



The University of Tehran Press

Journal of Iran and Regional Studies

Online ISSN: 2645-6060

Home Page: <https://jices.ut.ac.ir>

Iranian Dialectics in the Ancient Middle East and Caucasus

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ARTICLE INFO

Article type:
Research Article

Article History:

Received 11 January 2025
Revised 05 February 2025
Accepted 08 February 2025
Published Online 08 February 2025

Keywords:

Theoretical Framework of the Iranian Dialectics,
Iranian Positive Dialectics,
Iranian Negative Dialectics,
Ancient Middle East,
Caucasus.

ABSTRACT

This article examines Iran's foreign relations in the ancient region now known as the Middle East (or West Asia) and the Caucasus, spanning from the establishment of Elamite civilization (3200–539 BC) to the fall of the Sasanian Empire in the 7th century CE. The analysis is conducted within the framework of the Iranian Dialectics, emphasizing the interplay between national and ultra-national variables. In the national domain, key factors include the belief systems of policymakers, the interest to political survival, the dynamics of political economy, Persia's geopolitical positioning, and its geographical realm. In the ultra-national context, the dominant world order and the international division of labor are pivotal variables shaping Iran's interactions. These components collectively play a critical role in defining Persia's relationships with both regional and extra-regional actors in the ancient Middle East and Caucasus. Based on these variables, four key indicators are identified: the agent-structure dynamic, symmetrical and asymmetrical interdependence, the influence of bureaucratic and non-governmental entities, and the international systemic status. Unlike the Iranian Negative Dialectics, which emphasizes disjunctions and fragmentation, the Iranian Positive Dialectics emerges as a primary outcome of agent-structure interactions in the Middle East and the Caucasus, highlighting the constructive interplay between these variables.

Cite this article: Houshisadat, M. (2025). Iranian Dialectics in the Ancient Middle East and Caucasus. *Journal of Iran and Regional Studies*, 7 (2), 53-70. DOI: <http://doi.org/10.22059/jices.2025.388656.1081>



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Publisher: University of Tehran Press.

Introduction

Iran, historically known to the world as Persia, is a sovereign nation-state in Western Asia that has been profoundly influenced by its foreign relations, particularly in the Middle East and the Caucasus. The name 'Iran' dates back to as early as the third century BCE, when a ruler referred to his empire as 'Iranshahr' and proclaimed himself 'King of Kings of Iran' (Daniel 2001: 1). The regional core areas are composed of the Persian Gulf littoral, the Fertile Crescent (Levant) and North Africa. Throughout over 3,300 years of history, Persia was ruled by centralizing powers, including the Elamites, Medes, Achaemenids, Parthians, Sassanids, as well as the non-Persian Seleucids. During the Seleucid era, Persia lacked an independent and unified government, along with a cohesive foreign policy. Notably, Persian foreign policy and international relations remain underexplored topics in the study of Middle Eastern and ancient Iranian history, despite the availability of substantial source material. Excellent works for background and further reading have been produced, though the author highlights only a select few. The field of Iranian history, particularly its foreign policy toward the Middle East and the Caucasus, has only recently achieved a degree of maturity in terms of monographic research and secondary literature. This progress now allows for a more substantial response to the growing demand for deeper explanations in this area.

Some of these accounts to date, such as Ervand Abrahamian's "A History of Modern Iran" (2008), have confined themselves to dealing with the emergence of modern Iran. Others, such as Richard Frye's "The Heritage of Persia" (1962), Elton Daniel's "the History of Iran" (2001), Michael Axworthy's "A History of Iran Empire of the Mind" (2008), Touraj Daryaee's "the Oxford Handbook of Iranian History" (2012), and Richard Foltz's "Iran in World History" (2016) have attempted to produce grand narratives of Iranian history. The emphasis of "the Cambridge History of Iran, the Seleucid, Parthian and Sasanian Periods; Volume 3" (1975) that was edited by Ehsan Yarshater, is upon domestic conditions in Persian agent and regional affairs, to some extent. Homa

Katouzian's books, entitled "the Persians Ancient, Medieval and Modern Iran" (2009) and "Iranian History and Politics: The Dialectic of State and Society" (2003) fall into this latter category.

Nonetheless, Katouzian's accounts are a historical survey and an analytical as well as empirical interpretation of that history, encompassing. The Middle Eastern political relationships in Dignas and Winter's surveys of the "Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity: Neighbours and Rivals" (2001) provides the best outline of the whole period. It begins and ends with wars and conflicts, while the Persians exchanged more with the Western Greeks and the Seleucids, followed by the Roman Byzantine.

In their excellent contributions to John Rich's "War and Society in the Roman World", (1993) and Daniel Snell's "A Companion to the Ancient Near East", (2005) Brian Ampbell and Mark Chavalas compare the structures of the empires with a closer focus on regional relationships.

The essays in the guide to the Persian foreign relations during the ancient Middle East and Caucasus edited by Christopher Thornton (2010) and Antigoni Zournatzi (2013) inform the interested reader on topics that are of much relevance for our context. William Wohlforth and his colleagues (2007) study the international and regional order during the ancient Middle East and Caucasus in their joint academic paper of "Testing Balance-of-Power Theory in World History". Rouhollah Ramazani in his academic article (2004), entitled "Ideology and Pragmatism in Iran's Foreign Policy" analyses and compares the principles of the Persian foreign policy since the ancient empires.

The reason for this research is that most edited or single-author books and scholarly articles tend to emphasise the history of Iranian foreign policy towards the ancient Middle East and

Caucasus, while not to provide coverage for Persian foreign relations theoretically. Hence, there is a need for academic research that attempts to elucidate the Iranian foreign relations in the ancient Near East on the basis of the variables and indicators of the Theoretical Framework of the Iranian Dialectics. This is the first and foremost difference from other books and articles written on the history of Iranian foreign policy towards the ancient Middle East.

