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# “Our Defense is a Holy Defense!” - The Iran-Iraq War and its Legacy in Contemporary Iranian Factional Politics

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## Abstract

The Iran-Iraq War is one of the most influential conflicts in the history of the modern Middle East. It is well-known that it has affected the geopolitics and security policies of regional powers such as Iran, Saudi Arabia, and the other Gulf States. However, the role of the war's legacy in domestic politics of these nations is significantly less understood. This paper analyzes public statements and newspaper editorials from prominent Iranian political figures to assess the different ways in which the Iran-Iraq War is understood in the Iranian domestic context, and to determine how it impacts political rhetoric in the Islamic Republic. The argument is made that Iranian policymakers hold similar views towards the war in regards to foreign policy, but differ significantly when discussing economic policy.

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## Introduction

One of the most influential events in the shaping of the Islamic Republic of Iran was the war it fought against Iraq from 1980 to 1988. The war killed and wounded thousands of Iranians, and helped entrench the clerical government. As a consequence, it continues to shape the regime's foreign policy posture to this day, as well as Iranian domestic politics, society, and culture. The war has shaped Iran's foreign policy tremendously, and many of its overseas involvements, such as the strengthening of Shia militias in Iraq and the defense of the Assad government in Syria, can be traced to lessons and legacies from the war years. Events such as the annual commemorations of the start of the conflict on September 21st, sponsored trips to sites of the major battles, and the screening of films dramatizing the war, continually remind the Iranian public of the conflict's importance in building, defending, and maintaining the state.

However, studies of the war's impact on Iranian foreign policy have neglected a crucial element: its influence in domestic political contestation and elite debates in Iran's domestic political scene. This paper seeks to illuminate the role of the war in this domestic political context, and will argue that the differing interpretations of the war's legacy are used by the multiple sides in Iran's internal politics to legitimize and support distinctive political positions. Due to its centrality in creating the state and in unifying the people of Iran against an exterior enemy, the Iran-Iraq War would seem to be an event held above Iran's tumultuous domestic political scene. However, members of the various Iranian political factions often refer to the war and its legacy in current times in order to advocate for or against specific policies. This paper will explore this phenomenon to demonstrate that the war and its legacy play a role in many crucial debates in Iranian factional politics.

A significant volume of scholarship has discussed the Iran-Iraq War. Understandings of the war have centered on topics such as the role of the war in consolidating the Iranian regime, the start of the war and its nature as a geopolitical contest, and the international, specifically American, involvement in the conflict.<sup>1</sup> In assessments of the war's contemporary impact, scholars have focused on the role of the war in shaping Iran's security outlook and the lessons to be drawn from the war for policymakers assessing Iran.<sup>2</sup> However, these analyses are concerned primarily with the foreign policy impacts of the war, and how it has shaped Iran's behavior in the region. The legacies of the war are explored in a series of essays collected in *Iran, Iraq, and the Legacies of War*, edited by Lawrence Potter and Gary Sick, which discuss the war's impact in areas such as the status of the Kurds, Iraqi Shia politics, the role of the Gulf States, and, most relevantly, the Iranian war generation. However, even the essay on the impact on Iran's war and postwar generations, while discussing the current impact of the war in popular discourse and culture, does not directly connect it to political rhetoric in the country.<sup>3</sup> This paper will seek to connect scholarship of the Iran-Iraq War to another field in Iranian political studies: internal politics and factional dynamics within the domestic sphere of the Islamic Republic.

The internal factional politics of Iran is another topic of significant scholarship. Several major pieces of the literature on factional politics include Mehdi Moslem's *Factional Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran*, which traces the development of factions from the revolution to the Presidency of Mohammed Khatami. Another text that covers the development of factions and the institutionalization of competing ideas in the state is Daniel Brumberg's *Reinventing Khomeini*, which discusses how factionalism was built into the Iranian regime during its formation. While these works cover the salient debates between the factions in

<sup>1</sup> Stephen Walt, *Revolution and War*, Cornell University Press, 1996, Blight, Lang, et al., *Becoming Enemies: US-Iran Relations and the Iran-Iraq War, 1979-1988*, Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2012.

<sup>2</sup> See Bruce Riedel, "Lessons from America's First War with Iran," the Brookings Institution, 2013, <http://www.brookings.edu/research/articles/2013/05/lessons-america-first-war-iran-riedel>, and Annie Tracy Samuel, "Attacking Iran: Lessons from the Iran-Iraq War," Belfer Center for Science and International Affairs, 2011, [http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/publication/21698/attacking\\_iran.html](http://belfercenter.ksg.harvard.edu/publication/21698/attacking_iran.html).

<sup>3</sup> Potter, Lawrence G. and Gary Sick, eds. *Iran, Iraq, and the Legacies of War*. New York: Palgrave Macmillan, 2004.

Iran, including over both foreign policy and economic management, they do not explicitly connect contemporary Iranian political rhetoric and debates to the legacy of the war.

In linking these two strands of scholarship, this paper will focus on two areas of debate in Iranian politics: foreign and economic policy. It will highlight the role of the war and its legacy in the rhetoric and understanding of these issues. To examine the war legacy in the rhetoric of Iranian elites, it will analyze speeches and statements on foreign and economic policy from elites across the political spectrum that contain references to the Iran-Iraq War, and identify common themes expressed when elites discuss the conflict.

