Shi'a principles and Iran's strategic culture towards ballistic missile deployment

MOHAMMAD ESLAMI AND ALENA VYSOTSKAYA
GUEDES VIEIRA*

On 8 January 2020, in response to the assassination of General Qasem Soleimani, Iran deployed 13 long-range ballistic missiles in an attack on two US military bases in Iraq, Al Taji and Ain Al-Asad, the latter being the biggest US military base in the Middle East.[1] This attack was exceptional for Iran, which had used its ballistic missile programme (BMP) only twice since the 1980–88 Iran–Iraq War: in 2017 and 2018, in both instances in retaliation against attacks by Islamic State in Iraq and Syria (ISIS), in each case deploying six mid-range missiles.[2] The January 2020 strike was recognized as exceptional within Iran as well as outside, being referred to as the 'first official attack on the US military bases after World War II'.[3]

Among the perspectives that help explain this change in Iran's approach to military action is that of strategic culture, which can be defined as 'the set of beliefs, assumptions, attitudes, norms, world-views and patterns of habitual behaviour held by strategic decision makers regarding the political objectives of war, and the best way to achieve [them]'.[4] Strategic culture, then, defines strategic thinking on the nature of war and military ethics by drawing on a number of 'sources' or 'components'.[5] Iran's historical experiences and geopolitical position represent the sources of its strategic culture, which is also shaped by Shi'a Islam, with Shi'a jurisprudence stipulating religious standards on the use of force and

1 Hasan Abbasi, 'The first attack on the US since the Second World War', *Aparat*, 26 July 2019, https://www.aparat.com/v/DQ6py (in Persian). (Unless otherwise noted at point of citation, all URLs cited in this article were accessible on 21 Nov. 2021.)
2 Mohammad Eslami, 'Iran's ballistic missile program and its foreign and security policy towards the United States under the Trump administration', *Revista española de ciencia política* 55: 1, 2021, pp. 37–62.
3 Abbasi, 'The first attack on the US since the Second World War'.
4 Yitzhak Klein, 'A theory of strategic culture', *Comparative strategy* 10: 1, 1991, pp. 3–23.
5 Darryl Howlett and John Glenn, 'Epilogue: Nordic strategic culture', *Cooperation and Conflict* 40: 1, 2005, pp. 121–40; Kamran Taremi, 'Iranian strategic culture: the impact of Ayatollah Khomeini's interpretation of Shiite Islam', *Contemporary Security Policy* 35: 1, 2014, pp. 3–25.

conduct of war.[6] This implies a central role for the Supreme Leader (*vali e faghih*) in defining Iran's strategic culture.[7]

This article explores Iran's retaliatory deployment of missiles from the Iran–Iraq War up to the present (1980–2021) to demonstrate how the change in its military behaviour is reflected on the level of Shi'a principles. The latter are viewed as providing a discursive habitat in which strategic culture is shaped, defining the purpose, range and possibilities for change in Iran's military actions. By telling us who Iranians are (Shi'a Muslims) and what they can do in given strategic situations, Shi'a provisions assign meaning to Iran's retaliatory missile deployment. Shi'a Islam is thus an integral part of the process by which Iran's strategic choices are framed and rationalized, whether in changing them or in maintaining the existing repertoire of choices regarding the use of force.

There is an established field of research investigating the place of Shi'a principles (sectarianism) in Iran's foreign and defence policy,[8] including the role of Iran's soft power and associated 'religious overlay'.[9] Moreover, scholars have extensively researched the role of *maslahat* (expediency) in Iran's foreign policy, defence policy, nuclear strategy and domestic crises.[10] Furthermore, there are several studies adopting a strategic culture perspective in their analysis of Iran's

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[6] Nazih Ayubi, *Political Islam: religion and politics in the Arab world* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2003); Jeffrey Haynes, ed., *Routledge handbook of religion and politics* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2008); Jeffrey Haynes, 'Religion and foreign policy making in the USA, India and Iran: towards a research agenda', *Third World Quarterly* 29: 1, 2008, pp. 143–65; Said Amir Arjomand, *After Khomeini: Iran under his successors* (Oxford: Oxford University Press, 2009); Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, 'What is radicalism? Power and resistance in Iran', *Middle East Critique* 21: 3, 2012, pp. 271–90; Jonathan Fox, *An introduction to religion and politics: theory and practice* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2018); Afshon Ostovar, 'The grand strategy of militant clients: Iran's way of war', *Security Studies* 28: 1, 2019, pp. 159–88.

[7] Taremi, 'Iranian strategic culture'.

[8] Shahram Akbarzadeh, 'Iran's uncertain standing in the Middle East', *Washington Quarterly* 40: 3, 2017, pp. 109–27; Hassan Ahmadian and Payam Mohseni, 'From detente to containment: the emergence of Iran's new Saudi strategy', *International Affairs* 97: 3, 2021, pp. 779–99; Arjomand, *After Khomeini*; Mohsen Ghadir and Adel Sarikhani, 'Governmental rules and expediency in Shi'a jurisprudence', *A Quarterly for Shiite Studies* 9: 3, 2018, pp. 73–90 (in Persian); David Thaler, Alireza Nader, Shahram Chubin, Jerrold D. Green, Charlotte Lynch and Frederic Wehrey, *Mullahs, guards, and bonyads: an exploration of Iranian leadership dynamics* (Santa Monica, CA: RAND, 2010); Ostovar, 'The grand strategy of militant clients'.

[9] Edward Wastnidge, 'Iran's own "war on terror": Iranian foreign policy towards Syria and Iraq during the Rouhani era', in Luciano Zaccara, ed., *Foreign policy of Iran under President Hassan Rouhani's first term (2013–2017)* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2020), pp. 107–29; Homeira Moshirzadeh, 'Discursive foundations of Iran's nuclear policy', *Security Dialogue* 38: 4, 2007, pp. 521–43; Homeira Moshirzadeh, 'Identity and security in the Middle East', *Iranian Review of Foreign Affairs* 4: 2, 2013, pp. 5–32; Gawdat Bagat and Anoushiravan Ehteshami, *Defending Iran: from Revolutionary Guards to ballistic missiles* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2021); Afshon Ostovar, *Vanguard of the imam: religion, politics, and Iran's Revolutionary Guards* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2016).