The less-explored thirty-three-century image of the Persian foreign relations in the ancient Middle East and Caucasus is examined by the author, and this article is thus a most welcome addition to previous works that has few titles on it. In fact, it is the goal of this research to illuminate the much less-known Persian foreign relations in the region and expands the domain, the variables and the indicators in which the theories of foreign policy can be evaluated, based on the Iranian case study. This research attempts to fill this void reconstructing and analysing the story of the Persian foreign relations and foreign policy in MENA during the ancient civilisations and empires based on the Theoretical Framework of the Iranian Dialectics. This article consists of a short introduction explaining the ancient Near East in brief, followed by literature review. It investigates the nature and composition of the Theoretical Framework of the Iranian Dialectics on the Iranian plateau and the surrounding lands in the ancient Middle East and Caucasus in more than three millennia since the establishment of the Elimate, as the first Persian monarchy, up to the fall of the Sassanid Empire.

Theoretical Framework of the Iranian Dialectics

Having represented as the consequent of foreign policy, foreign relations display the agent's management in this arena within the international structure. Therefore, both structure and agency need to be brought into consideration. We can either explain state behavior as the consequence of the structure of the international system or observe it as the outcome of policy making within the state (Smith et al., 2016: 6). Some argue, for instance James Rosenau, Richard Snyder, Hay (and Williams), that both agency and structure are involved in foreign policy with decisions being made (agency) but always within a set of constraints (structure). Epistemologically, the objectivist approach studies the subject (agent) being impressed by the object (structure) in foreign policy.

Rosenau in his "pre-theory of foreign policy" includes individual variables (agent) as one of his five sets of independent variables thought to be important in understanding and explaining foreign policy behavior. Moving toward a theory of "National-International Linkage", he defines linkage as "any recurrent sequence of behavior that originates in one national or international system and is reacted to the other one." Rosenau also underscored the need to integrate information at several levels of analysis, including individual policy makers, national, as well as the international system in understanding foreign policy (Rosenau, 1971: 108-109). On this basis, existing orientations in the foreign policy of countries are not constant, because the realm of foreign policy is the product of interaction between the changing domestic and foreign events.

"Foreign Policy Decision-Making", edited by Snyder and his colleagues is one of the foundational works of the subfield of foreign policy analysis emphasising the agent-structure mutual effects. Snyder concentrated further on the effects on foreign policy of individuals and their preconceptions, organisations, their procedures, cultures, and their values as well as the reciprocal interaction with the international structure (Snyder et al., 2002: 65, 120-124).

Rouhollah Ramezani; moreover, argues the autonomy refers to optimise freedom of action in the international system meaning that countries' policy makers, apart from other states' influence and power, can administrate and pursue their own specified foreign policy strategies. According to Ramezani in his article under the name of "Dynamic Triangular Interaction", Iranian foreign policy is defined as a sphere demonstrating dynamic interaction between

domestic development, foreign policy, and the effects of the international system (Ramezani, 2009: 17-31).

Now, the questions are asked in a slightly different dialect than that used by Rosenau, Ramezani, Snyder and others. They mostly emphasised the importance of the structure-level explanations of the agent behavior in foreign policy, at the expense of examining more micro-level explanatory levels that focus on how and why agents act in international system. So, it could be perceived as more independent factor mainly by Rosenau.

It is now more inclined to comprehend foreign policy as a combination of inputs and outputs that apply to the behavior of a wide range of players, from international factors to influential regional and domestic elements. Posting and answering questions about main players as well as the inputs and outputs of foreign policy decisions means placing oneself first within a particular viewpoint of what foreign policy as a form of state behavior is, who make it, how we judge its implementation (foreign relations), and the local and structural effects of that foreign relations. On this basis, possible responses to such questions can be found first in the realm of theory and theoretical framework and only subsequently in case study(s) that draw out the actors, context, tools, and goals that constitute a particular decision (Smith et al., 2016: 2). Our focus is on what might rightly be regarded as the theoretical framework of the Iranian Dialectics that studies the mutual interactions between the agent (state behavior) and the structure (international system) in both micro and macro levels positively and negatively. This article is something of an exercise in bridge-building with a greater appreciation of the multilevel and multi-casual dynamics, as comprehensively studied by Snyder, Rosenau and others. In addition, theory and theoretical framework is of little interest unless one can utilise it in specific case study(s). Accordingly, the unstudied relationship between agent and structure based on the above-mentioned form in Iranian foreign relations is undertaken by the Theoretical Framework of the Iranian Dialectics.

Iran was defined and presented by both insiders and outsiders. On this basis, the structure provides reproducing the agent's role and mutually, the agent is subordinated to the international structure. Consequently, these two actors support survival of the other side and the state of quo. The Iranian Positive Dialectics is the main consequence of these agent-structure's reciprocal interactions, in both regional and ultra-regional levels. The Iranian Negative has been; on the other hand, the main outcome of direct and indirect confrontations between the Persian agent and the international structure, yet at times the revisionist agent has tried to change the status of quo in the system. The Theoretical Framework of the Iranian Dialectics in the history of its foreign relations is based on establishing the relationship between the national and ultra-national variables that influence on the foreign policy. The beliefs system of the leading policy-makers (along with those of other key actors) is the first variable within the national area while concentrating on value orientations, ideological tendencies, personality traits, psychological predispositions, well-defined preferences as well as perceptions of the dominant decision-maker. Nonetheless, the leaders' beliefs system does not lead to decision automatically. The interest to survival, as the second factor, could be prioritised to the survival of the state. The factor of political economy has been affecting the Persian foreign policy that was dominated by the central powers in the Middle East and the Caucasus. The geopolitics of Persia could be considered as the fourth factor having been frequently threatening and, in some cases, advantageous. As the fifth factor, the Iranian foreign relations have been influenced by its geographical realm.

The ultra-national field consists of dominant world order, as well as the international division of labor. In fact, Persian agent was just subordinated to the international structure during the Seleucid's reign. The second ultra-national variable has affected the governmental structure and

decision-making in foreign policy and could be perceived as a continuation of the internal political economy in the agent.

