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Relazione finale

GRIEVANCE, GREED, FEASIBILITY

PREMISES OF CIVIL WAR THEORIES AND THEIR IMPLICATIONS FOR CURRENT-DAY IRAN

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Abstract*English*

In this bachelor's thesis I enquire into the factors that expose a country to the risk of civil war. In the first part of my work I present the major positions in the scientific debate on civil war causation and illustrate controversies arising from different interpretations of key variables. In the second part I apply my findings to the Islamic Republic of Iran elaborating on the risk factors in the light of the so-called “feasibility hypothesis”.

Italiano

La tesi – redatta in lingua inglese – indaga i fattori che mettono un Paese a rischio di guerra civile e si articola in due parti. Nella prima parte si presentano i principali orientamenti emersi nel dibattito scientifico sull'origine delle guerre civili e si approfondiscono i principali fattori causali che emergono da un'analisi econometrica, prospettandone le difficoltà interpretative. Nella seconda parte del lavoro, si procede all'applicazione della cosiddetta “ipotesi sulla fattibilità” a un caso di studio, la Repubblica Islamica dell'Iran, discutendone opportunità e rischi.

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Introduction – What does it take to make a war?

The question why wars occur has, of course, always been on historians' minds. After all, history is made up of periods, in which tensions between actors in a society are processed by peacetime means, but also of moments when mechanisms of conflict resolution fail. Depending on the scale of the underlying conflict, which thus comes to a head, fierce battles may ensue and have indeed ensued and continue to do so, as a random look at media coverage on any of these days will readily reveal.

Although the tendency of certain historiographers to represent historical events exclusively as a sequence of spectacular sanguinary battles is certainly to be condemned, it would also be a mistake to downplay the incidence of wars.

A war is “*a state of armed conflict between different countries or different groups within a country*”¹ and these are indeed the only levels of conflict where the term applies. This is reflected in current political debate, where the most commonly reported dimensions of war are the civil war and the somewhat quirky – some say oxymoronic – humanitarian war. Other categories of violent conflict include interstate war (or “full-fledged war”), internationalized internal armed conflict, genocide, ethnic cleansing, politicide, etc. I shall come back to this terminological issue later.

According to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program, after the end of the Second World War there have been 1,580 internal armed conflicts and 118 interstate wars. To date we count 30 ongoing armed conflicts, whereof 21 are intrastate and 9 internationalized internal armed conflicts. No interstate war is currently accounted for.² Hence, if we want to understand violent conflict in the modern-day world, we may gain a lot from focusing on struggles internal to a country.

Civil wars are intrastate wars. Different definitions of the term have been proposed. Mostly, they are focused on the wars' “*frequency, magnitude, severity, and intensity*” as anticipated by Small and Singer (1970) in their path-breaking paper which laid the bases for quantitative civil war research.³ Since those early days an extensive literature on civil war issues has been produced. In this paper I will concentrate on the topic of civil war causation.

In the first chapter I discuss premises and methodological problems. In chapter two I present three contrasting theories of civil war causation. Chapter three is about the Collier-Hoeffler model, an opportunity-centred policy instrument for developing conflict prevention strategies. Finally, in chapter four I apply that model to the Islamic Republic of Iran discussing strengths, weaknesses, opportunities and threats – both of Iran and of the model.

¹Oxford English Dictionary, 2011

²For definitions and coding criteria see <http://www.pcr.uu.se/research/ucdp/datasets/>. The given figures exclude so-called extra-systemic wars.

³SMALL and Singer (1970), p.145

FIRST PART

Chapter 1 – Levels of conflict

Human existence is conflictual in nature. Conflicts unfold on several levels. To begin with there are intrapersonal conflicts, i.e. struggles interior to the individual and originating from what, in borrowing from the terminology of psychoanalysis, I shall call their “drives”. These can be thought of as vectorial forces pushing the individual towards certain behaviours. They are counterbalanced by the forces of “conscience” and “reason”.

Secondly, there is the interpersonal level of conflict, where two individuals clash due to differing views, different sets of values, shortcomings in communication or what other reasons for controversy there may be.

The landscape of potential conflict grows ever more complex when we add interactions between three or more people. This is because we have to keep track of how intrapersonal mechanisms determine individual behaviour, how this behaviour is viewed by others and what reactions it produces, then assess the interactional pattern and try to determine how it influences third-party perception and action.

1.1 THE GROUP

In the social sciences much emphasis is placed on the group: primary and secondary groups, in- and out-groups, peer groups, reference groups, interest groups – just to name a few – are examples of the terminology used to describe social aggregations that come under the general heading of groups.

An important working hypothesis in social psychology views groups as “dynamic entities” enacting complex patterns of interaction both on the in- and outside. In order to describe these dynamics, it is useful to refer to the terminology of psychoanalysis introduced above.

If, for the sake of simplicity, we consider large groups as an embodiment of an aggregated drive and reason, just as any individual embodies their own drive and reason, it is legitimate to speak of a group's goals. All the more so as groups, just as any individual of sound mind, are able to articulate their goals clearly and expressly, e.g. through a declaration of intentions, a charter, or the like.

Talking about large rebel organizations and combat units, we can confidently expect that our assumption about the personality of groups holds true for such larger-scale observations, too.

Yet psychoanalysis is neither the prevalent nor the only set of ideas being discussed in psychology. An interesting alternative is given by behaviourism, which sees the organism as a kind of automaton “*responding' to conditions (stimuli) set by the outer environment and by inner biological*

processes”⁴.

Groups, accordingly, act upon incentives provided by the surrounding world. Hence, in order to study group behaviour, one needs to assess the *de facto* outside world irrespective of the way individuals represent the latter to themselves. In behaviourism, group action is not about an aggregated drive and reason but about being conditioned by circumstances.

I touch upon this branch of theory – though briefly and superficially – because it provides me with useful metaphors to illustrate different policy narratives in chapter two.

1.2 WHEN IS A WAR A CIVIL WAR?

Answering this question is crucial in modern political science. New econometric techniques now allow for a sophisticated analysis of historical data on civil wars. But in order to be effective and to produce meaningful results these instruments need coding standards. The above question can be broken down into different aspects.

To begin with, the actors: Is government involvement necessary? What about states where there is war but no more government? What if rebels claim they have formed their own legitimate government? What size and degree of organization are required in order for a rebel group to be considered effective?

Secondly, the conflict's incidence: Is there a minimum death toll a violent conflict must reach to be considered a war? Do we count total deaths or per capita deaths, do we operate a cumulative death count or do we look at individual years?

Thirdly, distribution: How can we account for effective resistance? What about conflicts where violence is unilateral? How do we handle state deaths as opposed to civilian deaths? What does casualty (and, for that sake, collateral damage) mean?

As anticipated in the introductory lines to this chapter there are, then, a whole range of other categories of violent conflict. Ambitious collections of information on civil conflicts – each with their own individual coding criteria – have been assembled and huge databases are now available to the interested public.⁵

Small and Singer (1982) gave a standard definition of civil war, whose subsequent evolutions the authoritative Correlates of War dataset is based on today. As civil war they code “*any armed conflict that involves (a) military action internal to the metropole, (b) the active participation of the nation-*

⁴From: Encyclopædia Britannica, <http://www.britannica.com/> (accessed on October 27, 2011)

⁵For raw data, readers may refer to the Uppsala Conflict Data Program (UCDP) or the Correlates of War Project (COW). The Stockholm International Peace Research Institute's Yearbook (SIPRI) provides rather elaborate and slightly more popular accounts.

al government, and (c) effective resistance by both sides”. Furthermore, state violence should be sustained and reciprocated and the war exceed a certain threshold of deaths (typically more than 1,000).⁶

These coding conventions were revised by Gleditsch (2004). Collier et al. (2006), whose paper I quote in the upcoming chapter, work with this updated set of data.

Chapter 2 – What moves a rebel group?

Not only historians and philanthropists are concerned with war, but so are political scientists and economists. After the end of the Second World War, another species of scholars, whom I may call the “developmentists” (a subspecies of the economists), have had their go at conflict issues. Their main chore in the post-colonial world, concurrent with the era of development, has been to think about the gap that separates the rich from the poor nations and to develop strategies to overcome this skew. The civil war issue has assumed particular priority because violence has turned out to be correlated with poverty.⁷

A global public body such as the World Bank was created to provide the necessary finance. But also the individual national states have, from the very beginning, taken interest in managing the “underdeveloped” countries' affairs. In the era of globalization, economic interconnectedness has alerted the rich countries' leaders to the necessity of securing stability and fostering economic growth in other parts of the world.⁸

Some argue that helping the wretched and the poor is a moral duty for any responsible individual and state. And in fact, the debate on civil war in public international law has brought forth the concept of “responsibility to protect”.⁹

Others say that rich nations are merely interested in preserving and augmenting their wealth. Development interventions would thus be but a smokescreen to conceal tough economic agendas.

One thing is certain, that economies and societies are intensely interdependent and that a fair share of the resources relevant to the industrialized nations' productive cycles originate from outside their borders. Any act of altruism in the global world is therefore linked with benefits.

In what seems a curious parallel, this two-fold view (idealism/humanism versus opportunism/self-interest/egotism) applies to the inner logic of conflicts, too. There are reasons why individuals (and, on a larger scale, peoples) decide to engage in rebellion. Given my preliminary considera-

⁶SMALL and Singer (1982, p.210), quoted in SAMBANIS (2004), p. 816

⁷cf. COLLIER, *The bottom billion*, 2007

⁸For an account of development policies and strategies see MCMICHAEL, *Development and social change*, 2008.