The paper will begin by discussing the legacy of the war in the dialogue on the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic. It will argue that despite differing views on foreign policy, the war's legacy is understood in a similar way by Iranian elites, and thus serves as a unifying factor among the factions on this issue. It will also consider potential changes in this dynamic, as shifts in this discussion of the war's legacy have occurred in relation to the possibility of a diplomatic resolution to the Iranian nuclear crisis. The paper will then argue that, conversely, the legacy of the Iran-Iraq War is significantly more contested in the field of economic policy, and is understood in different ways by those on differing sides of Iran's economic policy debate. Specifically in the debate on economics, the paper will argue that the idea of the "economy of resistance," the economic policy designed to circumvent the impact of international sanctions on Iran for its nuclear program, has its roots in the experience of the Iran-Iraq War. Through analyzing these two debates and the role of the war in them, the paper will conclude that the war is an important concept for rallying domestic support for various policies, and it is continually referenced in discussions in Iranian politics. In doing so, the paper will connect understandings of the Iran-Iraq War with other work on the internal political dynamics of the Islamic Republic, demonstrating that the war remains an important factor in formulating policy in the Islamic Republic.

### **The Legacy of the Iran-Iraq War**

The Iran-Iraq War<sup>4</sup> began on September 21 1980, when the Iraqi Armed Forces, seeking to capitalize on the disarray of the Iranian military and state, invaded. Despite some initial successes the Iraqi invasion ground to a halt and, by 1982, the Iranian forces ejected the invaders from the country. From 1982 to 1988, the war slowed to a stalemate. With the main battlefronts bogged down, fighting expanded to include air and missile attacks on cities as well as naval clashes over oil shipping in the Gulf. In 1988, both sides accepted the conditions of UN Resolution 598, which outlined a path to peace.<sup>5</sup>

Throughout the war, Iran was placed under substantial international pressure economically, politically, and militarily. The Iraqis were given significant funding and arms from the Gulf countries, especially Kuwait and Saudi Arabia, and from the United Kingdom, France, the United States, and the Soviet Union.<sup>6</sup> Conversely, Iran found itself isolated, without any major allies or arms suppliers, and facing international silence over Iraq's aggression, targeting of civilians, and use of chemical weapons on a massive scale.<sup>7</sup> It is important to note that Iran did purchase millions of dollars' worth of equipment during the war through Israel, and so was not totally isolated.<sup>8</sup> However the general attitude for many Iranians, and one which persists today, was a strong sense of isolation. As articulated

<sup>4</sup> The war is also known in Iran as "The Imposed War," "The Holy Defense," and "The Sacred Defense." It will be referred to in this paper as the Iran-Iraq War unless in a direct quote, which may use one of the alternative Iranian names.

<sup>5</sup> For sources focused on the course of the war, see Dilip Hiro, *The Longest War: The Iran-Iraq Military Conflict*, (London: Grafton Books, 1989), Shahram Chubin and Charles Tripp, *Iran and Iraq at War*, (London, I.B. Tauris and Co. Ltd 1988).

<sup>6</sup> Hiro, *The Longest War*, 71-85.

<sup>7</sup> Joost Hiltermann, "Deep Traumas, Fresh Ambitions: Legacies of the Iran-Iraq War," Middle Eastern Research and Information Project.

<sup>8</sup> Parsi, Trita, *Treachorous Alliance the Secret Dealings of Israel, Iran, and the United States*. New Haven: Yale University Press, 107; Chapters 10-11.

by the editor of the conservative newspaper Resalat, “we felt the world was against us.”<sup>9</sup> The war also placed crippling economic pressure on Iran, forcing the vast expenditure of funds for waging the conflict, and leading to damage to the economic infrastructure of the country. The international arms embargo on Iran by the United States resulted in a shift to a domestic emphasis on arms production, leading the Iranian state to develop many of its industries to support the war effort. As a result of war pressures and foreign isolation, Iran was forced to implement more statist control over the economy, and instituted price controls, and food and oil rationing, along with the promotion of domestic industries.<sup>10</sup>

Iran also faced direct confrontations during the “Tanker War” in the Persian Gulf. By 1984, Iran was responding to Iraqi attacks on its shipping by targeting any vessel carrying Iraqi oil or sailing under the flag of a nation supporting Iraq. This resulted in an American naval deployment to the Persian Gulf and violent engagements between Iranian and American forces. While the American presence was couched in terms of protecting oil supplies, it had placed more pressure on Iran, due to the latter’s attacks on neutral shipping carrying Iraqi oil and due to the American tilt towards Iraq. The armed standoff finally resulted in the accidental destruction of an Iranian airliner and subsequent American efforts to paint the incident as Iran’s fault.<sup>11</sup> The overall experience of the war was formative for many Iranians, and its lessons have remained an integral part of public life.