[10] See, respectively, Thaler et al., *Mullahs, guards, and bonyads*; Mahan Abedin, 'The domestic determinants of Iranian foreign policy: challenges to consensus', *Strategic Analysis* 35: 4, 2011, pp. 613–28; Masoud Kazemzadeh, *Iran's foreign policy: elite factionalism, ideology, the nuclear weapons program, and the United States* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2020); Mohammad Javad Zarif and Seyed Mahdi Sajjadieh, 'Formulation of expediency discourse in the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran', *Political Science* 102: 20, 2014, pp. 103–48 (in Persian); Michael Eisenstadt and Mahdi Khalaji, *Iran's flexible fatwa: how 'expediency' shapes nuclear decisionmaking* (Washington DC: Washington Institute for Near East Policy, 2021), pp. 1–6, https://www.washingtoninstitute. org/policy-analysis/irans-flexible-fatwa-how-expediency-shapes-nuclear-decisionmaking; Maziar Ghiabi, 'The council of expediency: crisis and statecraft in Iran and beyond', *Middle Eastern Studies* 55: 5, 2019, pp. 837–53.

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foreign and defence policy,[11] some addressing the importance of Shi'a Islam.[12] Nevertheless, systematic analysis of Iran's military actions from a strategic culture perspective that focuses specifically on the principles of Shi'a Islam remains rare.[13] Moreover, while existing contributions have paid special attention to *maslahat*, other important principles of Shi'a Islam have not been covered. A particularly pertinent omission is the case of *qisas* (retaliation), which is crucial to understanding Iran's retaliatory ballistic missile deployment; others that merit attention are *zarare aghall* (minimum loss), *ezterar* (emergency) and *nafye sabil* (banning the pathway). By paying closer attention to these principles, which we see as shaping the discursive habitat in which Iran's strategic culture has emerged, this article aims to offer a more nuanced understanding of the sources of Iran's strategic culture.

The article is structured as follows. We begin by discussing *qisas* and *maslahat* (expediency) as two religious foundations of the strategic deliberation on deployment of the BMP in Iran,[14] and introduce three inferential Shi'a principles.[15] We then move on to look at the limitations on missile deployment imposed by Shi'a Islam that curbed Iran's military action during the war with Iraq,[16] demonstrating that Iran's restraint emerged in a discursive habitat in which retaliation was performed according to Shi'a Islam as *qisas* and became closely associated with the principle of *zarare aghall* (minimum loss).[17] We then focus on Iran's retaliatory missile attacks on ISIS of 2017 and 2018, which marked a revival

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[11] Mohammad Eslami and Alena Vieira, 'Iran's strategic culture: the "revolutionary" and "moderation" narratives on the ballistic missile programme', *Third World Quarterly* 42: 2, 2020, pp. 312–28; Taremi, 'Iranian strategic culture'; Michael Eisenstadt, 'The strategic culture of the Islamic Republic of Iran: religion, expediency, and soft power in an era of disruptive change', *Quantico/Va Middle East Studies at the Marine Corps University*, 2015, pp. 1–57.

[12] Kamran Taremi, 'Beyond the axis of evil: ballistic missiles in Iran's military thinking', *Security Dialogue* 36: 1, 2005, pp. 93–108.

[13] Exceptions include the following: Taremi, 'Beyond the axis of evil'; Ostovar, 'The grand strategy of militant clients'; Ariane Tabatabai and Anine Samuel, 'What the Iran–Iraq War tells us about the future of the Iran nuclear deal', *International Security* 42: 1, 2017, pp. 152–85.

[14] While *qisas* and *moghabele be mesl* have a similar meaning, we use *qisas* as the more established equivalent for retaliation in a Shi'a context: see Nadia Bagheri, Mojtaba Janipour and Mahin Sobhani, 'Retaliatory defense from the perspective of the procedure of international criminal courts', *Journal of Criminal Law Research* 7: 24, 2018, pp. 163–96 (in Persian). See also Mohammad Hosein Eskandary, 'The principle of Moghabeleh be mesl in international law from an Islamic perspective', 2010, https://library.tebyan.net/fa/Viewer/Text/71473/34 (in Persian).

[15] Shi'a jurisprudence distinguishes between real rules (*ahkam e vagheie*), fixed and permanent, such as the prohibition of alcohol and governmental rules (*ahkam e hokumati*) which are issued (inferred) by the religious leader in an emergency situation (*ezterar*), especially in situations not covered by a fixed rule (real rule). Thus, by nature, governmental decrees cannot be fixed and prefabricated. *Vali e faghih* must identify public expediency (*maslahat*) considering time, place and other conditions, and infer and induce the rulings of the Islamic state based on them. Throughout history, for inferring Shi'a laws and religious commends, jurists (*foqaha*) relied on the Quran, tradition (*hadith*) and *aql* (intellect of religious leader) as the main inferential tools to 'decide about the destiny of Islamic society' in strategic dilemmas, including the issuing of fatwas to temporarily suspend some of Islam's provisions. Thus, decision-making in Shi'a jurisprudence is based on the leader's understanding (diagnosis) of conditions in the Islamic state which leads to a specific strategic action (prescription).

[16] Eslami and Vieira, 'Iran's strategic culture'.

[17] Abolghasem Alidust and Ahmad Ehsanifar, 'Jurisprudential prohibition of the use of nuclear weapons in emergency times', *Islamic Law* 16: 61, 2018, pp. 119–47 (in Persian); Hassan Abdi and Mohammad Javad Hashemi, 'Analysing the concept of weapons of mass destruction and their adaptation to the Islamic point of view, with an emphasis on the views of the Supreme Leader Imam Khomeini', *Journal of Politics* 48: 3, 2018, pp. 709–32 (in Persian).

of deploying the BMP, and where *qisas* was performed as a consequence of its close association with the principle of *ezterar* (emergency).[18] Finally, we demonstrate how the assassination of Soleimani in early 2020 led to an articulation of Iran's strategic options that associated *qisas* as the basis for the deployment of the BMP in the 2020 attacks on Ain Al-Asad and Al Taji in Iraq with *nafye sabil* as a predominant principle.[19]

The article draws on analysis of religious texts (Qur'an and *hadith*), in Arabic, as well as on a selection of texts in Persian. These include fatwas related to the BMP issued by both of Iran's Supreme Leaders, Ayatollah Khomeini (from 1987) and Ayatollah Khamenei (from 2010); Ayatollah Khamenei's statements issued immediately after missile deployment and his declarations during Holy Defence week (the annual anniversary of the Iran–Iraq War, in September); and finally, Ayatollah Khamenei's statements and speeches on Quds International Day, celebrated on the last Friday of Ramadan. This initial selection of 15 declarations and speeches is complemented by an analysis of 30 statements, mostly given immediately following missile deployments by Iran's high officials: the president of Iran, representatives of the Ministry for Foreign Affairs and Ministry of Defence, generals of the Revolutionary Guards and army (*artesh*), imams (at Friday prayers), members of parliament and individual political strategists and experts, across the period 2017–20.[20] Finally, the article also draws on two interviews with Iranian religious leaders (*marjae taghlid*) conducted by the lead author in April 2021.