⁹See the recent article by former Australian foreign minister Gareth Evans, *The Responsibility to Protect Comes of Age*, available at <http://thetopianblog.tumblr.com/post/11980029501/the-responsibility-to-protect-comes-of-age> (accessed on October 31, 2011).

tions, questions are: Are rebels driven by a visceral sentiment that stems from some kind of deprivation or from the prospect of gaining material wealth? Or are they cool-headed entrepreneurs who assess risks and opportunities and, depending on expected outcomes, decide whether to rebel? In other words, are they plagued by grievances and driven by greed? (And what inconsistencies may there be between their declared motives and the goals they actually pursue?) Or do they act on opportunities that make rebellion feasible?

The debate in point has been carried out among the community of political scientists and economists working on civil war issues. In this chapter I will first explain the two perspectives of motivational hypotheses – greed and grievance theory – and give an outline of the positions advocated by the debate's protagonists. I will then go on to introduce feasibility theory as proposed by Collier et al. (2006).

Grievance and greed theory both work with gnostic categories in keeping with psychoanalysis, whereas the feasibility approach resorts to explanations that are behaviouristic in kind. All three are policy narratives, i.e. toolboxes containing a consistent set of explanations for the behaviour of groups involved in violent conflict.

Quantitative research is done under all three premises and often with the same methodological protocols. The Gini coefficient as a means of measuring distribution inequality, for example, is used to detect objective grievances (measuring income or asset inequality), but at the same time it serves as a proxy for a feasibility variable such as government efficacy (when used to measure population dispersion).

Chapters three and four will focus on proxy variables and the values they typically assume. Let us for now clarify the exact meaning of the terms grievance, greed and feasibility.

2.1 GRIEVANCE

Political science, as that branch of scholarship that accumulates knowledge about the *polis*, has traditionally viewed civil conflicts as arising from a “root cause” that translates into perceived and objective grievances and makes rebellion desirable. This theory is readily backed by the rhetoric of insurgent parties, who usually stress the grievances inflicted upon them and depict themselves as liberators of their people from burdens such as colonial rule or despotic governance.

A classic example is the tale of a righteous people that decides to engage in a just, though tiresome struggle to overcome repression, despotism and imperialist rule in order to be free at last.

2.1.1 OBJECTIVE GRIEVANCES

Grievances are objective when they can be accounted for empirically. If perceived by the popu-

lace, they may translate into subjective grievances. However, they don't always necessarily do so.

Economic hardship and inequality are important grievance factors and so is state violence. Bad or irresponsible governance, corruption, embezzlement and the occurrence of electoral frauds have in the past attracted attention, too. Civil liberties, freedom of expression and the right to participation may not be forgotten either and the number of political prisoners in a country is another proxy for objective grievances though this points us to a weak spot in grievance theory, which I will discuss in a moment.

2.1.2 SUBJECTIVE GRIEVANCES

Grievances are subjective when they are perceived by the individual. They may arise from some objective grievance but may also be the result of misrepresentations of the social reality.

Relative deprivation matters both in its material aspect and in terms of missing opportunities. Individuals perceive that they are worse off than others and think that this is unfair. In order to end the state of injustice, they are ready to engage in resistance.

Discrimination is an example. It can occur on the basis of sex, race, language, religion, political opinions, and personal or social conditions¹⁰ and can become manifest in legal provisions (e.g. apartheid or racial segregation) or social custom (prejudice, racial hatred, etc.). It may affect the individual or the group, who are discriminated against, directly through violence or indirectly through denied opportunities. More recently the “digital divide” has been discussed as a new source of discrimination.

Some grievances are difficult to class, since they have both subjective and objective elements.

2.1.3 PROBLEMS WITH GRIEVANCE THEORY

A strong point against grievance is the “propaganda allegation”, i.e. the claim that rebellious groups set up rhetorical smokescreens in order to conceal their true motives. Talking of political prisoners, for example, it is sometimes difficult to establish justice.

In his 2010 *The Shah* Milani depicts the case of the monarchy in Iran:

“A good example of how the Shah and the opposition approached political questions can be found in the issue of political prisoners. The opposition outlandishly claimed that Iran had 'hundreds of thousands of political prisoners', whereas the actual number was closer to 4,000. [...] On the other hand, for years, when the Western media asked the Shah about the plight of political prisoners and torture in Iran, [he] invariably dismissed the question by saying Iran had no political prisoners, only criminals.”¹¹

¹⁰This short list is taken from article 3 of the Italian Constitution. Modern discrimination discourse, though, has progressed considerably and developed concepts such as gender and identity discrimination and discrimination based on ethnicity rather than race.

¹¹MILANI, *The Shah*, 2010, p.319

If observers rely solely on the parties' accounts, they will hardly arrive at a realistic understanding of the nature of a particular conflict. In the past this was a problem especially when conflicts occurred in remote corners of the world. The little evidence that made it from the periphery to the centre could be biased and partial depending on the necessities of the moment and of who conveyed the news.

The era of global media coverage – some optimistically conjectured – was to resolve this problem thanks to a capillary, viral network of instant information exchange connecting people from all over the world.¹² And in part this has come true. We have seen an empowerment of the global civil society.

Yet there is consensus among observers that the development also brought with it some severe setbacks. Today the huge amount of news available makes it difficult to distinguish authentic from biased reporting. As to conflict coverage, parties usually try to exploit the media attention for their purposes. Thus, false reports are spread around the world within minutes and the fact that it is close to impossible to stop or correct a piece of false news once they circulate can be partially attributed to the blurred dimensions of the virtual public space.¹³

[BOX 1] BIASED! – SOME NOTES ON TRUSTWORTHINESS

With the readers' permission, I shall try a little digression on the methodological topic of trustworthiness:

In the case illustrated by Milano how can observers arrive at a non-random¹⁴ conclusion about a probable range of SAVAK activities, when the accounts provided by the actors differ so largely. Now in reality, Milani in the quoted passage already qualifies the information he gives. He dismisses opposition claims as “exaggerated” and “outlandish” and reports the “true” figures disclosed to him by a certain Emad Baghi, whom he introduces as “*one of Iran's leading human rights activists and an opponent of the death penalty*”.¹⁵

In other words, he makes an appeal to authority by presenting an outside interlocutor with qualities such as to back up his own judgement about the two contending parties' interpretations. This is a device well known to rhetoricians and it is exactly the kind of expedient scholars use when they use indirectly provided information. They weight their sources.

But even the appeal to authority can obviously be biased. Typically scholars will have a certain pool of information readily available and habitually refer to outside sources when they need extra input. Their range of outside sources, however, is heavily influenced by habits, knowledge and work environment.

Consider, for example, that my sociological reading of the Iranian society has been substantial-

¹²See the recent shift in the meaning of the English adjective “viral”, now denoting “*an image, video, piece of information, etc. that is circulated rapidly and widely from one Internet user to another*” (OED). “Viral marketing” and “go viral” are two such newfangled expressions.

¹³Another issue is resilience. Under ordinary circumstances modern means of communication are able to supply the above services to the global public. But as soon as a national government decides to interfere with its functioning by shutting down the telecommunications network or internet in their country, the world is reminded of just how vulnerable these new instruments still are.

¹⁴Difficult to choose the adjective that fits here! Is it “correct” or rather “justified” or “reasonable” or what?

¹⁵MILANI, p.471

ly influenced by the ideas of Mrs Felicetta Ferraro, a former cultural *attachée* at the Italian embassy in Iran. On Iranian history, on the other hand, I read a biography of the last Shah by Milani, a California-based senior expert on Iranian politics. Now the interesting fact is that it was Ferraro who alerted me to the book, which she herself has positively reviewed.

To what degree this actually determines basic features of my analysis is difficult to assess and also depends on the breadth of my general reading. In this paper, the accent is more on a data-backed economic analysis, thus alleviating the urgency of the issue.

Generally, however, it is to be expected that intellectual cross-fertilization, or the “parochial professional bias”¹⁶, plays an important role in shaping the scholar's stance and has to be taken heed of. Diversification and disclosure of sources are the most effective remedy.

Coming back, finally, to the above example, I would like to add that the observations concerning political prisoners do not round up the question once and for all because in the case of secret service abductions and killings there is another line to the argument. One could simply argue that “any political prisoner is one too many”, and dismiss the rest of the debate.

2.2 GREED

Because of the intrinsic bias susceptibility of the grievance theory (“Which side are you on?”), scholars have developed other possible explanations for rebellion. They turned away from the root causes and started viewing rebel groups as social entrepreneurs driven by prospects of profit. Many conflict-prone states actually dispose of natural resource riches, which can have a two-fold effect on conflict.

Firstly, a region's natural resource endowment is an incentive to start rebellion and, once started, it provides the necessary finance to sustain rebel activities. Rebels may indeed exploit mines or oil wells through setting up their own extraction facilities or they may tax the existing operators in the mining industry. In both cases the material return on rebellion is huge.

The Democratic Republic of Congo is the one quintessential example of a state torn by civil war due to resource riches. To its very considerable credit, the greed hypothesis has helped to launch global campaigning against trade in so-called “conflict diamonds”.¹⁷ But also oil, gas and rare earth metals play an important role in rebel business.¹⁸

Finally, government control itself is a source of attraction for rebels since it allows them to dispose of state funds and to impose taxation on the resident population and the economy.

