The Iranian political elite, state and society relations, and foreign relations since the Islamic revolution
Rakel, E.P.

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Chapter 1
Theoretical Framework

1.1 Introduction
Governments are different from each other, as are societies, both in their political and in their daily life. Yet, governments and societies are not that different, making it impossible to find categorizations that would cover the nature of various political systems under one notion. To better understand the nature of a political system, one has to look at both the similarities between, as well the uniqueness of, governments and societies.

An important element of power in a society is the political elite. Many studies on political elites have been carried out on industrialized and developing countries, the latter particularly since the period of de-colonization in the 1950s-1970s. However, studies of elites have, thus far, been unable to develop a coherent theory that would also include other factors, such as the impact of ideology (politicized religion/Shi’ism), or the pressures from external forces on policy formulation. To label the nature of a political system, however, does not by itself provide a better understanding of the power relations in a country. Yet, the knowledge of the power relations in a society alone will not give us a clear understanding of how domestic and foreign policy is formulated.

Therefore, this chapter is interested in the following questions: who has power in a society? What is the position of elites and their related institutions in society? What other factors play a role in domestic and foreign policy formulation, such as the impact of ideology (politicized religion/Shi’ism)? What is the place of geopolitics in foreign policy formulation?

This chapter describes the theoretical framework of the work. It first discusses the nature of the political system in Iran. Then, it analyses elite studies in general and those on Iran in particular. In the following, it conceptualizes the composition of the political elite in the Islamic Republic of Iran (IRI). It finally stresses the necessity to integrate the concept of geopolitics into foreign policy analysis. Here, the conventional approach to geopolitics is criticized and a new approach, called “critical geopolitics,” is suggested, as part and parcel of the critical theory of IR and IPE theories. It then puts the concept of critical geopolitics in relation to the case of Iran, with special focus on the role of politicized religion (Shi’ism) in the formulation of the IRI’s foreign policy.

1.2 The Nature of the Political System in the Islamic Republic of Iran
The IRI is unique in a sense that it combines a semi-theocratic mode of rule based on the velayat-e faqih system (the Governance of the Jurist, see chapter 2.2), institutional-
ized according to the constitution of 1979, with a constitutionally based rule of the people based on the constitution of 1906. According to Chehabi (2001), the IRI has characteristic features, which are inherent in both totalitarianism and authoritarianism.

In this research I will use Juan Linz’ categorization of political systems in *Totalitarian and Authoritarian Regimes* (1975/2000). In his theorization of totalitarian and authoritarian regimes, in contrast to democratic ones, Linz brings forth the concept of pluralism as an important feature of authoritarian regimes. That is, pluralism is not only a feature of democratic political regimes. In general, Linz distinguishes between two types of political systems: democratic and non-democratic political systems. A political system is democratic:

“when it allows the free formulation of political preferences, through the use of basic freedoms of association, information, and communication, for the purpose of free competition between leaders to validate at regular intervals by nonviolent means their claim to rule; a democratic system does this without excluding any effective political office from that competition or prohibiting any members of the political community from expressing their preference by norms requiring the use of force to enforce them” (Linz 1975/2000: 58).

Among the non-democratic political systems Linz distinguishes between totalitarian and authoritarian political systems. According to Linz a political system is totalitarian when it has:

“an ideology, a single mass party and other mobilizational organizations, and concentrated power in an individual and his collaborators or a small group that is not accountable to any large constituency and cannot be dislodged from power by institutionalized, peaceful means” (Linz 1975/2000: 67).

While each of these characteristic features can also be found in authoritarian systems, it is the combination of these features that make a political system totalitarian. Authoritarian political systems are:

“political systems with limited, not responsible, political pluralism, without elaborate and guiding ideology, but with distinctive mentalities, without extensive nor intensive political mobilization, except at some points in their development, and in which a leader or occasionally a small group exercises power within ill-defined limits but actually quite predictable ones” (Linz 1964/1970: 255).

In Linz’ understanding what distinguishes authoritarian regimes most from totalitarian regimes is pluralism. In contrast to democracies, however, where we can speak of an almost “unlimited” pluralism, in authoritarian regimes the pluralism is “limited.” Furthermore, in authoritarian regimes the groups in power are not legally or de facto accountable to society (Linz 1975/2000: 161).
In this study I use the concepts of totalitarian, authoritarian, and democratic regimes as ideal types based on Max Weber. An ideal type:

“brings together certain relationships and events of historical life into a complex which is conceived as an internally consistent system [...] this construction itself is like a utopia which has been arrived at by the analytical accentuation of certain elements of reality [...] it is no hypothesis but it offers guidance in the construction of hypotheses. It is not a description of reality but it aims to give unambiguous means of expression to such a description [...] An ideal type is formed by the one-sided accentuation of one or more points of view and by the synthesis of a great many diffuse, discrete, more or less present and occasionally absent concrete individual phenomena, which are arranged according to those one-sidedly emphasized viewpoints into a unified analytical construct” (Weber 1904/1949: 90).