Unveiling Shi'a principles as a source of Iran's strategic culture

In Iran, the only Shi'a regime in the world, Shi'a jurisprudence provides a foundation for the country's contemporary strategic culture. It is centred on the principle of *maslahat*, which offers an inferential tool for the Supreme Leader to 'decide about the destiny of Islamic society' in strategic dilemmas,[21] including issuing fatwas temporarily suspending some of Islam's provisions.[22] Decision-making in Shi'a jurisprudence is thus based on the Supreme Leader's understanding (diagnosis) of conditions in the Islamic state, which then leads to a specific strategic action (prescription). Nevertheless, as noted above, there are a number of Shi'a principles that are crucial to understanding Iran's strategic action.

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[18] Eisenstadt, 'The strategic culture of the Islamic Republic of Iran'.
[19] Arash Bidar, 'Sanctions and threats from the view of jurisprudence rules and international law', *International Journal of Resistive Economics* 1: 1, 2013, pp. 8–20; Bahador Zare'e, Ali Zaynivand and Kimia Muhammadi, 'The rule of "nafye sabil" in Islamic thought and foreign policy of Islamic Republic of Iran', *Journal of Islamic Revolution Studies* 11: 36, 2014, pp. 167–82 (in Persian); Habib Babaei, 'Islam and Christianity: their respective roles in civilizational clashes', *Comparative Civilizations Review* 79: 1, 2018, pp. 137–40. We exclude from our analysis the shooting down of the RQ4 US military drone in June 2019 and the missile deployment destroying Ukraine International Airlines flight 752 in early 2020, as these constitute self-defence rather than retaliation.
[20] These declarations were retrieved from official websites or national and international newspapers.
[21] Decision-making in Shi'a jurisprudence is based on the leader's understanding (diagnosis) of conditions in the Islamic state, which then leads to a specific strategic action (prescription). The opposite of *maslahat* is *mafsadeh* (inexpediency), and it is the responsibility of the Supreme Leader to achieve expediency and avoid inexpediency. See Seif-Allah Sarrafi, 'An overview of the place of maslahat in jurisprudence', *Qebessat* 2: 8, 2004, pp. 1–20 (in Persian).
[22] Ghiabi, 'The council of expediency'.

Qisas *(retaliation), a response to enemy attacks*

Iran has used its ballistic missiles exclusively as a means of retaliation. There is solid support for this strategic option in Shi'a Islam, which prohibits initiating war and stipulates retaliation against enemy attacks and repelling enemy aggression as the only instances where employing armed force is justified.[23]

Iran's retaliatory use of the ballistic missile brings the principle of *qisas* to the fore. The term refers to a retaliatory act in Islam, originally related to murder or intentional physical injury.[24] Recognized as a legitimate act, *qisas* is present in many Qur'an verses, *hadiths* and fatwas, in parallel with the recognition of the corresponding actions in international ethics and law. In Shi'a Islam, *qisas* can be 'discussed at both micro and macro levels, namely, as a punishment of someone who intentionally kills another person, resulting in *e'dam* (execution), or as legitimized defence and the right to respond to enemies' attacks, respectively'.[25]

Whether the case occurs on a micro or macro level, *qisas* must meet the standards of Shi'a jurisprudence in order to avoid further sinful acts (and especially the spread of violence).[26] This happens on the basis of the overarching principle of *maslahat*, and another set of inferential religious principles, noted above (*zarare aghall*, *ezterar* and *nafye sabil*). This context explains Iran's retaliation against some attacks and actions and not others: the immediate retaliation against the assassination of General Qasem Soleimani in January 2020 with an attack using 13 ballistic missiles on US military bases in Iraq, and no immediate acts of retaliation following the assassination of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh, an Iranian nuclear scientist, in November 2020.[27] The different strategic decisions in the two cases can arguably be explained by a number of factors, including the different role of each figure in Iran's foreign policy; but from the perspective of Shi'a jurisprudence, both decisions obey the idea that '*qisas*, even though legitimate, cannot compromise the public expediency [*maslahat*]. This means that the Supreme Leader decides about the timing, place, instruments and the eventual format of the *qisas*.'[28]

Retaliation is central to Iran's strategic culture, which is characterized by strategic isolation and 'loneliness',[29] and is intertwined with the BMP in a special way. This connection between retaliation and the BMP was forged in Iran's historical experience of the War of the Cities, and as a reflection of this fact Iran's most advanced ballistic missile types (developed after 2005) have carried the names of Iranian cities attacked by Iraq in the 1980s: 'Hoveizeh', 'Khorramshahr', 'Dezful'

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[23] Author interview with the first anonymous *Marja'e Taghlid* (religious leader), April 2020, Qom, Iran.

[24] Ebrahim Ghodsi, 'Murder in the criminal law of Iran and Islam', *Police Journal* 68: 2, 1995, pp. 160–69.

[25] Author interview with the second anonymous *Marja'e Taghlid*, April 2020, Qom, Iran.

[26] Bagheri et al., 'Retaliatory defense'.

[27] Some have considered the death of Israeli nuclear and missile scientist Aby Har Even in June 2021, following an attack by anonymous troops on his hotel, as an act of *qisas* in retaliation for the killing of Mohsen Fakhrizadeh. See 'Ex-head of Israel space program dies of Acre hotel attack injuries, weeks later', *Times of Israel*, 6 June 2021, https://www.timesofisrael.com/ex-head-of-israel-space-program-dies/.

[28] First author interview with anonymous *Marja'e Taghlid*, April 2020, Qom, Iran.

[29] Jennifer Knepper, 'Nuclear weapons and Iranian strategic culture', *Comparative Strategy* 27: 5, 2008, pp. 451–68; Taremi, 'Iranian strategic culture'.

and 'Dehlavieh'.[30] Subsequent missile deployment reinforced the centrality of retaliation in Iran's strategic culture (and its connection with the BMP). First, the Iranian mid-range ballistic missiles employed in the attacks on ISIS bases in 2017 and 2018 were missiles of the 'Zolfaghar' type,[31] a designation referring to the sword of Imam Ali, a historical figure remembered as the first person to fight Islamic fundamentalism back in the seventh century during the Nahravan war.[32] More recently, in August 2020, the title of 'Haj Qasem' was attributed to a newly released ballistic missile type, evoking Iran's retaliation against the assassination of General Qasem Soleimani in January 2020.