Setting out from the greed concept Collier and Hoeffler (2001) developed a model of civil war explanation in which they identify a set of statistically relevant variables that cause the onset of violence.¹⁹

1) GDP per capita → the lower the worse

¹⁶HIRSHLEIFER, *The Dark Side of the Force*, 2001, p.4

¹⁷For reference: <http://www.un.org/peace/africa/Diamond.html>

¹⁸cf. ROSS (2005)

¹⁹Table 1 contains more information and an updated set of key variables.

2) GDP per capita growth	→	the lower the worse
3) Primary commodity exports	→	pernicious if high, with a peak at 32% of GDP
4) Peace duration	→	the longer the better
5) Social fractionalization and ethnic dominance	→	play a minor role
6) Male secondary schooling	→	the higher the better
7) Population size	→	risk approximately proportional to size
8) Geographic dispersion of the population	→	the lower the better

These variables and their respective influence on civil war onset have resulted from what is called a linear regression ran on a set of economic and other data. This is a basic econometric technique that helps to find correlations between variables. It is important to know that each variable has a correlation coefficient that tells us something about the direction and the magnitude of the change the independent variable may induce in the dependent one (in this case civil war onset). Secondly, the level of statistic significance indicates how well the theoretical correlation fits the actual observations.

For interpretation consider that a negative coefficient means that an increase in the independent variable will decrease the risk of civil war onset, whereas with a positive coefficient an increase in the independent will engender higher conflict risk. As for significance, three stars are optimum but still a single star is commonly held to stand for a robust finding. We will see this in table 1.

Another question is the interpretation of the correlations. In many cases this can be very ambiguous. Possible alternative readings of individual variables that have found support among researchers are discussed throughout the rest of this work. For now we may notice that this set combines both greed and grievance factors but finds evidence that the greed side influences the outcome to a much greater extent. The paper's publication in 2001 sparked what has come to be known as the “greed-versus-grievance debate”.

2.3 FEASIBILITY

Since its publication, there has been an intense production of academic papers that refer to Collier and Hoeffler (2001) more or less directly. New and different sets of significant variables have been proposed. What I am interested in pointing out is that Collier et al. (2006), revisiting the earlier work, arrive at a new “*basic division between theories of civil war*”: those that focus on feasibility, and those that focus on motivation. Motivation is the sphere where greed and grievance are collocated.²⁰

²⁰COLLIER et al. (2006), p.6

Arguing that no “*special inducements in terms of motivation*” are needed in order to incite rebellion, they introduce the so-called “feasibility hypothesis”, which proposes that

*“[...] where rebellion is feasible it will occur: motivation is indeterminate, being supplied by whatever agenda happens to be adopted by the first social entrepreneur to occupy the viable niche.”*²¹

This somewhat reductionist approach draws on the epistemology of economics which, in Collier's words, “*tend[s] to set little credence on the explanations which people give for their behavior, preferring to work by 'revealed preference'*”.²²

What characterizes this method is its pragmatic way of leaving out of consideration motivational explanations of group behaviour. As anticipated above, we have here an example of the theoretical stance of behaviourism in civil war studies.²³

As in all areas of life, so in civil war studies, there is the old and the new, there are theories that come in a quaint, grandfatherly guise and those that are wrapped in stylish and fashionable state-of-the-art cloth. Collier et al. (2006), combining feasibility and motivation in a single model of civil war causation, decidedly place themselves at the centre of what in their view is a major innovation in civil war theory.

*“Whereas traditional political analyses either assumed or asserted some particular 'root cause' of civil war, usually traced to a historical grievance, modern economic theory focuses on the feasibility of rebellion as well as its motivation.”*²⁴

Chapter 3 – The Collier-Hoeffler model – an influential theory of feasibility

Although with the introduction of the feasibility hypothesis, Collier et al. (2006) have adopted a different conceptual frame for explaining civil war causation, their analysis of time series data basically yields the same significant variables as before. The only difference with respect to previous publications is that the updated COW data set allows them to improve their model's predictive performance including three significant variables hitherto omitted.

Table 1 contains these variables along with their correlation coefficients and levels of significance (see section 2.2).

Variable	Proxied by (if not already a proxy itself)	Correlation coefficient	Level of significance
GDP per capita	ln(GDP per capita)	-0.203	*

²¹ibid., pp.19f.

²²COLLIER (2006), p.4

²³Feasibility might even appear mechanistic in that it depicts insurgents as criminal entrepreneurs and likens their endeavour to an enterprise conducted according to economic principles: “*The sense of grievance may be based upon some objective grounds for complaint, or it may be conjured up by massaging prejudices. However, while this distinction is morally interesting to observers – is the cause just? – it is of no practical importance.*” (ibid., p.3)

²⁴ibid., p.4

GDP per capita growth (t-1)		-0.145	***
Primary commodity exports (proportion of GDP)		7.133	*
"	PCE squared	-14.058	*
Years of peace		-0.057	***
Former French African colony	dummy	-1.020	*
Social fractionalization	Index (ranging from 0 to 1)	2.323	***
Proportion of young men of age 15-29 in total population		17.423	*
Total population	ln(population)	0.284	***
Mountainous (proportion of total land area)	Index (Gerrard & Fearon)	0.015	*

Table 1: Significant variables and their correlation coefficients in Collier et al. (2006)

3.1 POLICY IMPLICATIONS

*"To predict a civil war it is surely more useful to focus on near-term indicators such as political incidents and rising violence. Rather, our model is useful in pointing to the typical structural risks and so provides some guidance on longer term policies for prevention."*²⁵

The intense learned debate, as I have pointed out, springs from concern about the yet pervasive phenomenon of violent conflicts in the world and is an attempt at finding policies that may effectively help to contain the detrimental consequences of civil war. Its protagonists are also chief political advisers.

Paul Collier, for example, was Director of the Research Development Department of the World Bank, where he collaborated with Nicholas Sambanis. James D. Fearon helps prepare World Bank's annual World Development Reports.²⁶ All three are authors whose works I quote.

Collier's views have also left the narrow realm of scholarly debate and entered global public discourse. In his 2007 popular science book, *The bottom billion: why the poorest countries are failing and what can be done about it*, he outlines and concretizes the policy strategies suggested by his findings. The central point he makes is about the so-called poverty traps: Overabundance of natural riches provides governments with easy revenue, which is then stashed away by corrupt elites instead of being invested in favour of sustained growth. Add the destructive potential of violent conflict to top it all.

Collier's aim is to "set things straight", i.e. to overcome public misperception and to alert the world to the fact that "[g]rievance is to a rebel organization what image is to a business."²⁷

²⁵ibid., p.7

²⁶I found biographical notes on Collier here: <http://users.ox.ac.uk/~econpco/> (accessed on October 27, 2011) and on Sambanis here: <http://www.yale.edu/polisci/people/nsambanisCV.pdf> (accessed on October 27, 2011).

²⁷COLLIER (2006), p.2

3.2 CRITIQUE

Not all of the variables the model argues for are universally accepted. For example, no sooner had Collier and Hoeffler (2001) presented their findings to the learned public than James D. Fearon of Stanford University stepped in criticizing one of their central interpretations. He argues that

*“oil predicts civil war risk not because it provides an easy source of rebel start-up finance, but probably because oil producers have relatively low state capabilities given their level of per capita income”.*²⁸

Also readers might wonder, quite comprehensibly, what has become of such important items as human rights that have been in the focus of global public debate for a fair share of years now. Fearon (2010) argues that *“very poor human rights performance is a very bad sign for a government: major civil conflict is then much more likely to begin, if it has not already started.”*²⁹

He studies the lagged effect of state repression using Gibney et al.'s (2008) Political Terror Scale. However, it has to be noted that his findings are compromised by risk of endogeneity and unclear interpretation.³⁰

A common problem of all economic accounts of civil war causation is the so-called spurious regression (or reverse causation). As for political terror, so for economic growth, the direction of the causal nexus cannot always be established with certainty. Does low growth really cause violence, or is poor economic performance itself a consequence of a minatory situation that prefigures violence and hampers investment but is caused by a totally different factor? Collier (2006) and Hegre and Sambanis (2006) tackle this question.

SECOND PART

Chapter 4 – Iran and feasibility

The intriguing thing about these political science endeavours is that they eventually contribute to an understanding of real actual situations and may yield practical advice as to what to do to prevent violence (assuming that research premises are correct). In this second part of my work I would therefore like to discuss a case in point, the Islamic Republic of Iran, in the light of feasibility theory.

4.1 THE IMPACT OF CHANGE ON CIVIL CONFLICT

In my analysis I set out from an observation on political change and its effect on civil war onset.

²⁸FEARON (2004), p.1

²⁹FEARON (2010), p.24

³⁰In Fearon's words the lagged PTS *“is picking up incipient or residual civil war activity”*. This means that a high level of political terror may be due to a state's having begun to enact policies of counterinsurgency that do not yet reach the threshold of civil war. In that case, the political terror would not be the cause of the conflict, but rather a symptom (ibid., pp.23ff.).

After that I will immediately turn to the specific context of Iran.

[BOX 2] REVOLUTION, REFORM, REACTION – SOME NOTES ON CHANGE

In this concise and slightly peculiar round-up of the typologies of institutional political change I build on Fearon (2003) who suggests that there is “*a strong relationship between changes in governing institutions [...] and an increased probability of civil war onset in subsequent years*”.³¹ Regardless of direction – whether it moves the system towards more autocracy or more democracy – change causes friction and *may* cause conflict to erupt.