On this basis, four indicators could be considered based on the mentioned variables. The first indicator refers to realities within both agent and structure that Ramezani and Rosenau have insisted on these parameters. The mutual interdependence between the agent and the structure, as the second indicator, has been, to some extent, explained in Ramezani's "Dynamic Triangular Interaction" and Rosenau's "National-International Linkages". What the Theoretical Framework of the Iranian Dialectics adds to the mentioned frameworks is the realities of the agent-structure's interactions, as well as the dialectics between these two main players positively or negatively. As such, the agent-structure's interdependence could be symmetrical or asymmetrical led to active or inactive confrontations. The third indicator is displayed within the agent under the title of bureaucracy and the nongovernmental circles that influences the process of decision-making in foreign policy. It is important to indicate that the structure, as the intermediate actor in this indicator, is impressed by the dialectics between both interior governmental and non-governmental agents. In other words, interaction between the structure and the agent could result in active confrontation or interaction between the governmental and non-governmental circles. Accordingly, the feedback of these engagements could be evident in foreign policy and consequently in foreign relations within the international system. Therefore, active confrontation within the Persian agent has been the outcome of asymmetrical power distribution between the governmental and non-governmental circles. On the other hand, symmetry in power distribution between the mentioned circles results in more internal unity and even negative dialectic against the structure.

The fourth indicator, contrary to the third one, is related to the structure, entitled the systemic status. As a matter of fact, orderly and disorderly international system affects the symmetrical or asymmetrical interdependence between the agent and the structure resulting in Iranian dialectics in both positive and negative forms. In this sense, the international system in transition could cause to decline in interaction with the Iranian agent.

"Iranian Dialectics in the Middle East and the Caucasus (c. 2700 BC – 660 CE)"

The first era in the Iranian foreign relations in the Middle East and the Caucasus; including the Persian Gulf region, Fertile Crescent (Levant) and Caucasus; accounted for the ancient civilisations and empires which ended upon the rise of the Islam.

Not until BC 2400, when Akkad subjugated the Amorites in the west, Assyrians in the north, Elamites in the east and Sumerians in the south Near East could lay claim to the title of monarch (Friedman, 2006: 25). Thereafter, the Middle East and the Caucasus ancient history is flow of kingdoms and empires, including Akkad, Sumer, Babylon, Hittite, Assyria, Lydia, the Seleucid, the ancient Egyptians, as well as the Persian dynasties of Elamite, Mede, Achaemenid, Parthia, and Sassanid.

The Elamite (c. 2700 BC – 539 BC) and the Median (678–549 BC)

The Pre-Iranian Elimate was the earliest aboriginal inhabitants of Iranian plateau and can be regarded as the founders of the first Iranian kingdom (Daniel, 2001: 25-26) that reached its apogee in the early thirteen century BCE approximately contemporary with the Sumerians in Mesopotamia (Burney, 1977: 150). Prior to the Aryan arrival, the consolidation of the Elamite confederation through the integration of the various tribes in Iranian plateau could have been made crucial as a response to the expansionist policy and military campaigns of Mesopotamian centralised states with a bureaucratic elite dependent on the king, especially those conducted by Assyrians and Ur monarchies (Shahbazi, 2012: 122). The Elamites initially attacked and destroyed Ur, and later invaded Babylonia. However, this kingdom was unable to embark on Assyrian-style imperial growth (Wohlforth et al., 2007: 162) and was influenced by the

Mesopotamian culture (Alizadeh, 2010: 373). The power vacuum created by the collapse of the Akkadian Empire benefited an independent Elam (Potts, 2012: 41).

The Semitic-speaking Assyria with the militaristic and imperial approach as well as high national unity, was at the center of the international system that would make them the largest empire to date in the world (Wohlforth et al., 2007: 161). It exercised its hegemony over the entire Middle Eastern multipolar system with more than 600 vassal kings. (Friedman, 2006: 27, 46) The Assyrians held the upper hand in the border zones, such as the Battle of Til Tuba in 653 BC, and these campaigns were marked by more forceful and direct Assyrian involvement in Elamite affairs, led to rapid succession of kings and instability in Elam (Waters, 2014: 23-24).

Contrary to the agricultural economy of Mesopotamian, the Elamite economy was based on mining and export of raw material, such as tin and copper, that was crucial for the powerful empires of Babylon and Assyria, whose war machines had an insatiable need for iron. Mesopotamia was dependent upon their resource-rich neighbors that means the conflict between the regional states, as the catalyst for economic expansion in other areas (Chavalas, 2005: 39) . So, the highlands of northwestern Iran were a prime source of supply for both and regularly invaded Elamite state since the late ninth up to the sixth century BC (Thornton, 2010: 31-32) . Furthermore, Elam buffered the Persian tribes from Assyria and Babylonia that permitted gradual domestic unity and consolidation (Shahbazi, 2012: 123). On the other hand, the small size of the opposing coalitions and neighboring states made side-deals with the Assyria (Wohlforth et al., 2007: 162) that manifests a period of Elamite and Assyrian interaction that began with the Elamo-Assyrian peace treaty of 674 BC lasting until 626 BCE (Alvarez-Mon, 2013: 472). This represents a vast regional trading network between Mesopotamia and Iranian plateau (Daniel, 2001: 26). For the foreign policy of Assyria essentially aimed at the acquisition of valuable goods and within this empire, vassal rulers were bound to Assyrians through treaties (Cotterell, 2017: 86, 127). The collapse of Babylonia's ally Elam by Assurbanipal (668-627 BC), the last great Assyrian king, left a power vacuum in Iranian plateau and removed a buffer between this empire and the rapidly growing power of the Median monarchy (Burney, 1977: 191). Upon the downfall of the Assyria and Semitic rule in the Middle East, the unity of the region was destroyed until the Persians reunited the areas of the previous Assyrian Empire. It was not until the Arabs under the banners of Islam that the Persian lost their hegemony (Fisher, 1969: 13).

The process of what can be called the Persian national consolidation and state formation was accelerated because the Medes came into contact with the aggressive and expansionist Assyrian Empire. Rasis I (735-714 BC) merged the Persian tribes into a coherent political and military force along the frontier into anti-Assyrian alliance, mostly with the Elamites, then Babylonia and also Urartu as the point of entry to the region (Daniel 2001: 36). The second purpose of this alliance was to assure the security of the primary east-west trade route passing from Iran. This coalition threatened the Assyrian regional hegemony and led to conflict, and pressure applied against the Medes (Sicker, 2000: 63-64).