In the first ten years after the Islamic revolution (1979-1989), the IRI had many characteristics of a totalitarian regime: a charismatic leader, Khomeini as both the highest religious and political authority; an ideology, with at its core the velayat-e faqih system, as developed by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini; and one party, the Islamic Republican Party (IRP). Can we therefore speak of the IRI as being a totalitarian state? This is already debatable when looking at the basic jurisprudence of the IRI, which is Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh). Islamic jurisprudence addresses mainly issues that fall into the realm of private law, but not public policy. This means, that the political elite in Iran has to invent many of the rules and regulations with reference to a jurisprudence that does not actually address these issues. Therefore, rules and regulations can be as varied as the interpretations of Islam itself and lead to disagreements among the Iranian political elite (Chehabi 2001: 56).

That is, different interpretations of Islam among the Iranian political elite have prevented the development of a coherent ideology on which the IRI could be based. In contrast, disagreement, among the members of the political elite, on how to interpret Islam regarding economic, socio-cultural, and foreign policy issues, and thus pluralism, was built into the political system right from the beginning of the existence of the IRI (Chehabi 2001: 59). This also explains why the IRP, established in 1979, which brought together many different ideas on how to govern social relations in the IRI, ceased to exist in 1987 (see further chapter 2.6.1).

Furthermore, since the death of Khomeini the significance of the Islamic ideology has been constantly decreasing and gradually, especially when Mohammad Khatami was elected president in 1997, even the core element of the Islamic ideology, the velayat-e faqih system, has become subject of debate. As a result the Islamic ideology has actually become less relevant for policy-making in Iran. Furthermore, Khomeini’s successor, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, does not have the same religious standing and, therefore, does not have the same authority among the population in general and the clergy in particular. Above this, since 1989, there has been to a certain extent some sharing of power between supreme leader and president.
Is it then the authoritarian model, as an ideal type, which fits the Iranian political system best? Chehabi argues the limited pluralism in Iran falls between the post-totalitarian systems of Eastern Europe and “classic” authoritarianism. In the post-totalitarian systems in post-Stalin Eastern Europe, the institutions and groups sharing political power emerged out of the political structure that had been created by the communist system itself. In “classic” authoritarianism, these institutions and groups emerge out of pre-existing political structures (Chehabi 2001: 63). The latter is what Linz (1975/2000: 143-145) calls “traditional or semi-traditional authority,” i.e. political systems with patrimonial or feudal characteristics, or political systems where these traditional structures are combined with modern political structures.

In Iran, power relations are products of the political system of the IRI (the velayat-e faqih system based on the Constitution of 1979), the legacy of the Constitutional Revolution (1905-1911) (the republican institutions of the legislative, executive, and the judiciary), and the traditional social structures (particularly the bazaar4 networks). The constitution of the IRI is both a reflection of the first Iranian constitution of 1906, as well as the ideas of Ayatollah Khomeini. Until now there is no clear distinction of competencies and jurisdiction between the political institutions and groups in power in the IRI (Chehabi 2001: 62). At the same time it has to be noted that Iran is unique among non-democratic regimes, having regular parliamentary and presidential elections with a (limited) choice of candidates, as well as relatively open discussions in parliament (Chehabi 2001: 64). In conclusion, Chehabi argues that the nature of the political system of the IRI is a mixture of totalitarian, authoritarian, and democratic tendencies, but that it is the authoritarian model that is the most accurate description of the political system in Iran. This study is in agreement with Chehabi in his conceptualization of the nature of the political system of the IRI. However, in this analysis a distinction between two periods will be made:

(1) The first ten years of the IRI when Khomeini was the supreme leader and
(2) The last almost twenty years.