Why is it that changes in the set-up of an established political system – for the worse or for the better – have this effect? I argue that change occurs at any time on the societal level and that this poses a threat to any established order in that it creates a gap between social realities and legal provisions. A country's stability, therefore, hinges strongly on its political system's capacity of keeping up with those inevitable changes.

There are different degrees to the intensity of political change. We can roughly distinguish between revolution, reform and reaction.

A revolution generally shatters the foundations of a state and implements a new order. By definition, it causes the most radical and far-reaching change, though at times what is referred to as a revolution can be a mere mockery of innovation (if it limits itself to replacing bodies and faces without changing general political lines).

Reform is moderate and progressive change implemented by institutional means over time. It does not compromise the deep structure of a society in the short term.

Finally reaction – associated with conservative ideas of maintaining the *status quo* and safeguarding traditional values – is the kind of silent anti-revolution and anti-reform which opposes change in the name of invariance (rather than continuity).

As to reaction my argument goes that, despite its apparently immobile stance, reaction actually carries out a precise programme of change through imposition because it counteracts innovations that would otherwise inevitably occur in the societal body. Hence, it is to be considered – somewhat counter to intuition – a vectorial, not a scalar, measure of opposition to inevitable innovations over time. This has some bearing on the analysis of the Iranian case.

All this points us to a dynamic understanding of peace as a system's capacity to keep pace with societal changes, neither erring on the side of caution (reaction), nor enforcing change all to hastily (radical reform).

As to the perspectives of change – revolution, reform and reaction – Iran has known all three of them in its recent past. We can roughly date the revolutionary phase from early 1978 to 1979³², followed by a reactionary period that saw the consolidation of the new order and ran from mid-1979 to the late 1980s. The years 1998 till 2004 have come to be known as the reform period due to political power being vested in the so-called “enlightened clerics”. And finally, “*Iran reversed the course of democratic reforms and tightened autocratic control in 2004*”.³³

³¹FEARON (2010), p.25. See also FEARON and Laitin (2003).

³²For a masterful account of the Iranian revolution see KAPUŚCIŃSKI, *Shah of Shahs*, 1985.

³³Marshall and Cole (2009), p.10

Illustration 1: Polity IV Authority Trends chart, Iran, 1946-2010

These developments are reflected in illustration 1, which is taken from the Polity IV project's website. Data are coded as follows:

“The ‘Polity Score’ captures [the] regime authority spectrum on a 21-point scale ranging from -10 (hereditary monarchy) to +10 (consolidated democracy). The Polity scores can also be converted to regime categories: we recommend a three-part categorization of ‘autocracies’ (-10 to -6), ‘anocracies’ (-5 to +5 [...]), and ‘democracies’ (+6 to +10).”³⁴

In keeping with what is said about friction and the inescapability of change in box 2, we have to assume that since 1982 – the date of the last recorded outbreak of mass violence³⁵ – politics have served the needs of the people. This, however, alerts us to the inadequacy of a similar way of measuring social friction. We only have a binary indicator: either there is utter friction that amounts to civil war or something that is smaller, but whose dimension we can only guess at.³⁶

Since guessing is not a scientifically sound method of acquiring knowledge, we can refer to empirical research work done by others (as I have done above with the illustration on authority developments) or we can try and track down bits of evidence. This method has me looking at the country's recent history.

³⁴<http://www.systemicpeace.org/polity/polity4.htm> (accessed on November 4, 2011)

³⁵Reference is to the “Iran vs. Mujaheddin” war as accounted for by Gleditsch (2004).

³⁶I tackle this problem in depth in section 4.4.

4.2 TRACKING DOWN FRICTION

In 2009 even unwitting observers from the outside could conclude that there was something going on in the streets of major Iranian cities. Thanks not least to the “viral” communication technologies (see section 2.1.3), news about protests over an alleged electoral fraud spread around the world.

In this paper I do not aim at establishing the truth about the allegations. What I do is I take the protests as a precious indicator that might point to the existence of a “viable niche” for rebellion.

4.3 VIABLE NICHES

If there are indications that current politics in Iran serve the needs of maintaining internal stability ineffectively and insufficiently, some might – in my view quite rightly – argue that there must be a gap between people's expectations and the state agenda. But since I want to lay emphasis on the structuralist part of the research design, I try to understand what might be the structural features of Iran's society that cause this gap.

4.3.1 A PEOPLE OF YOUNG ROVERS?

Of special statistic interest is that part of the population that is most susceptible of taking the rebel road, i.e. in Collier et al.'s (2006) approximation young males aged 15-29.

I find that 17.89 per cent of Iranians belong to this group.³⁷ This is an extraordinarily large proportion as we shall see in a moment. Tables 2-6 contain data from Collier et al. (2006). The column “sample mean” contains the mean value of the variable throughout the whole data set, i.e. for all countries in all periods observed. “Peace mean” is the mean value of this variable in all country periods where there was no war onset, whereas “war start mean” denotes the mean of those countries and periods that witnessed a war start.

In table 2 this is to say that in countries with a war start for a given year, in average, the share of young men in the total population was 13.1 per cent. The peacetime observations, on the other hand, had an average of 12.9 per cent of young men in their total population. The positive coefficient tells us that the greater the share, the higher the risk of conflict.³⁸

	Iran	Sample mean	Peace mean	War start mean	Correlation coefficient	Level of significance
Proportion of young men of age 15-29 in total population	17.89%	12.90%	12.90%	13.10%	17.423	*

Table 2: Proportion of young men (15-29) – Source: United Nations (2008 census)

Clearly, none of the samples comes anywhere close to matching Iran's share of young people.

³⁷UN Data from 2008 census: 12.6 million on a total population of 70.5 million.

³⁸The table rows will be introduced piecemeal through tables 2-6. See appendix E for the complete table. In appendix C, I disclose my data sources.

The country is an extreme outlier with respect to both peace and war means, which happen to nearly coincide. When we consider that the correlation is such that “*a doubling in the proportion of the population [...] increases the risk of conflict from 4.7 per cent to 31.9 per cent.*”³⁹, in terms of civil war probability for Iran this is very remarkable!

This somehow drastic appraisal, however, is mitigated by a special feature of the Iranian young population, namely their high level of education. I arrive at that after having a look at who these young people are.

For this purpose I introduce the view of Felicetta Ferraro, a senior Italian expert on Iran and for eight years cultural *attachée* at the Italian embassy in the country. In her words

*“[these] are youth who have experienced neither the ideological drive nor the fervour of the revolution, nor have they known the hardships of war. But they have gone through the enthusiasm of reform, which has strongly shaped their attitudes. Today they find themselves on the margins of a difficult phase of transition and of real political struggle and their future is threatened by the consequences of economic crisis.”*⁴⁰

Against the background of Iran's contemporary history the under-thirty figure assumes particular significance because it is a proxy for that part of the population born after the 1979 revolutionary events and who have therefore not participated of the political turmoil of those days.

This leads us to another of our key variables, namely peace duration. There is strong evidence that the risk of civil war onset decreases with the duration of peace periods. This is due to what Collier and Hoeffler (2001) describe as the depreciation of conflict-specific capital.⁴¹

Quite banally, weapons and other military paraphernalia deteriorate over time. Also can expertise be lost in oblivion or through the deaths of key figures, which altogether raises the cost of rebellion. The negative coefficient tells us that conflict risk is all the lower the longer peace has lasted. In comparison with sample means, this time Iran is “on the safe side”.

	Iran	Sample mean	Peace mean	War start mean	Correlation coefficient	Level of significance
Years of Peace	29	32	33	16	-0.057	***

Table 3: Peace duration – Source: Gleditsch (2004)

This appraisal is supported by Iran's educational performance. In a previous version of Collier's model male secondary schooling, in place of the proportion of young men in the total population, was used to proxy the opportunity cost of rebellion. The latter is higher when education levels – and with it earning perspectives – are higher. “*A country which has ten percentage points more of its*

³⁹COLLIER et al. (2006), p.15

⁴⁰This and the following quotations are excerpts from a speech Ferraro gave in occasion of the thirtieth anniversary of the Islamic Revolution on 11 February 2009. The audio is available at <http://www.radioradicale.it/scheda/272562/iran-1979-la-rivoluzione-islamica-trentanni-dopo> (accessed on November 1, 2011). I provide the Italian-language transcript in appendix A. All translations are mine.

⁴¹COLLIER and Hoeffler (2001), p.5

*youths in schools – say 55% instead of 45% – cuts its risk of conflict from 14% to around 10%.”*⁴²

Iran's population is highly educated. At 85.26%⁴³, male secondary schooling is among the highest not only for that region of the world (+10.38% relative to the MENA states) but also with respect to income levels (+22.5% relative to middle income states, +4.92% relative to upper middle income states).

In terms of conflict risk this is remarkable. According to feasibility theory, education raises the opportunity cost of rebellion because it is to be expected that highly educated young men have well-paid jobs and that relinquishing these would be quite a sacrifice for them. However, this assumption has to be counterchecked.

If, for example, the economic situation of the population is dire and there is high juvenile unemployment, this would lower the opportunity cost and weaken education's positive effect on conflict risk.

Borrowing a Collier quip we might say that, unsurprisingly, just like a “[w]ar cannot be fought just on hopes or hatreds”⁴⁴, a man cannot survive just on a cardboard diploma.