Qisas *in the light of other inferential principles:* zarare aghall, ezterar, nafye sabil

Along with *maslahat*, a cornerstone Shi'a principle, there are a number of inferential Shi'a principles that are important for understanding Iran's strategic choices and allow Iran's Supreme Leader to infer that his religious order (fatwa) about *qisas* (with or without reliance on the BMP) reaches the level of public expediency (*maslahat*). These are *zarare aghall, ezterar* and *nafye sabil*.[33]

First, *zarare aghall* (minimum loss) stands out as an important principle offering guidance to the Supreme Leader in his decision about individual strategic decisions involving the BMP.[34] Existing Shi'a resources (and especially early Islam's *hadith*, in which the Prophet Muhammad prohibits poisoning the water sources of Islam's enemies) allow three rules to be distinguished, dating back to the beginning of Islam and referring to restrictions on the use of weapons;[35] taken together, they constitute *zarare aghall*. First, it is not permissible to kill children, women, the elderly or the insane; second, killing non-combatants and innocent civilians is prohibited; and third, using poison to kill civilians, trees and animals, or to damage the environment, is also prohibited.[36] As a result, drawing on the interpretation of individual Shi'a provisions, *zarare aghall* stigmatizes certain strategic options as

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[30] Mohammad Bagheri, 'Khorramshahr (missile) is perfect', *Mashregh News*, 19 Feb. 2019, https://www.mashreghnews.ir/news/938414/ (in Persian).

[31] 'IRGC's missile retaliation against ISIS in Syria', *Didestan*, 1 Oct. 2018, https://www.didestan.com/video/yVPrZYA7.

[32] Akbar Ghafooru and Razieh Jafari, 'The maximum attraction and minimum repulsion in government of Imam Ali (PBUH)', *International Journal of Humanities and Cultural Studies* 1: 1, 2016, pp. 263–72 (in Persian).

[33] First and second author interviews with anonymous *Marja'e Taghlid*, April 2020, Qom, Iran.

[34] The 'minimum loss' principle has already been found to inform Iran's strategic action with regard to Iran's nuclear programme. See Mahtab Alam Rizvi, 'Velayat-e-Faqih (Supreme Leader) and Iranian foreign policy: an historical analysis', *Strategic Analysis* 36: 1, 2012, pp. 112–27; Alidust and Ehsanifar, 'Jurisprudential prohibition of the use of nuclear weapons'.

[35] Rizvi, 'Velayat-e-Faqih (Supreme Leader) and Iranian foreign policy'. The *hadith* is the collected oral tradition of the Prophet Muhammad. However, Shi'a Muslims also believe in the oral and written traditions of their twelve imams who were the representatives of the Prophet. Ali bin Abu-Taleb, the cousin of the Prophet and the first imam of Shi'as, is also accepted as the fourth *khalifa* after the Prophet by Sunni Muslims as well.

[36] Alidust and Ehsanifar, 'Jurisprudential prohibition of the use of nuclear weapons'; Fatemeh Aghajanpour, 'The use of weapons of mass destruction from the perspective of Islam', *International Studies Quarterly* 12: 4, 2016, pp. 77–111 (in Persian); Rouh-allah Akrami, Sattar Mohammadi Zarrini and Mahdi Abdi, 'Prohibition of the use of weapons of mass destruction from the perspective of Islamic jurisprudence', *Studies of Imami Jurisprudence* 4: 3, 2015, pp. 79–93 (in Persian).

haram (unlawful), some of them related to the employment of ballistic missiles (such as the use of missiles that cannot be precisely targeted).

Another important principle is *ezterar* (emergency). The imperatives of saving human life, preserving Islam and ensuring the survival of Islamic rule justify strategic actions that may imply material loss, damage to the environment and the loss of human lives.[37] These actions, considered *haram*, are permitted in an emergency situation. In such situations, the aforementioned actions are *halal* (lawful),[38] as the Qur'anic Sura Al-Maidah, verse 3, states: 'Then, whoever is constrained by dire necessity (and driven to what is forbidden), without purposely inclining to sin.' For instance, a substantial number of losses among troops of the Islamic Revolution Guard Corps (IRGC) in the fight against ISIS in Syria and Iraq has been justified as 'preserving Islam and [the] survival of Islamic [rule]'.[39]

Finally, *nafye sabil* (banning the pathway) can be identified as another relevant principle in the strategic deliberation over implementation of the BMP.[40] This principle emphasizes preventing the domination of non-Muslims over Muslims, and draws on an interpretation of verse 141 from the Sura Al-Nissa of the Qur'an: 'Allah will judge between you [all] on the Day of Resurrection. And never will Allah grant to the disbelievers a way [to triumph] over the believers.'[41] While *nafye sabil* establishes the imperative to 'ban all material and non-material ways' for non-Muslims to dominate Muslims (including trade and international cooperation), the Supreme Leader can compromise *nafye sabil* for a more expedient purpose:[42] for example, Iran's signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2014, which was referred to by Ayatollah Khamenei as 'heroic flexibility'.[43] Following the 1979 Islamic Revolution, the narrative of 'fighting global arrogance', of opposition to oppressive superpowers viewed as illegitimate players in the international system they dominate, has figured as a modern interpretation of *nafye sabil*, assuming the importance of a guiding principle for Iran's foreign and defence policy,[44] and indeed for Iran's identity, characterized as it has been as 'Islamic utopian-romanticism'.[45]

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[37] Alidust and Ehsanifar, 'Jurisprudential prohibition of the use of nuclear weapons'.

[38] Amir Vatani, 'Examination of emergency and necessity in jurisprudence', *Articles and Investigations* 71 : 1, 2002, pp. 187–207, https://journals.ut.ac.ir/article_12720.html.

[39] Zarif and Sajjadieh, 'Formulation of expediency discourse'.

[40] Bidar, 'Sanctions and threats from the view of jurisprudence rules'.

[41] Zare'e et al., 'The rule of "nafye sabil" in Islamic thought'.

[42] First author interview with anonymous *Marja'e Taghlid*, April 2020, Qom, Iran.

[43] Ezzatollah Motamed Kutiani and Ahmad Rezaei, 'The principles of dignity and tolerance and their relationship with heroic flexibility in political negotiations from the viewpoint of Islam', *Islamic Politics Research* 5 : 12, 2018, pp. 109–29.

[44] Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, 'Islamic utopian romanticism and the foreign policy culture of Iran', *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 14 : 3, 2005, pp. 265–92; Majid Rezaei and Mohammad Ali Hashemi, 'Re-reading the rule of nafye sabil with an approach to the thoughts of Imam Khomeini', *Matin Research Journal* 14 : 57, 2013, pp. 61–86 (in Persian); Mohammad Javad Jafari Ghorbi, 'Strategies to counter the cultural domination of the arrogant system in the political thought of Imam Khomeini', *Journal of the Islamic Revolution (Scientific Research)* 3 : 9, 2014, pp. 69–90 (in Persian); Gholamreza Khajesarvi, *Explaining Imam Khomeini's decision-making pattern in the face of the United States based on political jurisprudence*, Islamic Revolution Documentation Center, Tehran, 3 June 2019, https://irdc.ir/fa/news/4966/ (in Persian).