### **Iranian Factional Politics**

The influence of the war on the Iranian people would have been less contentious without the development of outspoken factional rivalries and political camps in Iran. The coalition that united to overthrow Shah Muhammad Reza Pahlavi during the Islamic Revolution of 1977-1979 was extremely diverse. It contained liberals, working-class Iranians, religious leaders, communists, and many other political blocs. They were united primarily by the desire to overthrow the Shah and their general support for the charismatic Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini. With the collapse of the Shah’s regime and the formation of a new government, factional differences emerged more prominently. For the early years of the regime, an alliance between the Islamic left and more radical Islamists served as the bedrock of the state, but by 1981 most leftists had been removed. However, their influence on the ideology of the revolution, specifically the emphasis on social justice and economic empowerment, led their ideology to remain within the ruling elite, alongside conservative views on economic redistribution and social equality.<sup>12</sup> The basis for factional politics in Iran arises from divisions within the revolutionary elite, lack of specificity on core matters of governance in Khomeini’s vision of an Islamic government, and in the construction of revolutionary parallel institutions that clash with the institutions of the state.<sup>13</sup>

Throughout the 1980s, and concurrent with the war, two primary political groupings developed within the Iranian body politic, termed by Moslem as the “conservatives” and the “radicals.” The conservative faction primarily emphasized private property rights, a more deregulated private sector without major state control, enactment of Sharia laws in personal life, and an emphasis on a more pragmatic foreign policy. This view contrasted with the “radical” perspective, which supported exporting the revolution abroad, a more

<sup>9</sup> Ibid. Quoted on page 99.

<sup>10</sup> Chubin, *Iran and Iraq at War*, Chapter 7.

<sup>11</sup> David Crist, “Gulf of Conflict: A History of US-Iran Confrontation at Sea,” *The Washington Institute of Near East Policy*, June 2009.

<sup>12</sup> Daniel Brumberg, *Reinventing Khomeini: The Struggle for Reform in Iran*, (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2001), 99-100.

<sup>13</sup> Mehdi Moslem, *Factional Politics in Post-Khomeini Iran*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2002), 11, 47.

statist and redistributive economic system at home, and greater tolerance in the cultural and personal spheres. This initial division set the stage for the factional politics visible in the Iranian political system today.<sup>14</sup>

A key factor in propagating factional divisions within Iran was the process of “dissonant institutionalization” undertaken during the consolidation of the regime. Dissonant Institutionalization is defined as the embedding of competing ideas about authority and legitimacy within the framework of the institutions of the state.<sup>15</sup> This process in Iran institutionalized differences between religious and democratic authority. This divide is exemplified by the differing powers between elected institutions, such as the parliament (hereafter called the Majles) and the President, which contrast with the unelected, and heavily clerical, Guardian Council and Expediency Council. These latter unelected bodies serve to interpret and judge the Islamic credentials of candidates and laws being considered. It is also demonstrated by differences between the bodies of the state and the revolutionary institutions that stand parallel to them, such as the regular armed forces and the Islamic Revolutionary Guards Corps (IRGC). These tensions over the balance of political power, built into the constitution and fabric of the state, help drive competition between the factions.

Contemporary factions in Iran are generally understood as having transcended the binary of “conservative” and “radical” from the earlier years of the state. There are two main dividers within the Iranian political elite today which serves to create four amorphous competing factions: the theocratic-republican divide, split between those who support the unelected clerical governing structures over the elected republican state institutions and vice versa, and the left-right economic divide, split between those who support greater state control and regulation of the economy and vice versa.<sup>16</sup> This has created the “theocratic right,” also occasionally referred to as the “mainstream conservatives,” who support clerical dominance and a less regulated economy; the “theocratic left,” also called the “hardliners,” who support clerical dominance and a more regulated and redistributive economy; the republican right, who support the republican state institutions and a less regulated economy and are known as the “pragmatists;” and the republican left, who support the republican institutions and a more regulated and redistributive economy, and are referred to as the “reformists”.<sup>17</sup> Prominent conservatives include Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei and Majles Speaker Ali Larijani, while important hardliners include former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, Guardian Council Chairman Ahmad Jannati, and many members of the IRGC.<sup>18</sup> Important pragmatists are centered on former President Ali Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani, and include current President Hassan Rouhani and former IRGC commander Mohsen Rezaei, while the reformists are primarily centered on Green Movement leader Mir Hussein Mousavi and former President Mohammad Khatami.<sup>19</sup> While these factions are not permanently institutionalized, they are a constant in Iranian political life. They are consistently in competition, but form coalitions that allow some to dominate policy making in the state for a period.<sup>20</sup> This unsteady and shifting political landscape has resulted in the politicization of many aspects of society, including the legacy of the Iran-Iraq War, which features in the rhetoric of multiple factions.

<sup>14</sup> Ibid, 47-48.

<sup>15</sup> Brumberg, *Reinventing Khomeini*, 100.

<sup>16</sup> Payam Mohseni, “Building Dictatorship: Privatization and Factional Politics of Regime Transformation in Iran,” Iran Study Group, United States Institute of Peace, August, 2013, 10-11.

<sup>17</sup> Kenneth Pollack, “Iran: Three Alternative Futures,” The Brookings Institution, June, 2006.

<sup>18</sup> Ibid.

<sup>19</sup> Ibid.

<sup>20</sup> Mohseni, “Building Dictatorship,” 14.