World Bank data give 20.2 per cent unemployment among Iranian males aged 15 to 24. We only have limited data to compare this figure to other countries or regions (see appendix D). However, a few comparisons reveal that in 2008 juvenile unemployment in Iran was 28 per cent higher than in the Euro area, 42 per cent relative to North America, and 72 per cent relative to Latin America.⁴⁵

At this point the gap between people's expectations and the way the system serves them comes to the fore again. There is disparity between the huge potential and the scarcity of opportunities. If not a direct factor in triggering rebellious moves, it does certainly shape perceptions and would be of interest for a motivation-centred reading of the Iranian case.

4.3.2 ECONOMIC PERFORMANCE

Linked with the above discourse on education and unemployment is the question of GDP per capita. A country's level of income is another important variable that determines the opportunity cost of rebellion.

Iran is a middle or upper middle income country. GDP per capita in 2009 was \$2,162.⁴⁶ Since Collier et al.'s dataset puts 1997 as base year for calculating real GDP, I need to convert these into

⁴²COLLIER (2006), p.6

⁴³The first figure related here is gross male secondary school enrolment in 2009 and is taken from the World Bank Development Indicators database. Note that comparisons are expressed as relative change, i.e. not as difference in percentage points. More complete statistics can be found in appendix B.

⁴⁴COLLIER (2006), p.3

⁴⁵A side note for my Italian readers: Male juvenile unemployment in 2009 was 23.3 per cent for Italy, 39.1 for Spain.

⁴⁶World Bank Development Indicators (in constant 2000 US\$)

constant 1997 US\$. Applying the conversion factor 0.932⁴⁷ and using the natural logarithm yields the following result.

	Iran	Sample mean	Peace mean	War start mean	Correlation coefficient	Level of significance
ln(GDP per capita)	7.608	8.604	8.659	7.003	-0.203	*

Table 4: GDP per capita – Source: World Bank

Compared with the war start sample mean, Iran's level of income is about 83% higher (\$2,015 against approx. \$1,100). Considering that “in a hypothetical country with characteristics set at the sample mean” the predicted risk is increased from 4.7 to 5.4 per cent if “the level of per capita income is halved”⁴⁸, Iran's reference value seems relatively stable. Yet it is still considerably inferior to the peace sample mean of approximately \$5,760.

Illustration 2: GDP per capita growth (in %) - Source: World Bank

Illustration 2 shows GDP per capita growth over the last decade. Iran has continuously been above world average and for most of the time keeps clear of the war sample mean, which is negative at around -0.5 per cent. However, recently there has been a decline in growth rates first to 1.1 per cent in 2008, then down to 0.6 in 2009.

	Iran	Sample mean	Peace mean	War start mean	Correlation coefficient	Level of significance
GDP per capita growth	0.62%	1.84%	2.01%	-0.49%	-0.145	***

⁴⁷World Bank figures are in constant 2000 US\$, whereas Collier assumes 1997 as base year. See conversion table at <http://oregonstate.edu/cla/polisci/download-conversion-factors>

⁴⁸COLLIER et al. (2006), p.9

Table 5: GDP per capita growth – Source: World Bank

Thus the country's economy joins a global trend of recession, which – if the above hypotheses apply – would have the world as a whole inch closer towards violent conflict. Certainly this is a real threat for the most vulnerable contexts. Yet how large its influence on Iran, is difficult to assess since growth, too, is correlated with other variables.

In addition we have to distinguish the effect of general recession from that caused by the ongoing sanctions imposed by both the international community and the United States, in particular. These measures are already taking their toll on the country's economy hampering growth in targeted sectors.⁴⁹

Crude oil is Iran's primary export commodity. In the graph below we see oil rents as a percentage of GDP. I add a line representing dynamics of the oil price to quickly check for correlations. In the last decade the proportion of oil rents has constantly been between 20 and 40 per cent of GDP with two peaks at 38.0 and 37.7 per cent in 2006 and 2008 respectively. 2009 has seen a drastic decline.

Illustration 3: Iran's oil rents and OPEC basket price – Source: World Bank and OPEC

By the end of the year oil rents made up only 21.4 per cent of GDP.

The role of primary commodity exports is controversial when it comes to civil war risk. Collier and Hoeffler (2001) find evidence for high risk in countries whose economy is based on extraction and export. Their calculations suggest that the “risk of conflict peaks when they constitute around

⁴⁹Dispute is over Iran's nuclear programme. See UN Security Council's resolutions no. 1696 (2006), 1737(2006), 1747 (2007), 1929 (2010) and 1984(2011). For the United States' official position see the two recent interviews by Secretary of State Hillary Clinton on BBC Persian and Voice of America (see Appendix F for links).

32% of GDP”.⁵⁰

Fearon (2004) calls attempts to explain this result “contortions”⁵¹ and suggests concentrating on oil (rather than general primary commodities) because using a slightly different methodology, which should have no bearing on the outcome, he finds that “*the apparent impact of primary commodity exports largely evaporates.*”⁵² He suggests that

“[p]erhaps primary commodity exports appear to matter not because they indicate rebel financing potential but because they correlate with oil production, which marks state weakness conditional on income.”⁵³

State weakness of oil (and other primary commodities) exporters is old hat. With oil rents so easily available, rentier states do not bother to build up an effective and efficient state apparatus. This seems to make them more conflict-prone and exposes them to a series of other risks that are discussed in Collier (2007).

In the above graph it is worth noting that the 2009 oil price drop roughly coincides with the period of domestic unrest. However, establishing an immediate link between government revenue shortfall on the one and state capacity on the other hand would be a little too audacious considering the brief period of time. Moreover, in 2010 and 2011 the oil price went back up again.

4.3.3 TERRAIN CHARACTERISTICS AND URBANIZATION

Iran has a vast territory (about five times the size of Germany) and a relatively low population density (45 inhabitants per square kilometre⁵⁴). The overall population of around 75 million⁵⁵, however, is large and has the country rank eighteenth among all nations.

	Iran	Sample mean	Peace mean	War start mean	Correlation coefficient	Level of significance
Population	73.97	30.20	28.30	56.50	NA	NA
ln(population)	18.12	17.22	17.16	17.85	0.284	***

Table 6: Population – Source: United Nations

The sample means tell us that a country has a greater risk of violent conflict the more populous it is. This has been interpreted in terms of scale effects. It is difficult for a state to control a large population

Collier et al. (2006) argue that

⁵⁰COLLIER and Hoeffler (2001), p.8

⁵¹FEARON (2004), p.5

⁵²ibid., p.4. The difference in Fearon is that he considers the dependent and independent variables not in five-year blocks like Collier et al. (2006), but in a country-year format, i.e. he does his regressions on annual data. On advantages and setbacks of this method see Fearon (2004).

⁵³ibid., p.9f.

⁵⁴World Bank Data, 2010

⁵⁵It's 73.9 million on account of the World Bank (2010), 77.9 million according to the CIA World Factbook (July 2011 estimate).

“the coefficient on the log of population is significantly below unity (0.28), so that a doubling of population size increases the risk of civil war by only 21 per cent (from 4.7 per cent to 5.7 per cent), which is significantly less than double. The most plausible interpretation of this is that there are economies of scale in certain basic functions of the state, most notably the deterrence of organized violence.”⁵⁶

Some argue that, eventually, the main factors preventing rebellion are government efficacy and a strong state. If opportunities are low, the much-cited social entrepreneur won't show up to occupy the viable regime change niche.

With respect to Iran there is anecdotal evidence in support of this argument. The aforementioned 2009 riots were settled through the massive use of force on the part of the executive. An Iranian idiosyncrasy has it that besides government police and military forces there are paramilitary units, the *basiji*, who are backed by the establishment and help to crack down on rebellion (and sometimes peaceful opposition).

Traditionally Iran has a strong central state. Its origins date back to Reza Shah and his son and successor Mohammed Reza Shah's agenda of radical modernization. In countries with a strong central state, Fearon (2010) argues, “*social support from many sympathetic people*”⁵⁷ is needed in order for rebellion to succeed. Whether this is the case in Iran has to be carefully assessed.

As I have done above with education, once again I would like to resort to a variable that appears significant in Collier and Hoeffler (2001) but ceases to do so in Collier et al. (2006), namely population dispersion. “[C]ountries with a highly concentrated population have a very low risk of conflict, whereas those with a highly dispersed population have a very high risk”⁵⁸

I have not been able to reconstruct the dispersion index used by the authors, but I dispose of the figures concerning population density and urbanization. According to Collier and Hoeffler (2001), “[e]mpirically, prior to war episodes both population density and urbanization are low.”⁵⁹ I don't give exact correlation coefficients since in the authors' later work the significance of these variables has not been confirmed.

	Iran	Sample mean	Peace mean	War start mean	Correlation coefficient	Level of significance
Population density	45	150	156	62	<0	NA
Urbanization	70%	45.11%	46.00%	32.70%	<0	NA

Table 7: Population density and urbanization – Source: World Bank

Again the resulting picture is extremely ambiguous. Iran's high rate of urban dwellers (compare the country's 70 per cent in 2010 to the European Union average of 74 per cent) seems to lower the risk of war onset. Yet at the same time and due to the vast territory population density is low, even

⁵⁶COLLIER et al. (2006), p.12

⁵⁷FEARON (2010), p.39

⁵⁸COLLIER and Hoeffler (2001), p.13

⁵⁹COLLIER and Hoeffler (2001), p.5

lower than the war start sample mean.