4. The bazaars have a long history in Iran, dating back to the 5th century B.C. Over the centuries they developed into big communities with shops, teahouses, restaurants, bathhouses, mosques, and religious schools, and also into financial centers, with their own banking, credit and investment systems. The Grand Bazaar in Tehran is both a stock exchange and a commodities market. The market stalls on the bazaar hide the real activities of the bazaaris. Until a unified system of multiple exchange rates was introduced in Iran in March 2002, the bazaaris acted as moneylenders and bought currency at lower rates than the free market. There has always been a close relationship between the clerics and the bazaaris. The clerics needed the bazaaris to fund mosques and religious schools and the bazaaris needed the clerics to keep their social position in the Iranian society. Both their wealth and their links with the clerics give the bazaaris enormous political power. The bazaaris played an important role in overthrowing the Shah’s regime and bringing Khomeini to power in 1979. The strong relationship between the bazaaris and the clerics, in recent times, has been receding due to the introduction of a unified system of multiple exchange rates, anti-profiteering campaigns against the bazaaris, and the overall crisis of the Iranian economy since the Islamic revolution. For more information on the bazaar in Tehran and the bazaaris involvement in politics see Keshavarzian, A. Bazaar and State in Iran-The Politics of the Tehran Marketplace, (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007).
The first decade after the Islamic revolution differs from the rest, as during this period the Islamic ideology was the strongest influence on the formulation of policy for economics, socio-cultural issues, and foreign affairs, whilst in the following decades it has been decreasing. To make this distinction is important because, as will be shown in the following chapters, the influence of the Islamic ideology on policy formulation in the first ten years after the revolution and its decreasing influence in the following almost two decades, is a pattern repeated across economics, socio-cultural issues, and foreign policy in the IRI.

Therefore, this study argues that, between 1979 and 1989 the political system of the IRI was closest to the totalitarian model, whilst, since 1989 the authoritarian model with some limited democratic features holds more true.

Explaining the nature of the political system of the IRI, however, is not sufficient by itself, in providing a better understanding of the power relations in the country. We also have to answer the following question: What is the position of elites in a society in general and in Iran in particular?

### 1.3 Studies of the Political Elite

Therborn (1999) distinguishes between three approaches to studying power relations in a society: (1) what he calls the “subjectivist approach;” (2) the “economic approach;” and (3) the “structural-processual” or “dialectical-materialist” approach.

The subjectivist approach is the classical analytical framework among elite theorists. It looks at who has power in a society. Representatives of this approach are: Vilfredo Pareto (1916-23 (1935)), Gaetano Mosca (1939), Robert Michels (1925 (1911)), C. Wright Mills (1956/59), and Robert Dahl (1961/1996). They can also be categorized as ruling class theorists and pluralists (Therborn 1999: 225). Classical elite theorists like Pareto, Mosca and Michels, and modern elitists like Mills and Dahl tried to show that democracy is a myth and that in reality it is a small elite that governs. The concept of political elite, as it was presented by Pareto, Mosca, and Michels, formed part of a doctrine that was critical of, and opposed to, democracy and even more to modern socialism. In *The Mind and Society* (1935), Pareto describes that the elite is made up of a group of people who have the best qualifications in their field. The elite consists of individuals that directly or indirectly play an important role in the government, such as ministers, senators, members of parliament, judges, generals and colonels. But also individuals, that because of wealth, family, social contacts, or political ideas, are included as part of the governing elite. Below the elite are the non-elite (Pareto 1935: 246, 2027-2036; Pareto 1976: 51-71). With reference to elite change, Pareto uses the concept of the “circulation of elite,” but does not make a clear distinction between the governing elite and the non-elite. According to him, the governing elite are gradually replaced by families that come from the lower classes who belong to the non-elite. Because of this circulation the governing class is changing continuously. Pareto related his theory of elite mainly to psychic characteristics. Based on Niccolò Machiavelli’s famous book, *The Prince*
Pareto argued that members of the governing class are either foxes, with great intelligence and fantasy, or lions, with great power. According to Pareto, politics needs both but policy-making depends on the composition of the governing elite. If the majority of the governing elite are foxes, they rule the country based on consent. If they are lions, they rule by means of force (Pareto 1935: 888, 2178, 2480).

Mosca was the first to make a systemic distinction between elites and the masses. In *The Ruling Class* (1939), he puts the concept of elite in relation to other social groups in society. He argues that two classes, a class that rules and a class that is ruled characterize every society. The first class is always less numerous than the second class. Its rule over the majority of society can be explained by the fact that the ruling class is organized, whereas the ruled class is not. Additionally, the members of the ruling class have certain attributes that make them superior and, therewith, more influential in society than the masses (Mosca 1939). The organized minority of the ruling class imposes its will on the unorganized majority. Mosca distinguishes between two groups within the ruling elite: the highest layer of the ruling elite consisting of only a few people; and a layer of a larger number of people that contains all the capabilities for leadership in a country. The political stability of a society depends on the level of morality, intelligence, and activity of this second layer of the political elite. Intellectual or moral shortcomings within this group pose a much greater threat to the political structure than similar shortcomings among the small number of people that belong to the highest layer of the governing class. The most important precondition to climb up the social ladder is not being the smartest or most moral person, but hard work and ambition. Elite change takes place when: a new source of welfare develops; the practical interest in knowledge grows; an old religion declines or a new emerges; or when a new stream of ideas spreads. According to this view, the history of civilized people is based on the conflict between those elements that try to monopolize power, and diffuse property, and the emergence of new forces from the majority to gain power (Mosca 1939: 65, 404, 450).