Nevertheless, in 612 BCE, an alliance comprised of Babylonian, the great rival of Assyria in Mesopotamia, and Median defeated the Egyptian-Assyrian coalition and then captured the Assyrian Capital of Nineveh, marked the end of a once mighty empire and the struggle for control of the Fertile Crescent had been decided in favor of Babylonia (Beaulien, 2005: 48). Egypt, was forced to remain behind its own traditional boundaries in Africa and Assyria disappeared entirely from the world stage. At about the same time, the Lydians secured her frontiers by treaty with Media, as a peer rival (Wohlforth et al., 2007: 162). Seemingly, the regional conflict was ultimately settled after Assyrian downfall on the basis of the preservation of the status quo. The Elamite civilisation and Median culture and traditions, such as cuneiform from the Sumerian

model, the system of administration, and the centralised power in policy-making played an essential role during the Achaemenid Empire (Foltz, 2016: 16).

The Achaemenid Empire (550-330 CE)

The Middle East and the Caucasus was divided into several kingdoms, including Media, Lydia, Babylonia and Egypt, by 559 BC, however the Assyrian fall left gradually the Medes and the Babylonian kingdom face to face (Briant, 2002: 22). There followed almost a century of multipolarity prior to Cyrus the great of Persia that captured Media in 549 BC due to friction between the Medians and the Persian royal families, led to establish a new hegemony in the 530s BC (Baker, 2012: 914). Lydia coalesced with Babylonia, East Greeks, Sparta and Egypt against Cyrus to revive the lost balance of power in the Middle Eastern structure; however, he took the first two states (in BC 546 & 538) and marched against Egypt, as the remaining major power in the Middle East and the Caucasus (Briant, 2002: 13; Shahbazi, 2012: 123). In fact, the Middle Eastern rulers regarded the conquest of the Mediterranean and the Persian Gulf littoral zones as well as the Fertile Crescent as an imperial narrative of the conquerable world (Haubold, 2012: 6, 18).

Cyrus established the first cosmopolitan state of the ancient world and was motivated by prudence rather than ideology in making policy decision. (Yarshater, 2003: 481) Therefore, in contrast with the legacies of the Assyrian and Babylonian kings, Cyrus neither decimated the conquered people nor deported their leaders. His policy of regional reconciliation was unprecedented in the history of the Near East. (Sicker, 2000: 79)

It was not Cyrus but his son and successor Cambyses who continued the Cyrus' expansionary phase of the empire's development with the conquest of Egypt (525 BC), as the remaining power in the Middle East and the Caucasus (Khatchadourian, 2012: 966). He formed an alliance with Arabian chieftains, whose their realms stretched from northwest Arabia in to southeastern Palestine and the Sinai (Ruzicka, 2012: 16, 36) controlling the routes across the Sinai Peninsula and could thus enable to the successful crossing (Waters, 2014: 54). The Persian-Egyptian conflicts was the continuation of the long-term struggles between the successive Middle Eastern kingdoms and Egypt that was rooted in geography when two cores on Egypt and the other on Mesopotamia, mainly Assyria, were competing in the Fertile Crescent, the so-called Levant or the middle territory. This struggle constituted a critical turning point and set the stage for broader East-West tussle in which Macedonians and then Romans played leading roles over the next thousand years (Ruzicka, 2012: xxi, 3-4, 215).

Subsequent of Cambyses conquest of Egypt, a new doctrine of strategic containment seems to have prevailed, confining Greeks and Persians to separate continents (Haubold, 2012: 18). Emphasis on Greek-Persian conflict in the Middle East and the Caucasus during the classical period (540s-330s BC) were complex, ranging from destructive invasion to temporary peace (Kosmin, 2013: 671). Chronologically, these battles ended at least for a time with the Peace of Callias in 449 BC, but thereafter the Persian supported Sparta against Athens in the terribly ruinous Peloponnesians wars. (Axworthy, 2008: 25) That eventually resulted in further hostility and two major campaigns against Greek mainland states by Darius and Xerxes I in 492-490 and 480-479 BC, while the Greeks launched a total ten campaigns against Egypt.

The Charismatic King, Darius I (522-486 BC) converted the Persian Empire into the global superpower and inaugurated a period of consolidation (Foltz, 2016: 18; Khatchadourian, 2012: 966). The empire-wide revolts due to the geographical realm of the Achaemenid Empire demonstrated the ineffectiveness of Cyrus' policy of ruling in such a vast territory through compatible local rulers. Darius; therefore, supported reforms in institutional and transport systems by arranging the territories into twenty provinces. Convenient roads from the frontier to the heart of the empire and canal between the Nile and the Red Sea were built so that

communications between the Persian Gulf to the Mediterranean coastline developed (Fisher, 1969: 14). To facilitate trade, commercial relations, and the exchange of commodities in the far reaches of the empire, Darius introduced a royal Persian coinage (Shahbazi, 2012: 133). Unlike Cyrus, who relied on Babylonian bureaucrats and Cambyses, who emulated the style of an Egyptian Pharaoh, the administration was centralised and Persianised by Darius and military was made more professional and Persian (Daniel, 2001: 42-43). The hegemony of Persia in the Near East represents that they sought to promote the legitimacy of their imperial rule (Zournatzi, 2013: 221-222). It attained international peace for two centuries in a large part due to adherence to the rule of the law, religious and cultural tolerance, statesmanship, (Shahbazi, 2012: 125) as well as loyalty to the imperial interests than to religious ideology (Ramazani, 2004: 550).

Any study of the Achaemenid's administration and decision making, such as in foreign policy, commences with the king, whose power was absolute, while he acted as a nexus amongst various sections within the bureaucratic system (Waters, 2014: 96). Most of Darius's I successors were however, weak in character, while corruption and in-fighting at court continued. (Daniel, 2001: 49) The internal administrative concerns weakened the central power of the king and this disorganisation had almost led to a disunified realm by the time of Darius III (Khatchadourian, 2012: 966). The Achaemenid's foreign relations in the Middle East and the Caucasus is generally told in a way that emphasises ongoing conflicts and political rivalry with the Western Greeks.

The Seleucid Empire (312 – 63 BC)

Less than two centuries following the Persian invasion to Athens, Alexander of Macedon defeated the Iranian armies at the Battle of Gaugamela in 330 BC, burned down Persepolis and established a Hellenistic Empire and made himself undisputed master of the entire Middle East which stretched from Persia to Egypt for about 200 years (323-146 BC). As such, the period of medieval Persia started since the fall of the Achaemenids and extended until the onset of sixteenth century AD. Indeed, Alexander devastated the integrity of Persia by undermining the authority of the kings and dividing the territory among his marshals. (Yarshater, 1983: 377) The Greek and Persian wars left an impression on the character and outlook of the western civilisation and empires in the centuries to come and its relations with empires and states in the Near East (Daniel, 2001: 50). Alexander failed to create administrative structure to sustain his empire, and his descendants were also unable to offer a stable alternative and Hellenise the Middle East (Wohlforth et al., 2007: 165).