In Iran there have been troubles linked with regionalism. The Kurds in the country's Northwest have a long history of resistance to the central state. Iranian Azerbaijan in 1946 even witnessed a temporarily successful secession and in the past clashes between powerful nomad tribes and the state led to major crises.

But what is the link between population dispersion and civil war? When Collier speaks of “*economies of scale in [...] the deterrence of organized violence*”⁶⁰ he implies that high population dispersion raises the cost of state surveillance because in a metropolitan area one police or military unit can control a great number of hypothetical dissidents, whereas in rural areas the ratio is less favourable.

Regions that are out of reach of the central power may become rebels' strongholds. This, in turn, points us to another variable, linked with the former, namely the proportion of mountainous terrain in a country.

If rebels find their “safe havens” in remote places inaccessible to government control, then it is to be expected that ruggedness of terrain predicts civil war probability in that it raises the cost of government control and lowers the cost of rebellion. This is the line of argument proposed by Collier et al. (2006).

Unfortunately I do not have reliable data concerning Iran's terrain characteristics, not to mention the index used by the authors. But a glance at near-term indicators convinces me that in Iran other than terrain factors have played a far more important role in recent political incidents. Therefore I propose to neglect the variable “mountainous”.⁶¹ If rebellion should appear, I argue, it is much more likely to “come out of some damned silly thing” in the cities, where 70 per cent of Iranians dwell.

4.4 FORMS OF VIOLENCE OTHER THAN CIVIL WAR

At this point of the paper, one might reasonably object that even if the risk of civil war onset is reassuringly low according to important parameters, there may be other forms of violence no less important. Indeed:

*“Our theory suggests that both grievance as well as economic factors are relevant to the analysis of political violence. The failure of the civil war empirical literature to account for this theory, we will argue, is the failure of this literature to model civil war as part of an evolving process of political violence.”*⁶²

Bodea and Elbadawi (2007) are pointing here to an intrinsic weakness of civil war theories. As

⁶⁰See fn 55.

⁶¹Another variable of Collier et al.'s model which I neglect for obvious reasons is the “former French African colony” dummy.

⁶²BODEA and Elbadawi (2007), p.23

we have already seen, the very way we define a civil war has some bearing on the outcome of statistical analyses. Population size is a significant factor in almost all models of civil war onset not least because in a populous country with an on-going conflict the threshold for deaths is more likely to be met.

But civil war is only one particular form of large-scale political violence and alongside it exist a whole range of other violent conflict patterns. In the introduction I cited genocide and ethnic cleansing. As to forms of lesser magnitude we may think of coups or politically motivated riots.

A more comprehensive approach to political violence would

*“view civil conflict as a process that has discrete levels or breakpoints. These begin with low levels of protest and proceed through higher levels of rebellion and, finally, if not sufficiently addressed, to civil war.”*⁶³

Escalation patterns are very probably driven by both intragroup and intergroup mechanisms. Social psychologists have shown how the process of “deindividuation” can lead to the complete loss of responsibility on the part of group members when the environment provides certain triggering factors.⁶⁴ The staggering cruelties committed by child soldiers in many wars on the African continent are an example of how these mechanisms can be exploited for a precise purpose.

As to intergroup mechanisms, it is said that the Thirty Years' War back in seventeenth-century Europe was fought for religious causes, and ethnic antagonism triggered the 1994 Rwandan genocide. Up until today addressing and fomenting religious and ethnic sentiment is part of many a leader's rule-and-divide strategy.

With respect to Iran we may take a look at the foundations of ethnicity and religion trying to understand how conflicts are processed and what grievance narratives there are. In ethnic terms Iran's society is relatively fractionalized. Table 8 shows its composition according to the CIA World Factbook and Ellingsen (2004).

	CIA World Factbook 2008 estimate	Ellingsen 1995 data
Persian	61%	51%
Azeri / Azerbaijani	16%	24%
Kurd	10%	7%
Lur / Luri	6%	2%
Baloch / Balochi	2%	2%
Arab	2%	3%
Turkmen and Turkic tribes	2%	-

⁶³REGAN and Norton (2005), p.326

⁶⁴Zimbardo's “Stanford Prison experiment” is a classic in social psychology. See bibliographical references.

Gilaki	-	8%
Other	1%	3%

Table 8: Ethnic groups in Iran – Source: CIA World Factbook and Ellingsen (2004)

When it comes to religion, however, we observe great homogeneity.

	CIA World Factbook 2008 estimate	Ellingsen 2001 data
Muslim (official)	98%	99.57%
Shi'a	- 89%	- 93.89%
Sunni	- 9%	- 5.68%
Other (includes Zoroastrian, Jewish, Christian and Baha'i)	2%	0.43%

Table 9: Religion in Iran – Source: CIA World Factbook and Ellingsen (2004)

It is important to note that religious conflict in Iran is less about struggles between religions – although the troubles faced by minorities like the Baha'i cannot be neglected – and more about state secularity.⁶⁵

The role of ethnicity (and religion) in civil wars is very contentious. For discussion, readers may refer to, among others, Montalvo and Reynal-Querol (2007), and Fearon and Laitin (2003). Here I argue that the traditionally strong and consolidated⁶⁶ Iranian national state has mitigated the fierceness of ethnic conflict. The erstwhile powerful Bakhtiari and Qashqai nomads, for example, have largely been kept out of politics in modern Iran. These considerations lead me to neglect the ethnic component of the Iranian conflict.

But there is another interesting point linked with religion that deserves to be tackled. It is about what I shall call “Islam-specific mechanisms of conflict escalation”. Bodea and Elbadawi (2007) observe that

“[p]opular demonstrations involving violence may lead to further violence for a variety of reasons: Episodes of violence legitimize future violent contestation of power; Violent rioting and protest signals discontent and grievance; Participation in violent riots creates individual experience or even leadership in the practice of violence; Finally, some violent protest may elicit a similarly violent response on the side of the government, leading to cycles of violence and repression (Tilly 2003, Moore 1998).”⁶⁷

It is quite astonishing how well this description fits the events in the run-up to the 1979 Iranian revolution. Back then, violence started on January 9, 1978 when police opened fire on a demonstrating crowd in the city of Qom. In response, a senior cleric declared *“that the traditional forty days of mourning were to be observed in all major cities, thereby initiating those cyclical waves of protest*

⁶⁵Nonetheless, readers should be aware that the 2009 protests are far from being a secular movement. See also FERRARO (2009): “[The young people of Iran] are Islamic, they are republicans and – as proven by the nuclear question – they are nationalists”.

⁶⁶Traditionally here means: since the Pahlavi era, when the Iranian state was drastically modernized.

⁶⁷BODEA and Elbadawi (2007), p.20

*and violence which regularly punctuated the course of the following month.*⁶⁸

Demonstrators assembled anew in the streets each time the forty-days period was over and the government cracked down on protests again leaving even more dead. Thus, after another forty days the latest victims could be commemorated. Eventually, protests against his regime assumed intractable dimensions and forced the Shah to flee the country.

This pattern of escalation, adroitly put to use by protest leaders, can therefore tell us something about an Iranian idiosyncrasy in conflict processing that stems from religious customs and is conducive to a circle of violence.⁶⁹

Surprisingly, observation of the latest post-electoral protest patterns yields the same results and supports this view. In June 2009, protests erupted immediately after election results were announced. Reports on an alleged electoral fraud in favour of the incumbent president Ahmadinejad spread throughout the country and sparked unrest in the major cities. Protests lasted for days and entailed mass arrests by the police and eventually there was also the much-feared first victim of state violence.⁷⁰

Just as we will by now expect, forty days later, i.e. in late July, another wave of demonstrations rolled through the country and led to new clashes between protesters and police. In addition, on other religious occasions such as the Shi'ite *Ashura* mourning or the death of the important reformist cleric Montazeri (both in late December 2009), protesters took advantage of general mobilization loudly airing their grievances.⁷¹

All this apparently contradicts my above findings about the mass of Iran's active male population being bereft of large-scale conflict experience due to their being born after the end of the last civil war in their country. Thus, I argue that in Iran organizational knowledge about mass mobilization, clearly a form of "conflict-specific capital", is rooted in religion and has therefore been resistant to depreciation.

In short we can say that there have been opportunities for collective action against the state favoured by religious custom. The situation's further evolution, however, has shown that when popular action exceeded a certain intensity, the regime was no more willing to accept this threat to authority and therefore cracked down on demonstrations. Hence, the viable niche was not there.

⁶⁸ AVERY et al., *From Nadir Shah to the Islamic Republic*, 1991, p.292

⁶⁹ This property of an event whose occurrence affects the dimension of its own causal factors is clearly reminiscent of a positive feedback loop in systems theory.

⁷⁰ The case most largely publicized was probably the death of 20-year-old female protester Neda Agha-Soltan. My interest lies not in establishing the truth over – certainly propagandistic-sounding – allegations that the police killing was an invention by protesters. What I do is I use the evidence for mass gatherings provided by Western media and interpret it in terms of the conflict escalation pattern described in this chapter.

⁷¹ In appendix G I provide a brief press review of the events cited.

Regan and Norton (2005) explain this in terms of increasing rebellion costs:

*“The difference between protest and rebellion resides not in the size of the action but in the degree of threat targeted at the state. [...] Therefore, actions on the rebellion scale will be seen as a greater threat to the regime, and in response, the regime is likely to increase the cost for those actions.”*⁷²

This might be the exact mechanism we have seen at work in Iran.