Another representative of the classical elite theorists is Robert Michels. In his early years Michels was a follower of Jean-Jacques Rousseau's ideas on the participation of citizens in democracy, sovereignty of the people, and the general will (*volonté générale*) (Rousseau 1762/1966). Later Pareto and Mosca and their idea of the inevitability of elites influenced him. In his book *Zur Soziologie des Parteiwesens in der modernen Demokratie* (1911), he developed his idea on the inevitability of organization as well as the inevitability of oligarchy (government of the few in an organization): “Wer Organisation sagt, sagt Tendenz zur Oligarchie” (Michels 1925: 25).

Since Max Weber elite theorists use a multidimensional approach to the study of elites. They no longer apply the concept of classes but concepts of status, occupational position or socio-economic background, or refer to market or work situation, such as occupation, prestige, income, and education to define the configuration of the elite in a society. Max Weber’s political theory published in *Die drei Reinen Typen der legitimen Herrschaft* (1968) is well known for his contribution to the analysis of authority and
bureaucracy. He distinguished between three “pure” types of authority: (1) traditional authority, (2) charismatic authority; and (3) legal-rational authority. Traditional authority is legitimized by custom and long-revered social norms. It is related to traditional organizations such as patriarchal kinship units. Charismatic authority is legitimized by the personality of the leader. It is related to charismatic movements such as early Christianity or political Islam. Legal-rational authority is legitimized in a modern society by the rule of law and the right of the rulers to issue commands. The legal-rational authority is closely connected to the functioning of elites. Its organizational basis is bureaucracy (Weber 1968: 475-488).

The American sociologist C.Wright Mills mainly wrote about elite configurations in the US in the 1950s. In his book *The Power Elite* (1956/59), he argues that only the position of an individual in large institutions determines whether someone becomes a member of the elite. According to Mills, the elite in the US has an economic, political, and military origin. These three domains are expanding and centralizing. At the top of these expanding and centralizing domains, the economic, political, and military elite develop. The leading figures in each of these three domains together form the power elite of the US. Thus, one’s institutional position determines, to a great extent, whether one belongs to the power elite or not (Mills 1956/59: 3-11). The structure and interests of the institutional hierarchies are interwoven. The unity of the power elite is based on co-ordination. That means the power elite can promote its interest much better by co-operating on formal and informal levels (Mills 1956/59: 19-20).

Mill’s theory can be related to neo-corporatism. The author’s writings on neo-corporatism state that governmental elite, semi-government, firms, and trade unions have close contacts, and influence each other, in the governmental decision-making process. They stress that these corporatist arrangements often pass by democratic institutions and procedures (Schmitter and Lehmbruch 1979).

According to the pluralists of the subjectivist approach, the state consists of a number of relatively autonomous political, economic, and other organizations within the domain of the state. Pluralism is influenced by Schumpeter who, in his book *Capitalism, Socialism and Democracy* (1942/1987), refers to democracy as a competition for the votes of the electorate i.e. democracy is:

“that institutional arrangement for arriving at political decisions in which individuals acquire the power to decide by means of competitive struggle for the people’s vote.”

Similarly Karl Mannheim argues that theories of elites and democracy are compatible:

“the actual shaping of policy is in the hands of elites; but this does not mean that the society is not democratic. For it is sufficient for democracy that the individual citizens, though prevented from taking a direct part in government all the time, have at least the possibility of making their aspirations felt at certain intervals […] [I]t would be wrong to overestimate the stability of such
elites in democratic societies, or their ability to wield power in arbitrary ways. In a democracy, the governed can always act to remove their leaders or to force them to take decisions in the interests of the many” (1956, part III: 179).

He emphasizes the reduced distance between the elite and the masses in a democracy:

“We assume that democracy is characterized, not by the absence of all elite strata, but rather by a new mode of elite selection and a new self-interpretation of the elite […] What changes most of all in the course of democratization is the distance between the elite and the rank-and-file. The democratic elite has a mass background; this is why it can mean something for the mass” (Mannheim 1956: 200).