Subsequent of Alexander's premature death in 323 BC, the Middle East and the Caucasus fell heir to half a century of political anarchy, the disintegration of central authority, and intermittent wars, while his massive empire was divided up between Macedonia (including Greece), Egypt and the most significant of which was a Hellenistic state, known as the Seleucids of Iran (Yarshater, 1983: 377). Yet it enjoyed a period of commerce and decades of important intellectual activity and relations with Hellenic politics and culture (Kosmin, 2013: 671).

This empire was vast, stretching from Mediterranean to the Send (Indus) in India, and was made up of different Iranian and non-Iranian peoples. Consequently, it proved more difficult to unite as one stable establishment (Beaulieu, 2005: 59). As a result, Persia was a subordinate agent to the structure without an independent foreign policy. Shortly thereafter, the Seleucid were absorbed into the Roman Empire, as were the rest of the Greek monarchies and would be succeeded by the Parthian Empire in 255 BC for nearly half a millennium.

This new phase of the conflict between the eastern and western cores in the Middle East and the Caucasus, comprising the Seleucids and Egypt, drove international relations in the Hellenistic Age. There was no détente as the two powers contested in a series of battles in

Levant. At the invitation of Egypt, Rome became the arbiter of Middle Eastern affairs, so the Romans soon established a protectorate over mainland Greek states and was master on western core, Asia Minor, and east of Mediterranean basin in opposition to the eastern core ruled by the Parthia, followed by the Sassanid Empires (Ruzicka, 2012: 212-213). They controlled both sides of the Caspian Sea, the eastern part of the Fertile Crescent, and the whole territory between the Tigris and Indus River.

Nevertheless, the Roman Empire was later divided between the Greek east and the Latin west.

Since the emperor Constantine transferred the Roman capital eastward to Constantinople in 330 CE up to the defeat of Emperor Heraclius by the Arab Muslims in 638 CE, the Roman provinces of the Middle East and the Caucasus were significant areas of the East Romans, hereafter usually called the Byzantine Empire (Fisher, 1969: 15). Therefore, the centre of Christian power in the Middle East and the Caucasus was Constantinople from 330 to 1453 CE.

The Parthian Empire (BC 247– AD 224)

The breakaway Seleucid state, the Parthia or the so-called Arsacids, embarked on their western expansion during the third century BC, while the Seleucids confronted with the new world power of Rome in the West, in addition of the Persians in the east. In effect, the Parthian Empire became the rival, balancing and opposing power for Roman policy in the Middle East (Mattern, 2002: 66).

It was master of the art of war and involved in a nearly 700-year-long phase of the Roman-Persian conflicts. The first major Roman invasion was led by the Emperor Trajan in 115 CE and most notably the battle of Carrhae in 53 BC, might be seen as necessary in terms of geopolitical competition, but ultimately futile (Axworthy, 2008: 34-38). However, the Romans' setback at Carrhae was great blow to Roman Prestige in the east. During the reign of the most significant Parthian king, Mithradates II, the Arsacids succeeded in extending their rule beyond the Euphrates River into Mesopotamia and Armenia. This was the beginning of an international role for the Parthian kingdom, a phase that also entailed contacts with Rome (Darijvers, 1998: 287). Their centres of the regional conflicts concentrated on the disputed territories in Mediterranean basin, the high plateau of Iran, most notably in Armenia as well as Mesopotamia. However, neither international agent could hope to destroy the other militarily (Campbell, 1993: 214, 220-221).

As a result, the regional relationships between Rome and Parthia achieved a rough balance of power in the east, based on control of Armenia that converted to Christianity in 301 CE, and with a de facto border along the Euphrates River. This was vividly more a psychological and political frontier than a real physical barrier (Ball, 1999: 16; Millar, 1993: 33, 437).

Concealed behind the long struggle between the western Seleucids followed by the Romans and the Parthians lie the origins of the silk trade, which was to be of central importance for many Iranian cities for more than a millennium. Accordingly, Persia, in effect, became a transit state and the most direct route from the Mediterranean lands to the further east, (Lewis, 1995: 38) while the Parthian control over the Silk Road trade network (Axworthy, 2008: 33) enriched the Persian Empire and established its role as one of the major global powers of the early Common Era, while. It was economically at the heart of the Roman-Persian conflicts and periodic wars (Foltz, 2016: 32). Though, Parthia and then Sassanid monarchs blocked the lucrative Silk Road trade in the Persian Gulf, Mesopotamia, and the east of the Mediterranean Sea occasionally. Persian geopolitical role as an intermediary was not at an end. As a result, Romans had to bypass Iran for the new trade routes to import silk spices from China and India and export gold coins to eastern and southern Asia since the first century CE (Frye, 1962: 196-197).

The last phase of Parthian-Roman relations was characterised by mutual respect based on the common interests and a sort of international law. The peace treaties of Nisibis in 299 and 363 CE made the Roman-Persian boundaries and the regional commerce more secure and established the Mesopotamia as a central to the trade between the two empires. Pragmatically, the two main agents in the Middle East and the Caucasus followed periods of rapprochement based on their common interest in commerce or Parthians' support to the Romans in the Jewish Wars (Rajak, 1998: 310). However, such relative concord and protocols could not be sustained due to the expansionist policies and imperial ambitions (Campbell, 1993: 234-236). However, the incessant wars with Rome, as well as the internal division and succession crises coupled with the stranglehold had critically weakened the cohesion of the Parthian Empire (Sicker, 2000: 173).

Internally, the Parthian system of political administration was more decentralised with omnipotent rulers by comparison with the Achaemenid system (Katouzian, 2009: 47). The monarchs presided over a considerable body of specialised officials, such as foreign policy decision-making (Dabrowa, 2012: 181). Nevertheless, the kings were elected through the first ever Persian parliament, the so-called 'Megisthanes', and the process of decision-making in foreign policy was observed and controlled by this entity.