### **The Legacy of the Iran-Iraq War and Factional Debates on Foreign Policy**

While the nature of state governance and the implementation of economic policy serve as key dividers between the factions in Iran, they do not agree on general approaches in foreign policy either. Reformists and pragmatists are generally in favor of building stronger ties with the United States and the West, both to promote economic growth and to liberalize the sociocultural sphere of the country. Contrarily, the conservatives and hardliners are more wary of ties to the United States especially, and the West more broadly. They consider the US to be the primary threat to the revolution and the regime, and a source of sociocultural ideas that run counter to revolutionary and Islamic views.<sup>21</sup>

With these divergent views, it would make sense that the factions would have differing interpretations of the lessons of the Iran-Iraq War. However, in general, the rhetoric about the war is relatively constant across the political spectrum despite differences in views on foreign policy. Officials from multiple sides of the spectrum appear to agree on the legacy of the Iran-Iraq War in understanding current debates. It is important to note that many Iranian officials who are generally associated with the more pragmatic or reformist factions, such as former President Rafsanjani, Mohsen Rezai, and Mir Hussein Mousavi, held important government or military posts during the war.<sup>22</sup> As a result, it is important to remember that their contemporary views are very probably influenced by their role in policy making during the war era.

When invoking the memory of the war in discussions of foreign policy, elites from all of the factions accept the frame that the Iran-Iraq War demonstrated Iran's ability to stand alone and defend itself from external pressure. They often connect the forces arrayed against Iran in the 1980s to opponents faced today, especially the United States. To varying degrees, members of the various factions have expressed a sense of nostalgia, or at least favorable remembrance, for the war era due to its role in unifying country behind the regime. It is important to reemphasize that this does not mean that the factions do not use the war legacy to argue for different policy positions; rather, it means that they share the same understanding of the war's legacy, but interpret the lessons of that legacy differently.

One of the major challenges of Iranian foreign policy today, and thus a common area of debate in the international relations arena, is the standoff with the West over the Iranian nuclear research program. The Iranian program began under the Shah, but was upgraded and expanded by the Islamic Republic, potentially to produce a nuclear weapon. In 2003, and again in 2009, secret Iranian uranium enrichment sites were revealed, suggesting duplicitous motives for the nuclear research. The international community, galvanized by the United States, imposed major sanctions on Iran to force it to curtail its program. Coupled with sanctions were threats by Israel and the United States that "all options" were on the table to prevent Iran from gaining a nuclear weapon, highlighting a willingness to resort to using force against Iran. In November of 2013, negotiators from the P5+1, referring to the permanent United Nations Security Council countries of the United States, United Kingdom, France, China, and Russia, along with Germany, signed an interim agreement with Iran to diminish its nuclear program and to buy time for the signing of a final nuclear agreement. The outcome remains uncertain, and the United States has continued to consider additional sanctions pressure or military strikes to prevent an Iranian nuclear weapon. The crisis atmosphere regarding the nuclear program emphasizes the sense that it is one of the direst external threats faced by Iran since the Iran-Iraq War, which may help explain the frequency of allusions to the war in foreign policy rhetoric.<sup>23</sup>

<sup>21</sup> Pollack, "Iran, Three Alternative Futures."

<sup>22</sup> Hiro, *The Longest War*, 61, 171, and 83, respectively.

<sup>23</sup> For detailed descriptions of the Iranian nuclear crisis and the diplomatic efforts to conclude it, see Greg Bruno, "Iran's Nuclear Program," Council of Foreign Relations, March 10, 2010, <http://www.cfr.org/iran/irans-nuclear-program/p16811>, and Kenneth Katzman, Paul Kerr, and Mary Beth Nikitin, "Iran: Interim Nuclear Agreement and Talks on a Comprehensive Accord,"



The parallel understandings of the war's legacy can be seen in public statements and speeches by officials affiliated with the primary political factions. While speaking at the Iranian Defense Ministry, President Hassan Rouhani, who is generally viewed as a pragmatist, stated that Iran's foreign policy is based on détente and diplomacy with outside powers. This vision is not entirely compatible with the more confrontational views of more conservative and hardline leaders. However, he also stated "if anyone decides to invade our country, we will firmly confront them as we did so during the eight-year Sacred Defense."<sup>24</sup> This reference to the war as a precedent for defending Iran's "independence, national interests, and values," in Rouhani's words, is a common theme in political discourse.

Reformists have referenced the Iran-Iraq War favorably in their discussions of foreign policy also. When speaking during Sacred Defense Week, the annual commemoration held to mark the beginning of the conflict, former President and reformist luminary Mohammad Khatami spoke glowingly of Iran's military in helping defend regional peace, and noted that "when bullying and force" are used in international relations, "our nation has the right to be strong and powerful."<sup>25</sup> While not explicitly referencing the war, by speaking at the major annual commemoration of the event, Khatami implicitly invoked its legacy, and echoed similar themes to Rouhani regarding the importance of the war in demonstrating Iran's willingness to defend itself from foreign threats. This also connects Iran's struggles with foreign powers today to struggles during the war, legitimizing measures of resistance undertaken by the government. Khatami also seemed to express the sense of nostalgia for the wartime when speaking to a gathering of university students, highlighting the importance of young people in "the proud years of the Sacred Defense."<sup>26</sup> In both of these instances, Khatami invokes many themes in discourse about the war similar to those of the pragmatists, discussing it as an example of Iran's abilities to defend itself and as a unifying factor that brought the Iranian people together.