An elite theorist, who belongs to the group of the pluralists, is the American political scientist Robert Dahl. He argues that there is not only one but a number of political elites. Dahl introduced the term “polyarchy”, as he considers democracy an unreachable political system. According to Dahl the difference between a polyarchy and a dictatorship is that in a dictatorship the government consists of a minority, while a polyarchy is a government of minorities. In an article in 1996, titled *Equality versus Inequality*, Dahl states that democracy and market capitalism are two powers, which in terms of political equality pull in different directions. The extent to which political equality and democracy can be realized depends, among other things, on the distribution of the access to political sources (e.g. money, property, reputation, status, and knowledge) and the readiness to use these sources to realize one’s own goals.

While the subjectivist approach is valuable in analyzing the composition of elites, it does not help to understand the direct and (especially) indirect interaction between the political elite and the rest of society, as well as in what way a political elite contributes to or slows down economic reform and democratization.

The economic approach among elite theories is mainly concerned with what is the capacity of elites to reach their goals. It is not about the distribution but the accumulation of power. Representatives of this approach are Talcott Parsons, *Sociological Theory and Modern Society* (1967), and Samuel P. Huntington, *Political Order in Changing Societies* (1968). The economic approach can be distinguished into a sociological and a utilitarian version, both based on liberal economics. The sociological variant, of which Parson is a representative, considers power to be a product generated by social relationships or the realization of “collective goals” (Parsons 1967: 308). The utilitarian variant, of which Huntington is a representative, claims that as in market relations, the power of all actors increases when all parties gain from collective action (Therborn 1999: 225-226). The problem with the economic approach is that within it both class and power are irrelevant (Therborn 1999: 226).

The structural-processual approach proclaimed by Therborn is based on historical
Marxism. This approach is not so much interested in who has power, and for what, but what are the effects of power upon a particular society, and on reproduction and change (Therborn 1999: 226). He therefore argues:

“rulers and ruling classes would be better identified not by their names and numbers, their social background and power career—although all this is of course not without importance— but by their actions, that is by the objective effects of their actions” (Therborn 1999: 228).

Furthermore he states:

“What all kinds of subjectivist elite and ruling class theorists are unable to do is to account for social change [...]. The classical elite theorists [...] all basically held that society did not change [...]. Ultimately they tended to reduce people and human society to biology. Now, though men certainly are biological organisms, it is an obvious fact that human society has changed over the ages of its existence and has taken a number of forms. The task of a social science must necessarily be to analyze these different historical forms and their change. This cannot be done by taking the subjects of power, their psyche, their will, as the starting point, but only by taking the social context in which they rule” (Therborn 1999: 228-229).

While Therborn makes a valuable categorization of the different approaches in the study of elites, he fails to make a systemic distinction between theories that study elites in industrialized countries and theories that study elites in developing countries.

This distinction is important, as power relations between state and society in countries where a comprehensive industrialization has taken place differ from countries where industrialization has failed, or only partly been successful. Industrialized countries are usually characterized by a certain extent of cohesion, whilst developing countries often exist in a socially fragmented society. That means, in the latter case, that although the political elite may have powerful forces on their side, it is confronted with the conflict between traditionalist and modernist forces within society at large (Amineh 1999). This puts great pressure on the activities of the political elite and the choices they make.

Furthermore, Therborn states that it is not the background and ideology of the individual members of the political elite that has to be taken as the basis of analysis, but the “social context in which they rule.” It is necessary to define here what is meant by social context. While elite theories usually focus on the nation state level, we should not forget the international context as an important variable in the study of elites and their actions. Additionally, what is missing in Therborn’s categorization of elites is the different conceptualizations of elites between: theories that only consider individuals

5. In the classical Marxian theory the conflict of social classes is the determining factor to produce change of the social structure. Here, classes are people who occupy a position in society defined by the relations of production.
that actually exercise power as members of the elite; and those theories that include, into the concept of elite, people who can have an indirect influence on political decision making. This also implies that, in contrast to the elite theories mentioned above, members of the elite do not necessarily have to control the power resources of a society to be influential, but can also have indirect influence on policy-making through participation in the political discourse.

An elite theorist who represents this latter category is the sociologist Tom Bottomore. In his book *Elites and Society* (1964/1993), he conceptualizes elites in general terms as functional, occupational groups that have, for various reasons, a high status in society. The elites can be analyzed according to their size, the number of different elites and their interrelations with political groups. Following Mosca he uses the term “political class”:

“to refer to all those groups which exercise political power or influence, and are directly engaged in struggles for political leadership” (Bottomore 1964/1993: 7).

This also includes counter elites or oppositional forces to the government, like leaders of political parties, representatives of trade unions, groups of businessmen, intellectuals etc. That means the political class comprises of various social groups that may cooperate, but also compete or stand in conflict with each other (Bottomore 1964/1993). This argument can also be found in the work by H.D. Lasswell, *Politics: Who Gets What, When, and How* (1952), who makes a distinction between the political elite and other elites that are not as closely associated to the exercise of power but can have a significant influence in society.