Conclusions

In order to round up my findings I create a new table that assembles the observations of tables 2-6 and adds a column in which a letter expresses the appraisal each single observation receives in terms of conflict risk. If Iran fares “better” relative to the peacetime observations in Collier et al.'s (2006) sample, then it receives the highest grade “A”. If, on the other hand, even the countries with war starts outperform Iran, then “E” is the corresponding lowest grade denoting high risk. “B”, “C” and “D” are intermediate appraisals.⁷³

	Iran	Appraisal	Sample mean	Peace mean	War start mean	Corr. coeff.	Level of sign.
ln(GDP per capita)	7.608	C ⁷⁴	8.604	8.659	7.003	-0.203	*
GDP per capita growth (t-1)	0.62%	C	1.84%	2.01%	-0.49%	-0.145	***
Years of Peace	29	B	32	33	16	-0.057	***
Proportion of young men of age 15-29 in total population	17.89%	E	12.90%	12.90%	13.10%	17.423	*
Population	73.97	E	30.20	28.30	56.50	0.284	***
⁷⁵ Male secondary schooling	85.26%	A	43.42%	44.39%	30.30%	NA	NA

A=peace mean or better; B=closer to peace mean than to war mean (70-100%); C=30-70%; D=closer to war mean than to peace mean (0-30%); E=war mean or worse

Table 10: Appraisal of Iran's conflict risk by key variables

This table summarizes my findings. We see both positive and negative evaluations. The long-lasting (relative) peace in the country and its high educational achievements let the civil war option appear remote. Population size and the mass of young, potentially disillusioned, males, however, shed a different light on the situation. Oil and gas reserves add to the overall risk as they constitute promising “booties” for rebellion. But we should bear in mind that they do also provide the necessary state finance for repression.⁷⁶

⁷²REGAN and Norton (2005), p.328

⁷³More precisely I calculate the percentage attained by Iran on a scale delimited by war means on the lower and peace means on the upper end: $x = (\text{iran} - \text{war mean}) / (\text{peace mean} - \text{war mean})$.

⁷⁴This becomes “D” when taking actual values instead of the natural logarithm.

⁷⁵This variable's statistical significance has not been confirmed by COLLIER et al. (2006).

⁷⁶Some argue that Iran's state capability hinges largely on oil and gas rents and that international price shocks may easily have disastrous effects. In this paper I have not investigated this perspective.

We have seen that every war has its narrative and its social entrepreneurs, who always have distinct characters. The feasibility concept may feel strangely unworldly in this respect. It appears as an attempt to remain *super partes*. This is understandable in so far as it is important not to be influenced by propaganda when trying to correctly assess a conflict.

The model regains conspicuous practicality when applied to a real context, such as the Islamic republic of Iran. The picture that emerges is a dynamic understanding of the conditions necessary to maintain a political system in a stable state. Civil war, sadly, can be a stable state, too, and this points us to the extraordinary importance of understanding its mechanisms.

Feasibility theory, or more in general economic theory of civil war, provides an additional analytical key for interpreting observations. It does certainly not replace political science or any branch of history other than the economic one. To predict from which nest the rebellious hornets will eventually spring is extremely complex if not impossible, and it probably affords a Bismarck understanding of all levels of politics. Yet even the Lord Chancellor, in terms of precision, did not make the mother of all predictions. Still, to look at existing nests from different angles, as I have tried to do in this paper, is certainly most useful.

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Appendix

APPENDIX A

“Iran 1979. La Rivoluzione Islamica ... trent'anni dopo” – Panel di esperti organizzato dall'*Institute for Global Studies - School of Government*, Roma (11 febbraio 2009)

Intervento di Felicetta Ferraro, già addetta culturale all'ambasciata d'Italia a Tehran:

“Quella iraniana è una realtà complessa e multiforme, difficile da comprendere soprattutto non vivendo nel paese. Bisogna, però, dire che effettivamente la persistenza di pregiudizi, che sono ormai dei veri e propri stereotipi, sull'insieme del sistema iraniano appare uno degli ostacoli alla comprensione della realtà oggi.

Come ha scritto di recente uno storico iraniano, in un numero dedicato ai trent'anni della rivoluzione, prima del '79 (parla per gli Stati Uniti ma credo che valga un po' per tutti) il quadro dell'Iran era così positivo che nessuno è stato capace di cogliere i segnali evidenti del crollo che si stava avvicinando. Oggi, al contrario, il quadro è così negativo che non si riesce a vedere i progressi di una società maturata grazie anche alle dinamiche che la rivoluzione, consapevolmente e non, ha messo in atto.

La trasformazione che ha preso il via nel '79 è stata una trasformazione radicale che ha modificato in maniera irreversibile la politica e la società. Le dinamiche del cambiamento sono, quindi, strettamente connesse all'evoluzione interna della Repubblica Islamica e delle sue istituzioni ed è da questo punto di vista che vanno osservate. Oggi ne parlerò in maniera veramente molto breve mettendo in evidenza soltanto alcuni elementi.

Il primo fattore che secondo me è molto importante è quello demografico. Nel periodo post-rivoluzionario **la popolazione iraniana è raddoppiata**. Sono oggi quasi 74 milioni. Due iraniani su tre sono **giovani al di sotto dei trent'anni** e l'85% di questi giovani ha studiato e in molti casi possiedono un **titolo di studio avanzato**.

Sono giovani che non hanno sperimentato la spinta ideologica, il fervore della rivoluzione o le sofferenze della guerra, ma hanno vissuto l'entusiasmo delle riforme che è stato altamente formativo per loro, e vivono oggi, senza potervi partecipare pienamente, una fase difficile di transizione e di proprio scontro politico alla quale si aggiungono le conseguenze di una crisi economica che pesa sul loro futuro.

La generazione ancora più giovane, quella diciassettenne/diciottenne, che è massicciamente scolarizzata, dimostra chiaramente di voler entrare a pieno titolo nei **processi di modernizzazione e di globalizzazione** sui quali ha una discreta informazione. È una generazione inquieta per i tanti diritti che pensa di non aver riconosciuti e che incanala questo disagio in un distacco dalla politica che si osserva oggi tra i più giovani, o anche in forme di devianza giovanile: il problema della droga è una delle preoccupazioni oggi in Iran.

Ma è anche una forza che preme per il cambiamento e, come altrove, anche in Iran questi giovani la cui vitalità è un dato di fatto riconosciuto da chiunque abbia un po' di familiarità con il Paese, vogliono partecipare alla **società dei consumi** e vogliono aver accesso alla **cultura internazionale**. In realtà, sono queste le loro richieste.

Nonostante la distanza che una parte di essi proclama dall'Islam ufficiale, il loro ruolo e il loro voto sono essenziali per la sopravvivenza del sistema e questo è chiaro a tutti, anche alle forze politiche conservatrici che stanno cercando di capire come venire a patti con questa generazione.

Frutto dello stesso sviluppo demografico è anche la **massiccia presenza femminile** nella società (la professoressa Mosaffa ne ha parlato adesso). Le donne iraniane hanno assunto un ruolo da protagoniste e questo, possiamo dire, paradossalmente proprio grazie alle opportunità che la società islamizzata ha loro offerto. Il concetto dello **ciador “lascia-passare”** è ormai noto. Ed

effettivamente **l'islamizzazione** della società ha legittimato l'ingresso nella scuola e nella vita pubblica delle donne appartenenti a famiglie conservatrici, tradizionali e della stessa nomenclatura religiosa.

Inoltre, milioni di ragazze degli strati sociali più bassi e delle campagne hanno usufruito dello sviluppo economico delle aree rurali e [di] quelle tribali, che la Repubblica Islamica ha messo all'inizio della rivoluzione tra i suoi programmi prioritari, per accedere all'istruzione e al mondo del lavoro. Oggi il **66% degli studenti universitari** è costituito da donne e le donne sono presenti in tutti i settori della società.

Nello stesso tempo, il tasso di natalità si è drasticamente ridotto e anche questo ha contribuito a una presenza più ampia delle donne nel mondo del lavoro, ma anche della cultura, dell'arte e, in maniera forse un po' più limitata, della politica.

A fronte di questa evoluzione persiste ancora un **quadro giuridico restrittivo** e una **pratica sociale di natura patriarcale** che, entrambi, sono ormai in aperto contrasto con il mondo femminile. I dati li conoscete, sono noti: una donna non può chiedere il divorzio, né ottenere l'affidamento dei figli e così via.

Contro questo quadro legale che, [...] si è costituito un movimento femminile che è molto attivo e che comprende donne di tutte le appartenenze. Donne che provengono dall'interno del mondo islamico e donne che sono in qualche modo un po' più ai margini di questa realtà. E non è un movimento completamente isolato sul piano politico. In generale si può dire che, malgrado le apparenze, il Paese presenta tutte le condizioni per una rivoluzione nella condizione delle donne.

Abbiamo, poi, un importante fattore che è quello della **urbanizzazione** che si era avviata già nel periodo precedente la rivoluzione, anzi ne è stata in parte una delle cause, e ha contribuito a creare una nuova identità che è quella del **cittadino**. Molti dei quali ricorderanno Sha'vand *** è il titolo anche di un famoso quotidiano del municipio di Tehran che sottolineava questa nuova categoria. Un cittadino che si libera progressivamente dei comportamenti sociali collettivi associati, quindi, all'appartenenza a un gruppo etnico, tribale, religioso o professionale.