This view of the Iran-Iraq War, emphasizing the defense of interests and national unity, is not unique to pragmatists or reformists. It is also an important element of the view of conservatives. The newspaper *Resalat*, which is primarily a hardline to conservative newspaper in Tehran, stated in one of its editorials on the current dispute and economic pressure resulting from Iran's nuclear program that "we are engaged in a full-fledged economic war with the West, and we should try to become triumphant in this war like [the] eight year Iran-Iraq War."<sup>27</sup> This editorial, despite coming from one of the hardline newspapers of Iran, sounds many of the same themes about the war that Rouhani and Khatami highlighted. It both connects the current struggle and pressure on Iran to the isolation endured by Iran during the war, and through that connection legitimizes the current policy of resistance against foreign pressure to seek an equitable agreement over the nuclear dispute. While the discourse echoes the same themes as that of the other factions, *Resalat's* comparison is significantly more explicit and harsh in its analogizing, reflecting its more hardline interpretation of the war's legacy. Rather than simply saying that the situation is comparable or no worse currently than it was during the wartime, it unambiguously refers to the current nuclear tensions as an "economic war."

Conservatives and hardliners have expressed this sentiment in public speeches as well. At a commemoration of martyrs from the Iran-Iraq War, several Iranian hardliners called for the negotiators in the nuclear talks to continue their "resistance" against the "hegemonic

The Congressional Research Service, November 26, 2014, <http://fas.org/sgp/crs/nuke/R43333.pdf>.

<sup>24</sup> "Iran's ethical principles deter nation from producing WMDs: Rouhani", Mehr News Agency, March 2nd, 2014.

<sup>25</sup> "Iran Report, October 2, 2000," Radio Free Europe Radio Liberty, October 2nd, 2000, <http://www.rferl.org/content/article/1342896.html>.

<sup>26</sup> "Iran's former reformist president addresses university students," BBC Monitoring Middle East – Political, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, December 15th, 2007.

<sup>27</sup> "What the Principlist Newspapers Say in Their Editorials Today," Fars News Agency, May 26th, 2014.

Note: The term "principlist" is one of the terms applied to the hardline faction in Iranian politics, due to their dedication to the "principles" of the original Islamic Revolution.

powers,” and to emulate the spirit of the martyrs in the war. One member of the Majles stated “if our soldiers evicted the enemy from our territory with least possible resources, we expect the team involved in the nuclear discussions to inflict firm defeat [to the enemy] in the negotiations with the P5+1.”<sup>28</sup> Despite holding very different views on the current policy, supporting “resistance,” which in previous negotiations translated to diplomatic stonewalling, rather than a free dialogue, the hardliners echoed the same themes concerning the war as their pragmatist and reformist opponents: Iran is facing foreign pressure as it did during the war and will protect its rights and independence in the face of threats.

A specific example of the different members of the Iranian political factions all referring to the legacy of the Iran-Iraq War in the same way can be seen in discourse around Iran’s involvement in the civil war in Syria. The reformist newspaper E’temad published a commentary on the state of the war in Syria in 2012, which stated that Syria had stood by Iran during the Iran-Iraq War, and this was a key reason behind Iran’s continued commitment to supporting the Syrian regime. However, the editorial was also cautious about the potential for a wider regional war in Syria and the destabilization of the region, although it stopped short of questioning Iran’s involvement in the conflict.<sup>29</sup>

This similar understanding of the legacy of the Iran-Iraq War in the conduct of the conflict in Syria was also displayed by conservatives and hardliners. Former IRGC General Hoseyn Hamedani justified Iranian assistance by also appealing to the legacy of the war, saying “Syria helped us greatly during the imposed war.” However, he displayed none of the caution of the reformist editorial on the conflict, rather, saying that “today we are fighting in Syria for the interest of the Islamic Republic, and our defense is a holy defense.”<sup>30</sup> General Hamedani rejected the idea of caution in waging the war in Syria, and explicitly justified Iran’s commitment to defending the Syrian regime by linking it to the heritage of the original “holy defense;” this example of discourse on the war in Syria emphasizes how the different factions can discuss the same legacies and ideas stemming from the war, but interpret their lessons differently to justify different foreign policies.

In the past year, this generally “bipartisan” understanding of the Iran-Iraq War’s legacy has begun to break down. The key instance of divergence is over how the events surrounding the end of the war are considered in foreign policy debates about Iran’s nuclear program. Conservatives and hardliners have been significantly more skeptical about the prospects of the nuclear deal than their pragmatist and reformist counterparts.<sup>31</sup> However, supporters of the nuclear diplomacy have turned to the legacy of the war to help make their case for the continued value of diplomacy, which they point to as crucial in ending the conflict, while conservatives have continued to see the war as justifying further resistance and confrontation. This has opened a split over the understandings of the war in foreign policy debates.

Iranian officials in favor of the continuation of negotiations have used the diplomatic resolution of the Iran-Iraq War as a legitimizing idea for this policy. An interview with a former diplomat, published by the moderate reformist newspaper E’temad, argued that the interim agreement signed at Geneva was akin to the ceasefire that ended the Iran-Iraq War, and that it had resulted in a temporary retreat by both sides.<sup>32</sup> This sense was even more passionately argued in an editorial from the moderate reformist newspaper Mardom-Salari,

<sup>28</sup> “Iranian Hardliners urge ‘Resistance’ in Nuclear Talks,” BBC Monitoring Middle East – Political, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, May 25th, 2014.