This is especially important for the case of the IRI, where a discourse has emerged between politicians, religious lay, clerical public intellectuals, and reform leaders on economic, socio-cultural, and foreign policy issues. Some politicians and intellectuals, especially, do not accept the *velayat-e faqih* system in its current form or reject it totally. The latter clearly aim to give more power into the hands of the people through elections and strive for a secularization of the political system. Who then has power in the IRI?

1.4 The Iranian Political Elite

There already exists an extensive literature on pre- and post-revolutionary Iran dealing with religion, Islam as political ideology, democracy, economics, and foreign relations. Major studies on the Iranian elite and class/groups relations have been made by James A. Bill, *The Politics of Iran-Groups, Classes and Modernization* (1972), Marvin Zonis, *The Political Elite of Iran* (1976), and Wilfried Buchta, *Who rules Iran? - The Structure of Power in the Islamic Republic* (2000). All three authors can be categorized among the pluralists of the subjectivist elite theorists. Bill’s research is an interesting account of Iranian elite and class/groups relations since the rise of the Persian Empire of Safavids (1501-1722) until the period of Mohammad Reza Shah (1941-1978/9). Zonis
has undertaken an in-depth study about background, education, and power relations of the Iranian political elite under Mohammad Reza Shah. As far as is known, Buchta’s book is the only one that analyzes the composition and power relations of the post-revolutionary Iranian elite since 1979. In his study of the post-revolutionary Iranian political elite, Buchta departs from the assumption that the Iranian power structure is characterized by a multitude of often autonomous power centers and not dominated by a single group or person (Buchta 2000: 2). His main argument is that to analyze the power structure in Iran one has to look at both the formal and informal power structure. The formal state structure is based on the constitution and governmental regulations, and manifests itself in state institutions and offices, as well as individuals according to their position in these institutions. Many members of the political elite gain their position in the political power structure thanks to personal patronage links. Sometimes, individual members of the political elite are more powerful than it might be assumed from their formal position. This is what constitutes the informal power structure. The decision making process is not only based on the formal governmental structure but also on the informal personal networks within the Iranian political elite (Buchta 2000: 7) e.g. depending on what political faction an individual belongs to and which political faction is dominant in a certain period of time. Similar to Buchta, Zonis argues that only looking at the formal power structure is not sufficient to analyze the decision-making process in a political system where personal linkages are stronger than institutional ones:

“In a political system where institutions are not paramount but where individuals in their interactions constitute the essence of the political process, the souls of men, or their personalities […] are of primary importance” (Zonis 1976: 10).

Zonis defines the political elite in Iran during Mohammad Reza Shah’s reign as:

“those Iranians who more or less persistently exercise power over significant behavior of large numbers of people with regard to the allocation of highly prized values in the national political system” (Zonis 1976: 7).

In their study of the political elite during the reign of Mohammad Reza Shah and after the Islamic revolution, both Zonis and Buchta take into account what Zonis calls the “counter elite” and Buchta the “semi-opposition.” Buchta considers the semi-opposition to be part of the informal power structure. The role of those individuals in this stratum is to mediate between the political regime and society. The semi-opposition includes intellectuals such as Abdolkarim Soroush, the Freedom Movement of Iran or Islamic women’s

rights groups (Buchta 2000: 9, diagram 2). Zonis distinguishes between the Shah with his political elite and the counter elite i.e., those that are considered to be opposed to the present elite and, therewith, also to the political regime. Consequently, the counter elite are subject to continued pressure from the regime (Zonis 1976: 39). Buchta and Zonis give a valuable overview of the composition of the pre- and post-revolutionary elite, but they fail to analyze the dynamism of elite change and consequently social change.

Bill analyses the processes of social change and modernization from a historical perspective. Central to his study are the changing class and group relations in the Iranian society. He goes a step further than Buchta and Zonis, as he looks at to what extent the dynamism of a changing society is closely connected to the interaction of class structure and the political system. Bill gives an interesting overview on how groups and class relations in Iran have changed or persisted over time. Like Buchta and Zonis, however, he sees Iranian social relations separate from global developments, and does not consider their effects on state and society relations and policy formulation.

This study will use the concept of the “politically relevant elite” (Perthes 2004: 5-7) to define the political elite in the IRI. The concept is similar to Buchta’s categorization of the Iranian political elite. Like Buchta’s categorization, the concept of the politically relevant elite includes those individuals who, through their position in state institutions, take decisions on domestic and foreign policy, or are actively involved in policy formulation. It also includes those figures that participate in defining norms and values, and have a decisive influence on public debate over strategic subjects. To the politically relevant elite belong, not only members of the government, but also politicians in opposition, journalists, high bureaucrats, members of the security institutions, leading economists, non-establishment clerics, intellectuals etc. That means, the politically relevant elite consists not only of those people who have power according to their position in state institutions but also of those individuals that influence or attempt to influence the political discourse.