[45] Adib-Moghaddam, 'Islamic utopian romanticism', p. 265. See also Khajesarvi, *Explaining Imam Khomeini's decision-making pattern*.

Zarare aghall, ezterar *and* nafye sabil*: a discursive habitat for retaliatory BMP employment in Iran*

This article argues that Shi'a principles shape a discursive habitat in which Iran's strategic decisions are defined. We analyse three instances of retaliatory missile employment by Iran: first, on Iraq, during the Iran–Iraq War (1984–8); second, on ISIS bases in Deir ez zur and Hejjin in Syria and in the north of Iraq (2017 and 2018); and third, on US military bases in Iraq following the assassination of General Soleimani (2020).

Iran–Iraq War (1980–88)   The Iran–Iraq War—and especially the War of the Cities—has shaped not only Iran's contemporary strategic thinking, but also its identity, up to the present.[46] The beginning of the War of the Cities was unprecedented in terms of Iraq's violent missile attacks on more than 20 Iranian towns and cities in 1983, causing a high number of casualties at a time when, unlike Iraq, Iran had no access to missiles (not to mention powerful allies).[47] The war changed Iran's attitude towards the BMP: the Iranian authorities, who initially had to resort to using Chinese ballistic missiles in 1984 as a means of retaliating against Iraq's missile attacks, saw an urgent need to develop a stronger missile capacity.[48] Thus, although Iran's first attempt to build ballistic missiles and high-level artillery dates back to 1977,[49] it was during the Iran–Iraq War,[50] particularly between 1984 and 1988, that the BMP experienced a breakthrough. In this sense, the evolution of the BMP in Iran cannot be dissociated from the idea of legitimate retaliation and is thus inherently linked to *qisas*.

 In October 1983, Iraq attacked Iran's cities of Dezful, Masjed Soleiman, Khorramabad, Andimeshk and Nahavand, deploying 190 missiles; these attacks resulted in 2,300 civilian deaths and a huge number of displacements, including from Tehran and Shiraz.[51] However, Iran's leadership refrained from engaging in a symmetrical act of retaliation. Instead, most of Iran's attacks on Iraq over the course of the following three years—the so-called '89 missile slap'[52]—targeted non-residential areas, thereby abstaining from systematically attacking Iraq's cities and military bases. This may appear surprising, as Iraq's missile attacks on Iranian

[46] Farhad Rezaei, 'Iran's ballistic missile program: a new case for engaging Iran?', *Insight Turkey* 18: 4, 2016, pp. 181–208.

[47] Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, 'Inventions of the Iran–Iraq War', *Critique: Critical Middle Eastern Studies* 16: 1, 2007, pp. 63–83.

[48] Mohammad Eslami and Saba Sotoudehfar, 'Iran–UAE relations and disputes over the sovereignty of Abu Musa and Tunbs', in Francisco Leandro, ed., *The geopolitics of Iran* (Basingstoke: Palgrave Macmillan, 2021), pp. 343–61.

[49] Michael Elleman and Maek Fitzpatrick, 'Evaluating design intent in Iran's ballistic-missile programme', *Adelphi Series* 57: 1, 2017, pp. 89–130; Eslami and Vieira, 'Iran's strategic culture'; Mohammad Eslami, Morteza Bazrafshan and Maryam Sedaghat, 'Shi'a geopolitics or religious tourism? Political convergence of Iran and Iraq in the light of Arbaeen pilgrimage', in Leandro, ed., *The geopolitics of Iran*, pp. 363–85.

[50] Williamson Murray and Kevin Woods, *The Iran–Iraq War: a military and strategic history* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2014); Mark Fitzpatrick, *Uncertain future: the JCPOA and Iran's nuclear and missile programmes* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2019).

[51] Arshin Adib-Moghaddam, *The international politics of the Persian Gulf: a cultural genealogy* (Abingdon: Routledge, 2006).

[52] '89 missile slaps on Saddam's face, Tehran', *Tansim* 24 Sept. 2014, https://www.tasnimnews.com/fa/news/1395/07/04/1194944/ (in Persian).

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cities, aimed at preventing Iranian ground operations while also instilling fear in Iranian society, were causing an increasing number of casualties and eventually brought the Iranian people on to the streets, urging the leadership to respond in kind, both as an act of retaliation and as a means to discourage further assaults on the country's residential areas. 'Missile for missile' emerged as a common slogan.[53] On 11 March 1984, Iran launched its first (long-range) missile attack on the Iraqi city of Kirkuk; but following several further missile attacks in 1984, Ayatollah Khomeini decided to suspend missile deployment.[54]

Iran's restraint in employing its ballistic missiles was the result of strategic deliberation in which a certain stigmatization of the BMP was working towards rendering it inadequate for the purpose of *qisas* in association with the principle of *zarare aghall*. Iran's Scud-B missiles were imprecise and resulted in damage to Iraq's residential areas and the death of Iraqi civilians. Ayatollah Khomeini therefore abstained from a strategic option that might contradict the Shi'a principles of *qisas* and *zarare aghall*, even though the resulting restrained approach was at odds with Iranian society's expectations of a symmetrical retaliation against Iraq's attacks on Iran's cities and residential areas. This strategic deliberation was reflected in Ayatollah Khomeini's declared emphasis on reducing risk to non-combatants, as well as in the obligation to announce targets of attack in advance.[55] One could argue that this association of *qisas* with *zarare aghall* has been at least partly responsible for the BMP not being employed for 29 years following Iran's attacks on Iraq in the 1980s, despite Iran's strategic isolation as a characteristic feature of its strategic culture and the fact that Iran was subject to continuous attacks by terrorist groups, with an estimated total of 17,000 Iranian victims between 1980 and 2013.[56] These groups included the Iraq-based *monafeghin* since the 1980s,[57] Al-Qaeda (since 1988) and, more recently, the fundamental Sunni paramilitary group Jundullah (between 2003 and 2011)[58] in the south-east of Iran.

Iran's missile deployments in the 1980s were performed under a conception of Shi'a Islam that was not characterized by *zarare aghall* alone. The latter principle coexisted with *ezterar*, to the extent that Iraq's military attacks on Iran had been driven by the goal of containing Iran's revolution. Moreover, the evolution of Iran's BMP was also associated with the aspiration to sustain and secure Iran's post-

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[53] The original Persian slogan is *Moushak javab e Moushak*.