<sup>29</sup> “Iran Commentary says disintegration of Syria favorable outcome for the west,” BBC Monitoring Middle East-Political, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, August 4th, 2012.

<sup>30</sup> “Former Guards Commander says Iran forces fighting in Syria,” BBC Monitoring Middle East – Political, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, May 5th, 2014.

<sup>31</sup> Arash Karami, “We’re Worried conference against nuclear deal stirs backlash,” Al-Monitor, May 5th, 2014, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2014/05/iran-anti-nuclear-deal-conference-backlash.html>.

<sup>32</sup> “Geneva deal ‘ceasefire’ with west – former Iranian Diplomat,” BBC Monitoring Middle East-Political, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, February 6th, 2014.



which stated that while the sacrifice and martyrdom of thousands of young Iranians had maintained the defense of the country during the war, it was finally brought to an end not through military strength but political and diplomatic bargaining.<sup>33</sup> Moderates, pragmatists, and reformists have thus used the events that ended the war, specifically the trumping of ideology by the pragmatic interests of the state, to justify support for the policy of diplomatic engagement to resolve the nuclear standoff.

These interpretations of the war contrast with more conservative interpretations of the war that emphasize the success of resistance against external pressure. In an article published by hardline newspaper *Siyasat-e Ruz*, the author argues that Iran was able to gain victory despite massive international pressure during the Iran-Iraq War. It goes on to add that the only agreement that can be acceptable for Iran is if America gives in to Iranian terms and drops its excessive demands.<sup>34</sup> Similarly, an editorial from the hardline newspaper *Keyhan* argued that the negotiations are “the continuation of war in other quarters,” and that Ayatollah Khomeini did not enter into negotiations to end the Iran-Iraq War with the idea of building a broader *détente*. It explicitly rejected the idea that the nuclear negotiations could be a route to build better relations with the West, and stated that “sacred defense” was the only way to deal with “bullies,” implying the United States.<sup>35</sup>

Together, these articles display the conservative and hardline viewpoint that the war demonstrated Iran’s successful ability to resist foreign pressure, and so there is no reason to compromise over the nuclear program due to isolation and sanctions now. This set of articles highlights a clash between differing interpretations of the war that have emerged in the aftermath of the interim nuclear agreement, between an emphasis on pragmatism and dialogue or confrontation and resistance. While the legacy of the war is usually understood in similar ways across the political spectrum, this recent split over the understanding of the war represents a counter to that trend. Considering the magnitude of the divergence between the views, it hints at the possibility for changes in discourse on foreign policy should an agreement with the West be reached.

### **The Economic Policy Debate and the “Economy of Resistance”**

While the main aspects of the legacy of the war are in general accepted by many members of the Iranian political elite in discussions about foreign policy, it is a significant differentiator in debates about Iranian economic policy. The chief debate regarding economic policy in Iran is the same left-right economic divide among global political elites regarding the extent to which the state should influence and regulate the economy.<sup>36</sup> Currently, this debate pits pragmatists and reformists, who usually favor economic liberalization both to promote Iran’s economic modernization and growth and to help increase Iran’s contact with the global community, against the conservatives and hardliners, who, while acknowledging the necessity of some international trade, prefer to keep the economy closed both to diminish the effects of international economic pressure and in order to minimize cultural influence from the West. As Western sanctions have placed extensive pressure on Iran’s economy, the issue of economic integration versus economic resistance has become increasingly intertwined with the debate about the status of the Iranian nuclear program.

A central idea in this economic debate is the concept of the “Economy of Resistance.” This economic model is primarily couched as a way for Iran to mitigate the effects of international sanctions, and it includes a focus on self-sufficiency, replacing imports with

<sup>33</sup> “Iran comment says US talks ‘taboo broken forever’; chides ‘extremists’ stance,” BBC Monitoring Middle East-Political, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, September 26th, 2014.

<sup>34</sup> “Iran Daily: Reaching Final Agreement between Iran, West, ‘not easy,’” BBC Monitoring Middle East-Political, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, May 19th, 2014.

<sup>35</sup> “Iran Editorial accuses US of ‘deceitful action’ in negotiations,” BBC Monitoring Middle East-Political, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, December 6th, 2014.

<sup>36</sup> Mohseni, “Building Dictatorship,” 11.

domestically produced alternatives, and barter agreements for necessary commodities.<sup>37</sup> The Economy of Resistance also entails the expansion of the influence of the IRGC in the economic activity of the country, as the Guards play an influential role in developing and implementing the policies of the resistance model.<sup>38</sup> The Economy of Resistance is generally favored by conservatives and hardliners who wish to maintain Iran's nuclear progress and resist international sanctions, while it is less popular among those pragmatists and reformists who support a diplomatic resolution and increased economic integration. For both sides, the experience of the economic isolation war serves as a reference to argue either for or against the resistance economy.

Iranian conservatives and hardliners emphasize several key themes when discussing both the Iran-Iraq War and its connections to the current economic situation of the country. They primarily draw parallels between the deprivation, hardship, and isolation of the war period with the current era of international sanctions pressure. They often argue that the nation needs to draw upon the experience of the war years to help shore up resistance against economic deprivation, and that an "Economy of Resistance," focused on self-reliance, state influence, and independence from the international system, drawing on the legacy of the country during the war years, is the proper course for the economic policy of the country.