Analytically, we can distinguish, like Buchta (2000 diagram 2) does, between three concentric circles of the politically relevant elite in Iran, each of which has a different degree of political influence. The inner circle elite comprise those members of the politically relevant elite who have the power to take strategic decisions or to block them. Strategic decisions can have a domestic or foreign policy character. Strategic decisions are also those, which directly or indirectly influence the priorities of state policy. To the second circle, the administrative elite, belong those members of the politically relevant elite who have a decisive influence on strategic decisions, or can take political decisions of less relevance. The third circle, the discourse elite, consists of those who directly or indirectly influence policy formulation by determining the political discourse and participate in “agenda setting” (Perthes 2004: 5; Reissner 2002).

In Buchta’s categorization, the different political factions of the political elite cut across the three circles. In the politically relevant elite approach, individuals can belong to several circles at the same time. For example, one can belong to the inner circle as
well as the discourse elite, such as former President Khatami. Members of the discourse elite, especially, introduce new ideas and demands for reform into the political discourse, and therewith, challenge the status quo of the political power structure. Therefore, it can be argued that there is a continuing conflict between the inner circle and the discourse elite in Iran (Reissner 2000). For example, more recently lay and clerical public intellectuals (e.g. Abdolkarim Soroush, Mohammad Mojtabahed Shabestari, and Mohsen Kadivar) and public intelligentsia (e.g. Abbas Abdi, Akbar Ganji, and Saeed Hajarian) question the *velayat-e faqih* system, the very foundation of the Islamic ideology and of the power relations in Iran. Also the women's movement in Iran and the critical press has had a decisive influence on the political discourse in Iran.

While the concept of the politically relevant elite is useful in giving an overview of the structure of power relations in Iran, including those who actually have power and those who directly or indirectly influence the political discourse, it falls short as it does not set power relations in relation to domestic and foreign policy formulation and how they come about. This leads us to the following questions: What other factors play a role in policy formulation? What is the place of geopolitics in foreign policy formulation? What is the impact of ideology (politicized religion/Shi’ism) on policy formulation?

1.5 Foreign Policy and Geopolitics

The term “geopolitics” finds its origins in the realist school of International Relations (IR), according to which, states are the sole actors in international relations and struggle for dominance in an anarchic world. The Swedish political scientist, Rudolf Kjellén, used the term in the late 19th century for the first time, to describe the interconnection between geography and politics. The British geographer, Halford Mackinder, then further developed it in the early 20th century. Being confronted with the decline of British hegemony he predicted that land powers would overtake sea powers and that the “Eurasian landmass” would rise as the world’s heartland, if not checked by Britain and its allies (Mackinder 1904; 1919). In the 1920s and 1930s, German geographers used the term to justify Nazi Germany’s expansion towards the East. After the Second World War, the geopolitical discourse was applied both by governments and citizens to define their state’s position in the world in the Cold War context. The term geopolitics, however, was avoided, because of its association with Nazi Germany. Instead, terms like “national security,” “containment,” and “deterrence” were used. During the Cold War the international system was generally understood as a bipolar world with a conflict between the two superpowers, the US and the Soviet Union, carried out in a traditional balance of power politics (Amineh 2003: 18-19).

However, to study the foreign policy of a state does not imply only looking at foreign policy practices but also at how certain representations of space are incorporated into foreign policy practices. Agnew and Corbridge argue that the description of a foreign policy situation alone is in itself an act of geopolitics. The geographical identification of a place, and the labeling of it in a certain way, brings about specific visions and ideas
about that place and the policies it pursues. To categorize a geographic area as “Islamic” or “Western,” for example, also implies to have certain ideas about its foreign policy practices (Agnew and Corbridge 1995: 47-48).

The critical theory⁷ and critical geopolitics⁸ approach of IR and IPE might help us to solve this problem, as they reject the agency-structure dualism, a-historic structuralism and determinism in the analysis of the world politics and historical structure of IR. They believe in the transformative character of the world and assume that any social structure has its limits. This stands in contrast to (neo-)realism⁹, institutionalism/pluralism¹⁰, structuralism¹¹ and traditional geopolitics, all of which have a static view on social relations, considering certain components of a social system as unchangeable, e.g. the state. Critical geopolitics and critical theory go beyond IR and IPE theories in that they analyze “dynamic systemic change,” thus they take an historical perspective on international relations. The most important aspect of the critical theory approach is that it believes in the transformative abilities of human beings and that collective human action leads to historical transformation. As Robert Cox (1994: 3), states:

“(A)gency is conditioned by prevailing structures. But structures are the product of history. They are the cumulative result of how people collectively respond to the conditions of their existence - i.e. structures are shaped over time by agency. This process does not take place in an abstract vacuum but is realized under specific historic circumstance.”