[54] Mohammad Eslami, 'Iran's ballistic missile program and its foreign and security policy towards the United States under the Trump administration', *Revista española de ciencia política* 55: 1, 2021, pp. 37–62.

[55] Due to the suspension of the use of Chinese missiles by Ayatollah Khomeini, as well as the existing sanctions preventing Iran from buying new missiles to retaliate against Iraq's attacks, Iran's leadership took a position of systematically investing in their own missile technology from 1984 onwards, eventually assuming an 'unlimited, non-nuclear missile defence strategy'. See Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei, *Historical re-reading of Iran's non-use of weapons of mass destruction*, Tehran, 8 Nov. 2014, https://farsi.khamenei.ir/others-report?id=28140 (in Persian).

[56] 'Iran is one of the biggest victims of terrorism in the world', *IRIB News*, 1 Sept. 2013, https://www.iribnews.ir/fa/news/35817 (in Persian).

[57] In one of the *monafeghin* attacks, at the prime minister's office on 29 Aug. 1981, Iran lost both its president (Mohammad Ali Rajai) and its prime minister (Mohammad Javad Bahonar). Additionally, in the explosion at the headquarters of the Republican Party of the Islamic Revolution on 28 June 1981, the chief justice of Iran (Mohammad Beheshti) and 72 more officials were killed by *monafeghin*.

[58] Iran considers Jundullah a terrorist group related to Al-Qaeda. This group assassinated over 151 Iranians under the leadership of Abdol-Malek Rigi.

revolutionary trajectory, which was closely associated with the aspiration to 'fight global arrogance',[59] an idea developed by Ayatollah Khomeini as a modern interpretation of the principle of *nafye sabil*.[60] This idea referred to the notion that some countries were suffering from a minority of other countries—first and foremost, Israel and the United States—exercising cultural, political and economic domination in addition to practising colonization and exploitation.[61]

Iran's BMP employment in response to ISIS attacks (2017–18)   While abstaining from using the BMP between 1988 and 2017, Iran invested massively in its modernization as a means of guaranteeing its defence and self-sufficiency. This move by Iran's leadership reflected the prominence of the principle of *ezterar* in deliberating the strategic options surrounding the deployment of the BMP, seen as a defence capability to save its people's lives against any possible attack, preserve Islam and ensure the survival of Islamic rule. A massive investment in a military programme such as the BMP that had not been used for almost 30 years thus became a legitimate military and strategic option for a country with a strategic culture defined by isolation (Iran has often presented itself as a country surrounded by military bases) and a volatile regional environment.[62]

As the programme evolved—at a certain point endowing Iran with the largest number of missiles of any country in the Middle East[63]—missile accuracy improved. This allowed the IRGC to announce that the missiles were 'able to hit a target within a few yards from a distance of several thousand kilometres',[64] and the BMP became associated with national pride, the opposite of the (inglorious) past of the War of the Cities in which Iran was a victim. Moreover, improved accuracy enabled the claim to be made that the risk to civilians was minimized, and so deployment of the BMP was turning into an acceptable strategic option that was strengthening Iran's deterrence and military self-sufficiency.[65] The new acceptability of the BMP under Shi'a Islam came as a result of the fact that its potential strategic employment was in line with *zarare aghall:* Ayatollah Khamenei has argued in this respect that the employment of accurate missiles is free from any ethical or religious problems.[66]

The IRGC missile attacks on ISIS bases in 2017 and 2018 illustrated Iran's changing approach. In June 2017, for the first time since the end of the Iran–Iraq War, the IRGC employed six missiles in an attack on the ISIS terrorist base in Deir ez zur.[67]

[59] Adib-Moghaddam, 'Islamic utopian romanticism'.

[60] Rezaei and Hashemi, 'Re-reading the rule of nafye sabil'.

[61] 'Iran test-fires 2 missiles marked with "Israel must be wiped out"', *Times of Israel*, 9 March 2016, https://www.timesofisrael.com/iran-fires-2-missiles-marked-with-israel-must-be-wiped-out/.

[62] Hadi Ajili and Mahsa Rouhi, 'Iran's military strategy', *Survival* 61: 6, 2019, pp. 139–52, DOI: 10.1080/00396338.2019.1688575.

[63] Paula Izewicz, *Iran's ballistic missile programme: its status and the way forward*, EU Non-proliferation paper no. 57 (Stockholm: SIPRI, 2017); Eslami, 'Iran's ballistic missile program'.

[64] Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei, 'The missile is the source of legitimacy', Tehran, 21 Oct. 2017, https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=32740 (in Persian).

[65] Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei, 'Negotiation is a deadly poison', Tehran, 14 May 2019, https://farsi.khamenei.ir/keyword-print?id=1226 (in Persian).

[66] Khamenei, 'Negotiation is a deadly poison'.

[67] Khamenei, 'The missile is the source of legitimacy'.

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The attack was carried out in retaliation for an ISIS attack on one of Iran's *majles* buildings and the tomb of Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini some days earlier. The IRGC operation caused heavy casualties among ISIS affiliates and also destroyed their equipment and bases.[68] In October 2018, the IRGC carried out another missile attack in the Hajin province on the Syria–Iraq border, once again following an ISIS attack on the Iranian city of Ahwaz during the Holy Defence Week national parade.[69] Iran targeted ISIS positions in Syrian territory to the east of the Euphrates with six ballistic missiles and seven unmanned combat aerial vehicles (UCAVs) in an operation that led to the death of a prominent ISIS commander, al-Mashhadani, who had been in charge of the northern Iraqi city of Mosul.[70]

Iran's retaliation using the BMP in 2017–18 was celebrated and widely proclaimed as a 'slap' against ISIS. Iran's military actions were legitimized with reference to the principle of *qisas*, allowing Ayatollah Khamenei to articulate his strategic options by stating: 'If the enemy attacks us, we will respond ten times over.'[71] While dismissing ISIS terrorist attacks in Iran as 'playing with fire crackers', he maintained that the attacks 'were only increasing the will of the Iranian nation to fight terrorism, including through use of its ballistic missiles'.[72]

A factor that contributed to the results of strategic deliberation on Iran's asymmetric retaliation against the ISIS attacks, which were carried out by gunmen and suicide bombers, was the nature of 'Iran's new enemy'. The fact that ISIS was a particularly violent terrorist group allowed Iran's authorities to draw on *maslahat* and sanction the exceptional retaliatory use of the BMP. *Qisas* was, in this instance, performed according to Shi'a Islam in association with *ezterar*, a principle related to the protection of human life and Islamic rule. Strategic deliberation was reinforced under the argument that the international reputation of Islam was in jeopardy.[73]