These themes are discernable in the comments and speeches made by many prominent conservatives. Ayatollah Ahmad Jannati, the conservative leader of the Guardian Council, exemplified this view at a Friday Prayer Sermon in Tehran in 2012.<sup>39</sup> He stated that the nation "needs a resistance economy" to confront economic problems, and that cooperation between the people, institutions, and organizations in the same manner as during the Iran-Iraq War will enable Iran to prevail.<sup>40</sup> Jannati's perspective on the war's legacy centers on the idea that the Iranian people can prevail in the current economic struggles as they prevailed in the 1980s, and so, in keeping with the policies that enabled Iran to maintain itself through the war, a resistance economy is needed. Conservative newspapers also echo the belief that the current sanctions and the pressure of the Iran-Iraq War are comparable situations, and so the government's pursuit of an Economy of Resistance is justified based on the successes during the war period. An editorial in the conservative-aligned newspaper *Resalat* argued that the wartime experience provides an exact template for the current Economy of Resistance. The editorial argues that "though our country was under the pressure of war and issues related to it, the people's unity and economic jihad made the threats and pressures ineffective." After describing the international pressures that Iran faced during the Iran-Iraq War, the article concludes with the idea that the nation should learn from the hardships of the era to mitigate the pressures the country currently faces.<sup>41</sup> A similar theme was sounded in an editorial in the IRGC-aligned newspaper *Javan*. The commentator argues that sanctions represent an opportunity for the nation to gain self-reliance in certain areas of industry, and draws the comparison to the country's development of its arms industry due to the isolation of the Iran-Iraq War.<sup>42</sup> This perspective further elucidates the themes of supporters of the Economy of Resistance, namely that Iran must emphasize self-sufficiency rather than integration of its

<sup>37</sup> Najmeh Bozorgmehr, "Iran Develops Economy of Resistance," *Financial Times*, September 10, 2012, <http://www.ft.com/intl/cms/s/0/27ec70a6-f911-11e1-8d92-00144feabdc0.html#axzz3LeAk3tsA>.

<sup>38</sup> "Iran's Basij Militia Builds 'Resistance Economy,'" *Al-Monitor*, March 19th, 2013, <http://www.al-monitor.com/pulse/originals/2013/03/iran-basij-militia-combat-sanctions-resistance-economy.html>.

<sup>39</sup> Hashem Kalantari, "Iran Cleric says UK Embassy Staff Face Trial," *Reuters*, July 3rd, 2009, <http://www.reuters.com/article/2009/07/03/us-iran-idUSL366850620090703>.

<sup>40</sup> "Resistance Economy' is only way to deal with problems: Jannati," *Mehr News Agency*, August 4th, 2012.

<sup>41</sup> "Commentary by Ma'sumeh Ne'mati," *Resalat*, Iranian Press Highlights 9 Aug 12, BBC Monitoring Middle East-Political, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, July 18th, 2012.

<sup>42</sup> "Commentary by Sina Takavar," *Javan*, Iranian Press Highlights 18 Jul 12, BBC Monitoring Middle East-Political, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, July 18th, 2012.

economy if it is to resist international pressure and that the war is the key example of the success of this strategy.

The Pragmatists and Reformists hold extremely different views about the economic lessons the Iran-Iraq War provides. While not rejecting the interpretation that Iranian resistance during the war was crucial, and that this precedent can help Iran face the current crisis, they emphasize that the private sector should be the driving force of the economy, rather than the state. They also argue that the war demonstrates a need for greater pragmatism in policy-making in general, and a need to pursue diplomatic and trade connections with other nations. As a result of these views, the pragmatists and reformists will often look to the reconstruction era, right after the end of the Iran-Iraq War, as the best analogy for an effective economic policy. They point to this period as more indicative of the economic structure the country should possess due to the focus of that era on revitalizing private industry and the private sector, rather than the more statist economic structure during the war. All of these ideas give a vision of Iranian economic policy that differs significantly from the view of the conservatives.

The view is expressed by many respected pragmatist leaders in speeches and articles. It is important to point out that the pragmatists and their allies are not necessarily opposed to the “Economy of Resistance” as a concept, or in drawing lessons from the wartime era. However, their views emphasize a more free-market system and stronger links with the international economy, which contrasts with the more statist and self-sufficiency interpretation of many hardliners. The former IRGC commander Mohsen Rezai, who is thought to be close to former President Rafsanjani and his pragmatic vision, highlighted his views in an interview with the Iranian reformist newspaper Sharq. In the interview, Rezai argued that the IRGC and the state interfering in the economy should only occur under very specific circumstances, primarily when the private sector is unable to provide economic growth and jobs. He agreed that during the wartime era the private sector had ground to a halt due to the war, the revolution, and the flight of many middle and upper class Iranians. He affirms this necessitated government intervention but points out that this was no longer the case and that economic mismanagement by the government contributed to the nation’s economic difficulties along with sanctions.<sup>43</sup> Rezai’s interpretation of the war and its lessons for the Economy of Resistance is completely counter to the interpretation given by the more conservative and hardline factions. Rather than serving as a precedent to return to, Rezai argued that the war was a unique circumstance that required major state intervention in the economy and that the current crisis is not equal in magnitude so requiring a continuation of such state intervention.