Non è più possibile, o almeno lo è sempre di meno, analizzare la società iraniana in termini di sistemi tradizionali o sociologicamente coerenti: i cittadini, gli abitanti rurali, i nomadi, i sunniti e così via. Il **mescolamento** di tali categorie all'interno di realtà vaste, si pensi per esempio alla città di Tehran, e la presenza di strategie individuali di comportamento [sono] sempre più evident[i] e costituiscono in sé un fattore di cambiamento importante nei rapporti all'interno della struttura sociale.

La crescita della componente urbanizzata non ha significato, però, o almeno non ancora, la perdita di importanza delle aree rurali che sono state oggetto di un'integrazione realizzata, senza grandi traumi questa volta, grazie alla rete di legami che le nuove élite intrattengono con queste realtà dalle quali spesso provengono e con le quali parlano un linguaggio comune.

Un fattore che è rivoluzionario nel vero senso della parola, nel contesto dei rapporti tra Stato e cittadini in Iran, è costituito poi dalla partecipazione alla vita politica, dalla politicizzazione dei singoli. L'Iran ha conosciuto dei momenti di azione politica collettiva – ricordiamo tutti la rivoluzione costituzionale – ma sono stati comunque dei movimenti limitati ad alcune fasce della popolazione, la più istruita e occidentalizzata, ed eventualmente una parte illuminata del clero.

La mobilitazione generale intorno agli eventi rivoluzionari e anche nelle successive lotte tra i gruppi, che avevano preso parte, ha aperto, invece, la strada a forme di partecipazione nuove che hanno coinvolto per la prima volta non solo gli intellettuali e una ristrettissima classe dirigente, ma tutta la popolazione compresi i gruppi rimasti storicamente ai margini.

L'organizzazione dello Stato in forma repubblicana che, benché islamica, prevede regolari consultazioni elettorali ha consolidato l'attitudine alla partecipazione. Gli iraniani sanno che votare può cambiare il loro destino, se lo fanno o non lo fanno, ma sanno che può cambiare il loro destino.

Le elezioni sono condizionate da un controllo preventivo dei candidati e non sono immuni dalla manipolazione (anche se non in misura maggiore di tanti altri paesi) ma esistono, sono regolari e determinano una vita politica movimentata con raggruppamenti politici contrapposti, scontri, vittorie, perdite, momenti di consenso e momenti di astensione da parte dell'elettorato. Le prossime presidenziali saranno in queste *** un banco di prova considerati anche *** i nomi dei candidati .

Infine, altra trasformazione decisiva, ultima in questa lista ma sicuramente importante: **l'assunzione diretta del potere da parte del clero** ha avuto come conseguenza la cooptazione nel processo di evoluzione della società di una componente la cui opposizione aveva fatto fallire i precedenti tentativi di modernizzazione. Posti di fronte alla necessità di governare, i religiosi, anche quelli più tradizionalisti, si sono confrontati con la realtà viva del Paese e hanno sviluppato al loro interno una dialettica che sta determinando importanti evoluzioni. Si pensi, per fare un solo esempio, alla critica del modello dello Stato che proviene dal clero riformista o dai cosiddetti intellettuali religiosi e all'influenza che essa ha avuto attraverso l'esperienza del precedente governo.

L'Islam iraniano, questa è una delle tesi che fa da cavallo di battaglia di un libro di Bernard Hourcade, "Iran : Nouvelles identités d'une république" – che vi consiglio veramente di leggere –, ha vissuto dopo la rivoluzione un cambiamento profondo modernizzandosi e consolidandosi e le conseguenze di questo processo appaiono durature, perché contemporaneamente si sono modernizzati i gruppi sociali ad esso tradizionalmente associati.

Nuovi soggetti hanno preso nelle mani la gestione complessiva del Paese. Provengono dalle file della rivoluzione, sono stati militanti, hanno fatto la guerra e poi, con il ritorno alla normalità, hanno studiato nelle università iraniane e all'estero, sono politicamente più spesso conservatori che non progressisti, ma sono modernisti negli affari e liberali in materia dei rapporti internazionali. E soprattutto hanno un'identità precisa: sono **islamici**, sono **repubblicani** e, come dimostra la questione nucleare, sono **nazionalisti**.

Concludendo, se si osserva l'Iran di oggi, avendo di fronte l'aspetto complessivo della sua realtà, è evidente che l'utilizzo del paradigma tradizione-modernità con l'Islam associato esclusivamente a tradizione non è più possibile, perché le dinamiche della società iraniana comprendono **l'Islam come fattore di cambiamento duraturo**; che al momento il cambiamento è più sociale che politico ma che- proprio perché la società iraniana è oggi giovane, educata e in maggioranza urbana, non ostile alla cultura internazionale, alla scienza, alla tecnologia, con in mano strumenti di partecipazione alla vita politica che può attivare - il cambiamento, che grazie alle nuove generazioni appare **inevitabile**, avrà carattere duraturo."

Fonte: <http://www.radioradicale.it/scheda/272562/iran-1979-la-rivoluzione-islamica-trentanni-dopo>

Trascrizione: David Eickhoff, October 17, 2011

APPENDIX B

Region / income level	Male gross secondary school enrolment (2009)	Iran compared with region/income level	
		percentage points	percentage
Iran	85,26%	-	-
World	69,17%	+16.09	+23.27%
High income: OECD	100,89%	-15.63	-15.49%
Upper middle income	81,27%	+4.00	+4.92%
Middle income	69,60%	+15.66	+22.50%
Lower middle income	60,84%	+24.42	+40.14%
Low income	41,91%	+43.36	+103.45%
Arab World	74,70%	+10.56	+14.14%
Europe & Central Asia (developing only)	90,75%	-5.48	-6.04%
Latin America & Caribbean (all income levels)	85,63%	-0.37	-0.43%
Middle East & North Africa (all income levels)	77,25%	+8.02	+10.38%
Sub-Saharan Africa (all income levels)	40,14%	+45.13	+112.43%

Table 11: Iran's performance in male gross secondary school enrolment – Source: World Bank

APPENDIX C

	Data source	Reference year (last available)
GDP measures	World Bank Development Indicators	2001-2009
Years of Peace	Gleditsch (2004)	2011
Population & education	UN (2008 census) and World Bank Development Indicators	2008 2009
Juvenile unemployment	World Bank Development Indicators	2008
Oil rents & OPEC basket price	World Bank Development Indicators and OPEC	2000-2009 2000-2011
Ethnic composition & religion	CIA World Factbook and Ellingsen (2004)	2008 1995/2001

Table 12: Data sources

APPENDIX D

Region / income level	Male juvenile unemployment rate (2008)	Iran compared with region/income level	
		percentage points	percentage
Iran	20.21%	-	-
High income: OECD	13.84%	+6.37	+46.00%
Euro area	15.80%	+4.41	+27.94%
Europe & Central Asia (developing only)	16.49%	+3.73	+22.60%
Latin America & Caribbean (all income levels)	11.74%	+8.47	+72.14%
Italy	23.25%	-3.04	-13.06%
Spain	39.08%	-18.87	-48.28%

Table 13: Iran's performance in male juvenile unemployment (15-24 years) – Source: World bank

APPENDIX E

	Iran	Sample mean	Peace mean	War start mean	Correlation coefficient	Level of significance
ln(GDP per capita)	7.608	8.604	8.659	7.003	-0.203	*
GDP per capita growth (t-1)	0.62%	1.84%	2.01%	-0.49%	-0.145	***
Years of Peace	29	32	33	16	-0.057	***
Proportion of young men of age 15-29 in total population	17.89%	12.90%	12.90%	13.10%	17.423	*
Population	73.97	30.20	28.30	56.50	0.284	***

Table 14: Iran data and Collier et al. (2006) sample means

APPENDIX F

US Secretary of State, Hillary Clinton, interviewed by BBC Persian and Voice of America:

<http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=ED0iU-sMaGA>)

<http://www.rferl.org/video/27081.html>

APPENDIX G

Newsroom	Header	Link
<i>June 20, 2009</i>		
Aljazeera English	<i>Iran police "use gas" on protesters</i>	http://www.aljazeera.com/news/middleeast/2009/06/2009620132648106415.html
BBC	<i>Iran police clash with protesters</i>	http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8110582.stm
July 30, 2009 (end of forty-days mourning period for June victims)		
BBC	<i>Iran Police clash with mourners</i>	http://news.bbc.co.uk/2/hi/middle_east/8175764.stm
<i>December 20-21, 2009 (mourning over Grand Ayatollah Montazeri)</i>		
Spiegel Online	<i>Thousands of regime opponents heading for Grand Ayatollah's funeral service</i> (Tausende Regimegegner strömen zur Trauerfeier für Großajatollah)	http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/0,1518,druck-668183,00.html
<i>December 28, 2009 (Ashura mourning)</i>		
Spiegel Online	<i>Tehran confirms death of eight people</i> (Teheran bestätigt Tod von acht Menschen)	http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/0,1518,druck-669178,00.html
<i>December 31, 2009</i>		
Spiegel Online	<i>Tear gas against demonstrators in Tehran</i> (Tränengas gegen Demonstranten in Teheran)	http://www.spiegel.de/politik/ausland/0,1518,druck-669700,00.html

Table 15: Press review Iran, June - December 2009