with a new Iran

Knowing how volatile the Middle East is right now²⁰³, and after thinking about the possible ramifications of conflict breaking out in the region, it is more important than ever for anyone wishing to help solve these long held disputes and conflicts to have an accurate understanding of the balance of power in the region. As such, understanding and accepting Iran's role is one of the keys to the region. Iran has to be understood as being a potentially dominating force in the Middle East. Most importantly however, the misconceptions about Iran must be dispelled.

Iran is not a wild, irrational, terrorist state. The Iranian leadership is a rational entity, carefully maneuvering in the region to establish itself as the key player, and seeks to be respected on the world stage as such. Furthermore, it must be understood that the notion of Iranian people as oppressed and angry at the regime is not correct. The Iranian people are domestically committed to their regime and wish for Iran to assume what they believe is their rightful place. In order for the United States government, for example, or any other organization for that matter to deal or negotiate successfully with Iran they must take into account domestic commitment. Because Iran's population is domestically committed, the Iranian government can be much more aggressive in its foreign policy choices, and can be an international "risk taker"²⁰⁴. This is an important distinction to note because the stance, it seems to me, of many in the Western world is that of Iran being risk averse. This is a popular conception because of the widely held belief that Iran is a coercive and repressive regime. It is safe to believe that a state

²⁰³ The recent Israel-Hamas conflict in Gaza is a testament to how strained relations are in the Middle East, there were several thousand casualties in the short conflict.

²⁰⁴ Since the population supports its designs in the region, Iran is essentially given a mandate to be aggressive. Its strong military presence and central location also strengthen its posture in the region.

with a coercive stance that oppresses its people would not be stable and should not be taken on the international scene. The logic is that because of a state's instability, it cannot take too many risks or make credible commitments internationally.

However as I have shown through examining public opinion polls and the literature, Iranians are in fact committed to the regime. For example, the West perceives Iran as a bastion for terrorist organizations based on their funding of groups such as Hezbollah and Hamas. However, according to public opinion polls, Iranians have a favorable view of these government actions²⁰⁵. Because Iranians are committed to the regime, Iran's power become more than just a myth, and should be taken seriously. Iran seeks to be treated on the international scene with the respect one would accord to any other developed nation, and is something they have not yet received. As a result, their stance in the Middle East has remained aggressive and oftentimes accusatory of the West. Through understanding Iran and recognizing the domestic commitment of the Iranian people, it will be much easier to negotiate with them to try to solve the many persistent issues in the region; the sparks that threaten to cause a wildfire could be averted if Iran were included in such peace talks on an equal footing.

²⁰⁵ See Chapter 4 where I discuss at length my findings from public opinion polls in Iran

Chapter 7: Iran, A Menace to Society?

I have embarked on a long journey of discovery, ultimately coming to the conclusion that Iran is the dominant power in the Middle East. I have also looked at the implications of Iran's new role of dominance in the region from various different angles, domestic, regional, and world-wide. Aside from the actual analysis and synthesis and an exploration of the implications of Iran's regional dominance, what can be learned from this thesis? I believe that if one takes away the following after reading this thesis, my job will be complete.

The first; (1) that Iran, contrary to widely-held Western beliefs, is a rational actor and is moving on a clear and calculated course. (2) Secondly, Iranians are educated and interested in exploring their freedoms as much as anyone in the United States and Europe. They use the internet frequently to exchange thoughts and ideas and this ever increasing proportion of Iran's population yields real power to decide the course of the country in the coming decades. (3) Iran is not a purely oppressive regime, rather, it is moving farther along the path towards democracy. Its Majiles is important enough for the government to actually care about trying to rig elections

and as we learned from the 2005 Presidential election, catering to constituents is the key to victory; more and more elected officials are being held accountable for their campaign promises. (4) Lastly, Iran must be dealt with as an equal. Continuing to hold the belief that Iran is a dangerous, oppressive, and backward regime will only push it farther away from working towards peace and stability in the region and with the Western world. Instead, if Iran is approached on equal footing and given the respect Iranians feel they deserve, achieving real stability in the Middle East is highly possible.

Recently, Hillary Clinton stated that Iran poses a direct threat to stability in the Middle East along with Europe and Russia²⁰⁶. The cold and passive-aggressive stance the United States and many other Western nations have taken towards Iran only further aggravates tensions. Iran simply wishes to be treated with the respect it feels it deserves and has earned with its recent ascension to a position of dominance in the region. It yields considerable power and influence in the Middle East, reaching out to Iran as equals and working together towards peace seems like a more viable option than treating Iran as if it is an irrational actor. I have shown through this thesis that Iran possesses the capabilities and domestic commitment to be considered dominant in the region. As such it is in a unique position to broker a lasting peace in one of the world's most turbulent regions. However, with much of the Western world treating Iran as a menace to society, peace seems unlikely. Changing attitudes towards Iran must be reached before any thought of peace can be materialized. Like it or not Iran is now the dominant power in the region and I believe, the path to peace, like the ancient Royal Roads, runs through Iran.

²⁰⁶ Taken from CNN.com: Clinton warns of Iranian threat to Europe, Russia : <http://www.cnn.com/2009/WORLD/meast/03/04/iran.us/index.html>

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