References to the reconstruction era after the war can be found prominently in other aspects of pragmatist discourse. A group of Iranian business leaders, speaking during their endorsement of Rafsanjani for President during the last Presidential election cycle emphasized the importance of the private sector and its role in growing the Iranian economy, and referred to the efforts undertaken under Rafsanjani’s first administration during the reconstruction era after the war to promote private enterprise.<sup>44</sup> The focus of the statement on the economic successes of the years *after* the war tacitly expresses the view that, economically, the war years are not a model to return to and were made necessary by dire circumstance, but now are an experience to be avoided in crafting economic policy.

The reformists also prefer to look beyond the war for models of economic governance, and mirror the pragmatists in seeing the conflict as a unique and undesirable period economically. In another instance, an adviser to the reformist Khatami administration

<sup>43</sup> “Presidential Hopeful Rezai plans to remove guard corps from economy-Iran daily,” BBC Monitoring Middle East-Political, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, June 5th, 2013.

<sup>44</sup> “Iranian Business leaders back Rafsanjani for Presidency,” Fars News Agency, BBC Monitoring Middle East-Political, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, April 22nd, 2013.

expressed the view that the country needed to draw lessons from both the war period and the reconstruction period for their economic policy. In his comments, however, he emphasized the ideas of “stepping up foreign investment and ensuring that the private sector plays a greater role in the economy.”<sup>45</sup> Both of these policies are more associated with the reformist and pragmatist factions, and reflect an interpretation of the war as a unique period in the nation’s economic policy. For the reformists, this comment highlights the preference for looking to the reconstruction era, rather than the war years, as a precedent for Iranian economic policy.

Reformist discourse on occasion can take an even more critical view of the war in conceptualizing economic policy. The reformist newspaper E’temad published an editorial focused on Iran’s reliance on the oil industry that came close to expressing direct criticism of economic policy of the war years. The article argued that the only way to reduce dependence on foreign purchases of oil exports was to develop private enterprise in Iran, and commented that during the Iran-Iraq War “the oil industry was not able to be put on its true path.”<sup>46</sup> This comment implicitly condemns the war era for its failure to emphasize the private sector, which the writer understands to be a crucial factor in achieving economic independence. This interpretation runs counter to that of the conservatives and highlights the different understandings of the war in the field of economic policy.

### Conclusions

The Iran-Iraq War, despite concluding over twenty-five years ago, remains a salient factor in Iranian political life. It has long been understood to be important in the shaping of Iran’s regional security and foreign policy outlooks, and continues to influence the way in which Iran reacts to crises, ranging from problems in Iraq and Syria, to its nuclear program. However, the influence and presence of the war in contemporary political debates has been significantly underexplored. By analyzing comments and articles from leading members of the reformist, pragmatist, conservative, and hardline factions in Iranian politics, this paper has demonstrated both the continued salience of the Iran-Iraq War in domestic political rhetoric, and outlined how the war influences specific debates in Iranian policymaking. Specifically, the paper has shown that in debates about Iranian foreign policy, the war is a unifying concept, and is generally conceptualized in the same way by elites across the political spectrum. Recently, however, a split has developed in the aftermath of the interim nuclear agreement with the P5+1 over how to interpret the war’s legacy in relation to these events, potentially heralding a new divergence in foreign policy debates.<sup>47</sup> In economic policy, the war’s legacy is hotly contested between the factions, ranging from being viewed as a model to which the country should return, to a unique and trying experience to be avoided in the future. This debate about the understanding of the economic legacy of the war has merged with broader disputes about the role of the state in Iran’s economy. In both of these policy discussions, the Iran-Iraq War features as a central aspect of political rhetoric, and references to its legacy help Iranian elites gain legitimacy for the policies they support.

Understanding the continued domestic importance of the Iran-Iraq War is crucial for analysts seeking to understand Iranian factional politics. As a defining event in the formation of the state, the Iran-Iraq War propelled many of Iran’s current leaders to their current roles, helped lay the ground for many of the divisions that have characterized Iran’s political scene and as has been shown, remains a major aspect of political rhetoric. Further studies of the legacy of the Iran-Iraq War in Iran’s domestic political competition

<sup>45</sup> Mouna Naim, “Economic Crisis undermines Khatami,” *Le Monde*, July 26th, 1998.

<sup>46</sup> “Commentary by Reza Padidar, Iranian Press Highlights 10 April 13, BBC Monitoring Middle East-Political, Supplied by BBC Worldwide Monitoring, April 10th, 2013.

<sup>47</sup> “Commentary by Ma’sumeh Ne’mati,” *Resalat*, Iranian Press Highlights 9 Aug 12, BBC Monitoring Middle East, July 18th, 2012.

can further illuminate this rhetorical feature and the dynamics of Iran's domestic political sphere, and can help analysts understand the methods used by Iranian elites to rally support for various policies. An important question still to be addressed is the extent to which references to the Iran-Iraq War are actually effective in galvanizing public support for policies pursued by the regime. While the salience of war rhetoric would suggest that there are political benefits to using it in reference to various policies, this paper has not demonstrated a concrete link between public support for government policies and the use of the legacy of the Iran-Iraq War in legitimizing and building support, soleaving an avenue for further investigation of the influence and importance of the war in Iranian political life.

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