The Parthians were primarily influenced by the Hellenised Persians of the Iranian hinterland, (Katouzian, 2009: 44-45) but during the Greek domination over Persia, Iran was never Hellenised as were Anatolia or even the other Middle Eastern territories (Lewis, 1995: 29). In addition, as the Arsacids was nomadic, it was unable to change the late Seleucid political system. As such, in order to be peacefully welcomed by the western provinces, the Parthian Empire converted into the provisional system with localised governors that they were virtually kings in their own provinces, conducting minor diplomatic relations with neighboring states (Arberry, 1963: 8-9). In general terms, the Parthians were more tolerant than the Sassanids in religious policies, (Lewis, 1995: 29) as the latter have used religious claims to reinforce his right by offensive foreign policy in the Middle East and conquest, even though individual monarchs would vary in these policies (Frye, 1962: 199; Southern, 2001: 231).

The Sassanid Empire (224-651 CE)

The rise of the Sassanid dynasty was a turning point regarding the Iranian foreign relations with Rome in the Near East. Although, the attitude of the early kings of the Sassanid against the Byzantine Romans was at first a continuation of Parthian sentiment, but they asked for more than declaration of loyalty from the client kings within his empire and claim all the territories that has once belonged to his Achaemenid ancestors (Dignas and Winter, 2001: 18).

The period of AD 320s to the 630s, Byzantine and Sassanid, were marked by repeated bouts of warfare and occasionally negotiations aimed at a restoration of the status quo. Likewise, both international agents engaged in mutually understood diplomacy and peace treaties in 244, 298, 363, 422, 562, and 628 CE. In fact, conflict and suspicion were punctuated by periods of peace, cooperation, and even goodwill, especially in the fifth century (Edwell, 2013: 853). Thanks to the embassies and courtly exchanges, Rome and Persia interacted and shared many points of interest regarding trade, the protection of the frontiers, cultural and religious policies (Arberry, 1963: 44). Under these circumstances and recognition of the regional balance of power, there still remained a vein of enmity in their regional foreign policy in accordance with religious and cultural differences and disputed areas.

In later years and decades, the succeeding Sassanid Empire maintained the geopolitical balance with the Rome and divided the Middle East and the Caucasus between the great two empires, approximately along a north-south axis marked by the Euphrates River drawing on the Parthian geo-strategic legacy. Notwithstanding, Iran held the upper hand over Rome throughout

much of the third century, (Foltz, 2016: 33) both Byzantine and Persia suffered from continuous dispute with no decisive advantage to either by the late 6th century CE (Frye, 1983: 173).

The “Arabia policy” of Persia and Byzantine remained a main component of their FR to deal with and administer the Arab territories in the Middle East (Dignas and Winter, 2001: 152). In fact, there was strife in the Arabian Peninsula caused by economic and commercial competition. Just as Byzantine dominated the western half of Arabia, the Persian controlled over the Mesopotamia, as a center of commerce, the eastern half of the Peninsula and the Persian Gulf that afforded favorable conditions for regional and ultra-regional commerce and communication (Dabrowa, 2012: 175). Shapur II and Ardashir I; moreover, subdued the whole of the Arab-occupied areas in western side of the Persian Gulf and Uman. Khusrau I intervened the Yemen on the pretext of aiding the Arabs against Byzantine (Zarrinkub, 1975: 1-2). The general policy of later Sassanid rulers was to prevent destructive incursions by nomadic Arabs from Hatra to the littoral of the Persian Gulf by establishing a buffer state on this border ruled by a friendly and loyal Arab dynasty (Daniel, 2001: 64).

Regionally, in order to protect themselves from periodic raids, the two empires created several client states, for example Yemen and the region of Jordan with its capital at the ancient trading city of Petra under the rule of the Sassanid and Byzantine, respectively (Arberry, 1963: 42). They had also given autonomy to strong tribes, including the Ghassanid under the protection of the Byzantine, while the Hira and Lakhmids were under the rule of the Persians (Armajani, 1970: 27). It means that these two Empires relied on their regional client states and the Arabian Peninsula turned in to the regional balance. This *de facto* mutual recognition in spite of hostile atmosphere, led to some areas of reciprocal cooperation based on shared interests, such as fending off bellicose nomadic invaders from Caucasus (Dignas and Winter, 2001: 192).

The Sassanid’s foreign policy might have tilted the balance in favor of the Zoroastrianism, (Daryaee, 2012: 187) despite of the Empire’s multinational character and distributed population, which was predominantly Christian and Jewish Mesopotamia in the west. In this point of view, the Sassanid Empire was the first religious state in Iran that made Zoroastrianism the official religion of the state (Ramazani, 2004: 551). However, its dealing with Christians and to a lesser extent Jews, were complicated following the Roman emperor Constantine’s Legalisation of Christianity in 313 CE, the so-called the Edict of Milan Christianising the Roman Empire. (Foltz, 2016: 36-37) This mutual religious pressures and intolerance caused in more centralisation in their political establishments domestically and escalation of the regional conflicts, more ideologically (MacMullen, 1985: 221). This means the now Christian Rome and the Zoroastrian Persian Empires dealt with the religious matters in a comparable way and that the union of autocracy and theocracy formed an important part of the Perso-Roman relations, impacting on armed conflicts and was the subject of agreements and treaties.

As such, some Sassanid monarchs, such as Ardashir I and Shapur I, waged wars against Romans because of the ideological foreign policy to spread Zoroastrian teachings in addition of the territorial claims (Ramazani, 2004: 552). Sometimes tolerated, more often persecuted, it was not separated from the State. Nevertheless, some Sassanid emperors pursued the policy of religious toleration within the Empire, such as Yezdegird I (399-420 CE), issuing a decree that permitted the Christians to rebuild their churches and to practice their religion openly (Lewis, 1995: 33). The prosecutions were resumed by his successor Bahram V (420-439 CE) and became so intense that a large number of Christians fled across the frontier to seek Roman protection (Sicker, 2000: 193).

As a matter of fact, severe defeats in battles, military exhaustion as well as domestic crises were the key reasons why the parties sought a cease-fire and tried to come to peace treaties. In other words, the Roman and the Persian Empires found each other as a perpetual menace in the

Middle East, while each of whom acknowledged the others sovereignty and that both rulers were perceived as equals.