Eventually, growing missile precision on the one hand and the nature of ISIS as a terrorist group on the other led to the articulation of strategic options resulting in the retaliatory deployment of Iran's BMP in 2017 and 2018 on the basis of *qisas*, already closely associated with *zarare aghall*, now also associated with *ezterar*. Deployment of the BMP as a means of retaliation came to be viewed as justified, and was considered not only possible, but even necessary.[74]

Attack on US military bases in 2020　　　On 3 January 2020, General Qasem Soleimani, head of the international branch of the IRGC, Sepahe Qods, and Abu Mahdi Al-Mohandes, commander of the Popular Mobilization Committee of Iraq (Hashd Al-Sha'bi), were assassinated by air strikes at Baghdad International Airport.[75] The

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[68] 'Ballistic missile attacks on ISIS bases', *Tansim*, 17 June 2017, shorturl.at/tyPYZ (in Persian).
[69] Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei, 'If any aggressor hits us, we will attack them ten times over', Tehran, 10 June 2018, https://farsi.khamenei.ir/photo-album?id=39869 (in Persian).
[70] The missiles employed in these strikes were of the Zulfiqar and Qiam types, with a maximum range of 750km and 800km, respectively. See Ajili and Rouhi, 'Iran's military strategy'; Eslami, 'Iran's ballistic missile program'.
[71] Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei, 'Hit and run is over', Tehran, 10 June 2018, https://farsi.khamenei.ir/video-content?id=29939 (in Persian).
[72] Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei, 'This fire cracking does not have any effect on the intention of the Iranian nation to fight terrorists', *Official website*, 7 June 2017, https://farsi.khamenei.ir/speech-content?id=36773 (in Persian).
[73] Second author interview with anonymous *Marja'e Taghlid*, April 2020, Qom, Iran.
[74] Eslami, 'Iran's ballistic missile program'.
[75] Eslami, 'Iran's ballistic missile program'.

strikes were launched from a drone (three MQ9 drones were employed in the operation) under the orders of US President Donald Trump. Qasem Soleimani was a 'cult hero in Iran and across the region';[76] Ayatollah Khamenei called him Iran's 'international face of resistance'.[77]

While many considered General Soleimani an international terrorist and celebrated his death, millions attended the funeral ceremonies held for him in several cities in Iran and Iraq.[78] The Iranian population appealed to the authorities to provide a 'strong military response' to what was seen as a 'heinous crime'.[79] Within a few hours of the assassination, the decision on the retaliation was announced by Ayatollah Khamenei, who stated that 'hard revenge awaits criminal killers'.[80] It was declared that Qasem Soleimani's death would be avenged by 'hard', 'precise', 'painful' and 'decisive' military action.[81] Strategic deliberation identified a missile strike as an adequate response, in line with the expectations of the Iranian population. Indeed, such expectations were presented as a factor reinforcing the legitimacy of Iran's strategic decision: 'The Iranian people's appeals for revenge were the real fuel of our missiles that destroyed Ain-Al Asad.'[82]

The decision to attack two US military bases (Ain-Al Asad and Al Taji) in Iraq by launching 13 long-range ballistic missiles set a new precedent in the way Shi'a principles framed and rationalized Iran's foreign policy and defence decisions: *qisas* was now associated with *nafye sabil* (banning the pathway), corresponding to preventing the domination of infidels (non-Muslims) over Muslims,[83] or, in its modern interpretation, 'fighting global arrogance'—a central principle of Iran's post-1979 foreign policy,[84] and one that has carried particular force since US withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2015. 'Fighting global arrogance' was converging with the strategic option of retaliation via the BMP, Soleimani's assassination having strengthened the voices of those in Iran pleading for 'an end to the rule

[76] Ilan Goldenberg, 'Will Iran's response to the Soleimani strike lead to war?', *Foreign Affairs*, 3 Jan. 2020, https://www.foreignaffairs.com/articles/iran/2020-01-03/will-irans-response-soleimani-strike-lead-war.

[77] Amir Toumaj, Candace Rondeaux and Arif Ammar, *Soleimani's shadow: the Fatemiyoun Division and Iran's proxy warfare propaganda*, New America, 9 July 2021, https://d1y8sb8igg2f8e.cloudfront.net/documents/Soleimanis_Shadow.pdf; Seyed Nematollah Saleh, 'General Soleimani was the symbol of fighting global arrogance', *Mehr News*, 12 Nov. 2021, https://www.mehrnews.com/news/4821386/.

[78] Official reporters from the funeral ceremony of General Soleimani noted the participation of 27 million Iranians in different cities. According to official reports, 60 Iranians were killed as a result of crowding at Soleimani's funeral ceremony in Kerman. This demonstrates his popularity within Iranian society.

[79] Hasan Rouhani, 'We will have revenge for this heinous crime', *IRNA*, 3 Jan. 2020, https://www.khabaronline.ir/news/1338068 (Persian resource). The words 'hard revenge' featured as trending hashtags on both Instagram and Twitter in early January 2020: https://www.twitter.com and https://www.instagram.com.

[80] Hassan Ahmadian, 'Iran's retaliation is not over', *Al Jazeera*, 11 Jan. 2020, https://www.aljazeera.com/opinions/2020/1/11/irans-retaliation-is-not-over

[81] Ebrahim Raeesi, 'Our revenge would be hard, accurate, painful and decisive', *Tehran Fararu*, 4 Jan. 2020, https://fararu.com/fa/news/423643 (in Persian); A. Motahari, 'Our revenge would be hard, accurate, painful and decisive', *Khordad News*, 4 Jan. 2020, https://www.khordad.news/fa/news/352141/ (in Persian); Ahmadian, 'Iran's retaliation is not over'; Hossein Salami, 'Our revenge would be hard, accurate, painful and decisive', ISNA, 7 Jan. 2020, https://www.isna.ir/news/98101712897 (in Persian).

[82] Ayatollah Seyed Ali Khamenei, 'Hard revenge means ending the corruptive presence of the US in the region', Tehran, 23 Jan. 2020, https://farsi.khamenei.ir/news-content?id=46940 (in Persian).

[83] Babaei, 'Islam and Christianity'; Zare'e et al., 'The rule of "nafye sabil" in Islamic thought'; Bidar, 'Sanctions and threats from the view of jurisprudence rules'.

[84] Haynes, ed., *Routledge handbook of religion and politics*, p. 293.