It is not justified to limit one's focus on armed conflicts, nonetheless the military confrontations characterised Roman relations with her Eastern neighbour. Although the military conflicts impeded uninterrupted flow of trade, both sides showed an interest in close economic relations. Primarily, in order to secure the revenues from customs duties they designed a diplomatic framework for a regulated exchange of goods. The same as the Parthian period, the Romans were interested in breaking the Persian monopoly in east-west trade route to protect its eastern commercial relations with Far East and India, by bypassing Iran for the new trade routes centres (Dignas and Winter, 2001: 195, 200).

In the end, neither West nor East prevailed in the millennia-long conflict waged by the eastern and western cores.

This Perso-Roman, later Perso-Byzantine competition was the dominating political fact in the history of the Middle East and the Caucasus until the rise of the Islamic caliphate, which destroyed one of the rivals and greatly weakened the other. In other words, what started with the Greeks and the Achaemenids was carried on to the Romans and the Parthians, climaxed with the Byzantines and the Sassanids, and in total, ended with the Arab Muslims invasions.

Conclusion

Since the onset of the Christian era, the regions now referred to as the Middle East and the Caucasus have been persistent arenas of contention, caught between the competing interests of two imperial powers—an occurrence neither unprecedented nor final in their millennia-long histories. The theoretical framework of Iranian Dialectics is developed to analyze the dynamic interplay between national and ultra-national variables, offering a nuanced analysis of Persian foreign relations in the ancient Middle East and Caucasus.

In the national area, the first variable refers to the beliefs system of the policy-makers. This factor is; nevertheless, linked to the personal values, personality trait, ideological preferences, psychological and the individual perceptions of them. The militaristic approach of Assyria took effects the regional foreign relations, so the foreign policy had been militarised typically against the Middle Eastern kingdoms, such as the Persian Elamite and Mede. Cyrus and his successors were ruthless, ambitious statesmen; no one ever conquered an empire without those characteristics in full measures. The charismatic emperors, such as Darius I, made impressions on the foreign relations in the Middle East and the Caucasus. They did not attempt to marginalise the non-Persian peoples in their own territories. As such, Cyrus and Darius I were the major kings in this respect. During the Sassanid, Shapur II was a powerful and successful king with enormous prestige, but his inheritors, who inclined to tolerance of religious minorities and a peace-oriented foreign policy. In the remainder of Kavad's rule, and in that of his son Khosraw I (531-579 CE), the two monarchs pushed through several social and political reforms. Nevertheless, the latter fought a series of wars with Byzantine, in which he was generally successful (Axworthy, 2008: 59, 63). On the contrary, the greatest excess of Khosraw Parvez (Khosraw II) was in war with Byzantine. As has been shown, the use of religion as an instrument of the Sassanid and Byzantine Empires for purposes in foreign policy has its roots in ancient Greece and has continued to serve as a force for both national cohesion and regional division ever since. That is because the Zoroastrian Sassanid and Byzantine which was Christian in faith, declared war against each other.

The rulers' interest to political survival has been the second national variable. During the reign of Elamite and Mede, each of them coalesced with the other Middle Eastern monarchies against Cyrus the Assyria. Expansionist policy during the Persian Empires of Achaemenid,

Parthia and Sassanid could be interpreted as the monarchs' interest to political survival, while the Persian agent was a pillar of the international structure.

The political economy could be considered as the third internal variable. The agricultural economy of Mesopotamian was dependent upon the raw material and metals from the Elamite and Mede. This economic rivalry resulted in the Assyrian's offensive foreign policy towards Persia. Under the Achaemenid and since the reign of Darius I, the royal Persian coinage was minted in order to facilitate the commercial relations and the exchange of commodities throughout the empire. Iran enjoyed an intellectual relation with Hellenic politics and culture during the Seleucids. Military conflicts between Rome and Persian Empires hampered uninterrupted trade and commerce, nevertheless the two powers showed a common interest in economic relations. Just under the Parthian and Sassanid's reigns, it is possible to discuss about the commercial communications. The importance of the Persian role in the production of pottery, textiles, stone sculpture, ceramic, architecture, and its interactions with Byzantine might be cited (Arberry, 1963: 56-58). The geopolitics of Persia, as the fourth variable, has been historically both threatening and advantageous. The resource-rich Iran was the prime target of the Mesopotamians invasions, while Elamite buffered the Persian tribes from the Assyrian and Babylonian raids, geopolitically. The Achaemenid Empire, mostly after Artaxerxes I, failed to create a national identity and unity that was never attempted within the multi-polar system (Haubold, 2012: 15). Domination of the Hellenistic civilisation by the Greeks followed by the Seleucid Empire has been proved the former. In other words, geopolitics of Persia was threatening when the Greeks invaded Persian territories. In fact, the physical geography (territorial boundaries) of Persia did not correspond with the political geography (geopolitics) since Darius I, when he tried to invade Greece and Europe which resulted in domestic disintegration and western invasion of Middle East and Persia. This trend represents that the agent declines, for instance in the arena of foreign relations, led to foreign raid.

On the other hand, geopolitics of Iran has been advantageous mainly during the rise of Achaemenid (until the end of Darius's rule) to Sassanid's reigns by the Persianised empires. However, the Persian geopolitical borders corresponded to the geographical boundaries during the reign of the Parthian and the Sasanian led to relative stability of the political establishment. For this reason, Persia converted to an important pillar of the international order. The interactions of these two Persian agents with the international structure converted Iran to a pillar of the structure with positive dialectics in foreign relations and symmetric interdependence. Geopolitically, there are no significant natural frontiers in the Middle East from its eastern reaches into Central Asia to the Mediterranean in the west. As a consequence, the political and military leaders have struggled mightily to create buffer zones to provide security and strategic depth in which to repel aggressors.

The Geographical Realm of the agent, as the fifth variable, affects the decision-making in the area of foreign policy that has been more advantageous in the history of Persia. The power of the Achaemenid Empire, during the period between Cyrus and Darius I and after Artaxerxes I, had gradually decreased in the remote areas due to extensive geographical realm that resulted in domestic revolts.

In fact, they failed to create a national identity and cohesion that was never attempted (Haubold, 2012: 15). The death of Artaxerxes I also led to internal conflicts due to geographical realm. Yet, it proved difficult for these monarchs to hold their distant outposts in their domains in the Middle East and the Caucasus. The first influential ultra-national variable accounts for the dominant world order and its mutual relations with the international system. If the Near Eastern system during the Achaemenid was marked by prolonged hegemony, the Greek city-states in the fifth century BCE might appear to represent an archetypal example of balancing in an anarchic system. Therefore, the Persian hegemonic system yielded to the equally brief

hegemony of Alexander the Great, followed by the Seleucid Empire in the Near East. As such, the Persian agent was subordinated to the mentioned regional structure and order. The Persian agent was however, the sole hegemon within the regional international system during the Mede and Achaemenid, while the two successive Empires of Parthia and the Sassanid were the main pillars of the international and regional structure. The Byzantine was the only empire in the Middle East bordering on the Parthians and the Sasanian Empires which could be considered two equal and rival political systems. Therefore, a state of competition was the normal relationship amongst the leading regional powers and the balance of power continued to swing. However, subsequent of the Arab Muslims invasion and decline of the Sassanid and the Byzantine Empires, the regional and the international order and bipolar system changed.

The international division of labor is defined as the second ultra-national variable, being affiliated with the national variable of political economy. Set at the crossroad between the Mediterranean region Mesopotamia, Central Asia and East Asia, Persia was an effective intermediary for commercial and cultural communications and her impacts were felt in countries as far away as Byzantine. In fact, the Middle East and the Caucasus developed with urbanisation and long-distance trade. Mesopotamia was an area of the utmost importance to the Persian Empires and colonised by Iranians, a center of trade and commerce, mostly during the Achaemenid. However, the economic rivalry between the Persia and Byzantine continued until the fall of the Sassanid despite the peace. In order to secure its eastern trade, the Romans were interested in breaking the Persian monopoly as mediators for the exchange of goods along the Roman eastern frontier and also in acquiring trade centres outside the Persian Empire.

The first indicator for the Theoretical Framework of the Iranian Dialectics comprises the realities within the agent-structure arena and their mutual interactions. This concept has influenced on the Persian foreign relations in in forms of hegemony, regional cooperation, competition and conflict. Subsequent of the Assyrian downfall, the revisionist Elamite and Mede supported the status quo in the Near East. Since the rise of the Achaemenid up to the fall of the Sasanian Empires, the so-called medieval Iran, the boundaries of the Persia were defined by the Euphrates, the Caucasus, the Oxus and the Indus and the Middle East was Iranian at its core but ethnically diverse on its periphery.

The Middle East system during the Achaemenid was marked by prolonged hegemony, so the Persian agent defined the international structure and order. During the Seleucid, lack of independence and integrity is the main characteristic of the Persia that was under the dominance of the non-Persian empire. Just as in the Middle East, the downfall of the Persian Empire, led to the breakdown of the regional order. Bilateral relationships between Iran and Byzantine, as the two international structure, were overshadowed by the attitudes of diplomacy and conflicts during the Parthia and Sassanid.

The agent-structure interdependence, as the second indicator, is divided in two forms of symmetrical and asymmetrical. As noted, the Middle Eastern and Caucasian order during the Achaemenid was marked by hegemony, so the Persian agent defined the international structure. Persian regional foreign relations during the Seleucid's rule were dependent to the central power. That represented asymmetrical interdependence based on the Iranian quasi-negative dialectics by Parthia and inactive confrontation with the structure. Just during the Parthian and the Sassanid's reign on Middle East with the positive dialectics, symmetrical interdependence in foreign policy had been the dominant power with Byzantine. However, this trend did not turn the offensive foreign policy of the Iranian and Byzantine in the Middle East and the Caucasus in to defensive. In fact, active and inactive confrontation, mostly during the Parthia, were the major features of the two empire's mutual interactions.

The third indicator refers to the agent's bureaucracy and non-governmental circles. The Persian Empires were dominated by numerically elite of warriors, bureaucrats, and religious

officials. The Persian kings, such as the Sassanid, had long possessed a fabulous reputation of statesmanship (Arberry, 1963: 62). Thereafter, Persian bureaucracy would leave an indelible mark on the legacies of all three empires of the Achaemenid, the Parthia and the Sassanid in the Middle East and the Caucasus, as an example in the area of foreign policy decision-making.

However, the Iranian non-governmental circles did not advocate the powerful agent of Hellenistic Seleucid. The Sassanid political and administrative system was based upon the Persian Aristocracy. However, the non-governmental circles under the Sassanid were separated from the ruling kingdom. Unlike the revisionist approach of the Elamite and the Persians under the Seleucid's rule, the Iranian foreign relations in the Middle East and the Caucasus during the triple Persian Empires was, too much extent, on the basis of the regional status quo.

Finally, the fourth indicator refers to the systemic status. The history of Byzantine-Persian relations during the Christian era suggests that these were characterised by little cultural exchange, but rather by a more or less constant series of wars or frontier skirmishes, interrupted by short periods of insecure peace when one other of the two powers was too disturbed by internal dissension too supine to prosecute a war.

It could be painted a picture of a region that is politically fractured and religiously diverse: the decline of the Achaemenid and the political anarchy accompanying this decline are major factors that inform the region's political reality. So, the subjugation of Persia by Greeks and Seleucids brought the Persians into direct contact with the Hellenism and the Iranian agent was completely subordinated to the regional and the international structure. The period before and after the Achaemenid was also a period of world in transition.

The political history of the Middle East in antiquity is principally the story of the continuing skirmish for control of the Fertile Crescent as well as the Arabian Desert between Egypt and Mesopotamia. Relations between Romans and Persians in late antiquity were bound to be turbulent. On both sides war accompanied by complex attempts to justify their respective goals, in both active and reactive confrontations. In fact, disorderly international system during the wars or world in transition took effect the Iranian dialectics in the Near East. Regional disorderly and chaos happening during the waning Achaemenid caused to furry invasion of western Greek, followed by the Seleucids.

In conclusion, the indicators and the variables within the Theoretical Framework of the Iranian Dialectics demonstrates that the Iranian dialectics in the ancient Near East and Caucasus was positive, whereas they exhibited quasi-negative during the Elamite period in opposition to Assyria and under the Seleucid Empire. In other words, the positive dialectics amongst the Persian agent and the international structure in the Middle East and the Caucasus stands out as the defining characteristic of this era, but symmetrically.

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