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of global arrogance' by means of military action,[85] including deployment of the BMP.[86] This new manifestation of *qisas* was reinforced by the notion of 'hard revenge',[87] and by recurrent statements from Iran's authorities that the western/US approach of 'hit and run is over'.[88] Evidence of this was provided by the destroyed 'US base in the eyesight of the people of the world', in a 'slap to the US',[89] whose 'corruptive presence … in the region' would soon be ended.[90] This idea was only strengthened after US withdrawal from the Al-Qiam, Al-Qayara and Kirkuk military bases in April 2020.[91]

According to Iranian estimates, the January 2020 missile strikes on US military bases left 139 dead and 146 injured.[92] Iran's traditional concern for proportionality, associated with *zarare aghall*, was sidelined.[93] This disproportionate and asymmetrical response was nevertheless considered legitimate, as it was performed in line with Shi'a Islamic principles in a way that associated *qisas* with the now dominant principle of *nafye sabil*, which found its expression in the increasingly powerful narrative of 'fighting global arrogance'. However, this is not to say that any strategic considerations associated with *zarare aghal* disappeared: in spite of the fact that the attacks on Ain Al-Asad and Al Taji resulted in casualties, Iranian officials repeatedly claimed that Iran did not aim to kill US soldiers in these assaults.[94] In support of this argument, Iran's officials emphasized that, following the direct order of Ayatollah Khamenei, the IRGC 'launched 13 ballistic missiles, one by one, in 2-minute intervals, in order to give US troops time to escape'.[95]

Conclusion

This article has set out to demonstrate how individual principles of Shi'a Islam, which allow for a more fine-grained understanding of sources (including ideological and religious) of Iran's strategic culture than the existing one, frame and rationalize the retaliatory employment of Iran's ballistic missiles. Various strategic options have been articulated in a discursive habitat where different Shi'a principles coexist, including *qisas*, *zarare aghall*, *ezterar* and *nafye sabil*, in addition to the

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[85] Eslami and Vieira, 'Iran's strategic culture'.

[86] Ahmad Alamal-Hoda, 'We don't want to take the revenge of our hero by killing the dirty animals (dogs)', *Khabar Online* , 10 Jan. 2020, https://www.khabaronline.ir/news/1340921/ (in Persian).

[87] Hassan Abbasi, 'Hard revenge is necessary', Tehran, 8 Jan. 2020, https://dr-abbasi.ir/18679/ (in Persian).

[88] Khamenei, 'Hit and run is over'.

[89] Ebrahim Raeesi, 'Missile attack on Ain Al-Asad was a strong slap in the sinister face of the US', *Pana News*, 4 Jan. 2020, https://www.pana.ir/news/1003435 (in Persian).

[90] Khamenei, 'Hard revenge means ending the corruptive presence'.

[91] Nafiseh Kuhnavard, 'Iraqi military bases: US pulling out of three key military bases', BBC News, 16 April 2020, https://www.bbc.com/news/world-middle-east-51914600.

[92] Omar Ahmad, 'The truth about US casualties in the Iran attack is slowly coming out', *Middle East Monitor*, 24 Jan. 2020, https://www.middleeastmonitor.com/20200124-the-truth-about-us-casualties-in-the-iran-attack-is-slowly-coming-out/. It is worth noting that these are disputed figures, with western/US reports claiming no fatalities.

[93] Gawdat Bahgat, 'Iran's ballistic missile and space program: an assessment', *Middle East Policy* 26: 1, 2019, pp. 31–48.

[94] Amir Ali Hajizadeh, 'Our aim was not to kill American soldiers', *National Television*-Shebake yeke Sima, 15 Jan. 2021, https://www.iribnews.ir/fa/news/2988080/.

[95] Hajizadeh, 'Our aim was not to kill American soldiers'.

fundamental and overarching principle of *maslahat*. This perspective helps us to understand three different instances of retaliatory missile employment by Iran over the past four decades. They are different because the retaliation was performed as *qisas* associated with other inferential principles, including *nafye sabil*, contrary to the previously dominant principles of *zarare aghall* and *ezterar* that informed Iran's BMP policy between 1979 and 2019.

Taking a perspective that is sensitive to the principles of Shi'a Islam allows us to better understand Iran's strategic options in its January 2020 missile attacks, which stand in stark contrast to previous BMP deployments. In this connection, it is useful to distinguish between the operational level and the level of assumptions and beliefs in any given country's strategic culture.[96] From this perspective, one could argue that while the latter level, of assumptions and beliefs, remains intact, the precedent set by the January 2020 missile deployment paves the way to a change in Iran's strategic culture at the operational–strategic level.

The investigation of the three instances of missile deployment and the more recent rise of *nafye sabil* in Iran's discursive habitat, where strategic actions (including the parameters of retaliation) are decided, raises the question of who else is on Iran's 'global arrogance' list, led by the United States and Israel. That list has been growing to include some Muslim countries, namely Saudi Arabia and the United Arab Emirates; and this growth extends to the (at first sight, paradoxical) trajectory of Iran's actions, in which the aspiration to prevent the domination of the 'globally arrogant' over weaker countries informs Iran's support of Maduro's regime in Venezuela or even its support of Armenia against Azerbaijan. Furthermore, the growing importance of *nafye sabil* needs to be assessed for its implications for Iran's 'forward defence' doctrine and the associated support given to groups such as Hezbollah or Hashd Al-Sha'bi.

The analysis presented here of Iran's ballistic missile employment raises a question that goes beyond the case-study of Iran, reaching into the currently widely debated issue of change in strategic culture. This issue sits at the heart of the so-called fourth generation debate in strategic culture studies,[97] often related to the competition between individual strategic subcultures, and mostly focusing on western democratic countries.[98] In this respect, a focus on religious principles could constitute an important avenue for future research, not necessarily in opposition to the fourth generation debate. A perspective focusing on religious principles and their importance in individual strategic cultures contributes to our understanding of the range of options available to a regime, and thus of the limits on a change in strategic culture. Such a perspective could also contribute to our understanding of the dynamics of competition between streams of thought within individual, especially non-western, strategic cultures.

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[96] Rajesh Basrur, 'Nuclear weapons and Indian strategic culture', *Journal of Peace Research* 38: 2, 2001, pp. 181–98.

[97] Alan Bloomfield, 'Time to move on: reconceptualizing the strategic culture debate', *Contemporary Security Policy* 33: 3, 2012, pp. 437–61; Tamir Libel, 'Rethinking strategic culture: a computational (social science) discursive–institutionalist approach', *Journal of Strategic Studies* 43: 5, 2020, pp. 686–709.

[98] Jeffrey Lantis and Andrew Charlton, 'Continuity or change? The strategic culture of Australia', *Comparative Strategy* 30: 4, 2011, pp. 291–315.