Critical geopolitics adds to this the geographic dimension in analyzing complex systemic realities. It not only looks at the “material spatial practices” that constitute the global political economy but also the way they are represented and contested (McHaffie 1997: 73-86).

The representatives of critical geopolitics take state-society relations as the unit of analysis. According to this view state-society complexes come into interaction through their (foreign) policies. By these interactions they create a “system level of social order” (Amineh and Houweiling 2004/2005: 11). Since the mid-19th century, the system-level of social order is characterized

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As we can see in figure 1.1, to study the foreign policy of a country does not imply only looking at foreign policy practices and the political and economic interests of political actors, but also, at how certain representations of space are incorporated into foreign policy practices. Actors in state-society complexes legitimize foreign policy by presenting the public with certain assumptions of other states and regions beyond their borders (Taylor 1993; Dijkink 1998). These assumptions of other states and regions can also be called “geopolitical visions” that is:

“any idea[s] concerning the relation between one's own and other places, involving feelings of (in)security or (dis)advantage (and/or) invoking ideas about a collective mission or foreign policy strategy” (Dijkink 1996: 10)

Assumptions about other states and regions emerge out of how the political elite of a society has defined its own state and its role in the world. This is what Campbell has called “geographical imagination”:

“A geographical imagination [...] can be defined as the way in which influential groups in the cultural life of a state define that state and nation within the world. It addresses the primary acts of identification and boundary-formation that population groups within a state engages” (Campbell 1992 in ÓTuathail 2004: 84).

That means, geographic imagination may in part be related to resources in specific locations, and in part cultural aspects that separate or unite domestic and external societies. Past experiences will also frame foreign policy (Amineh & Houweling 2004/2005: 13).

Geographical imagination is the basis of the “geopolitical culture” of a state. Geopolitical cultures are the product of the cultural and organizational processes that shape foreign policy in a state. But a geopolitical culture is not homogenous. Conflicts among the political elite, based on different political and/or economic interests:

“produce a geopolitical culture that is powered by division and contradictory impulses and drives” (ÓTuathail 2004: 85, 87).

Geopolitical cultures are also characterized by “geopolitical traditions” that compete in the interpretation of a state’s position in international relations:

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12. Sequential industrialization (SI) is the “long-term history of socio-economic and political transformation from agricultural-based economies and civilizations into industrial-based economies and civilizations of, sequentially from first to last, a part of Europe, the English colonies (America, New Zealand, and Australia) and Western Europe, Eastern Europe, and finally a number of so-called Third World countries. At the same time, the SI era is the period of reactive state formation, nation building, and efforts to close the productivity-power gaps between those who succeed and those who fail to transform” (Amineh 2007: 4)
“A geopolitical tradition is a historical canon of thought on state identity, foreign policy, and the national interest, which is usually defined in opposition to alternative traditions” (Ó’Tuathail 2004: 88-89).

Furthermore foreign policy practices are also influenced by external elements, namely by the geopolitical visions of other countries as well as other countries’ foreign policy practices.

The factors influencing foreign policy formulation as developed in figure 1.1 can be applied to the case of Iran since the Islamic revolution and have been visualized in figure 1.2.

**Figure 1.1. Factors of Foreign Policy Practices**
In Iran geopolitical traditions have, over the last 200 years, been greatly influenced by the country’s experiences of foreign intervention. The Tobacco revolt (1881-1882)\(^{13}\), the Constitutional revolution (1905-1911)\(^{14}\), the Oil Nationalization Movement of Prime Minister Mosaddeq (1951-1953)\(^{15}\) and, finally, the Iranian Islamic revolution (1978-1979)\(^{16}\), were all events that partly can be explained as reactions to the domination of Iran by foreign powers and exploitation of the country’s wealth and resources by foreign powers and companies. These events were closely connected to Iran’s historical experience of foreign influences and penetration: first, the rivalry with other empires (e.g. the Ottoman Empire); and second the interference into its internal affairs during the last 200 years by France, Russia, Britain, and the United States (US).\(^{17}\) They were

\(^{13}\) In the 19th century the Qajars granted concessions to Britain for tobacco. Mirza Hassan Shirazi, the marja-e taqlid at the time, issued an edict, which forbade Shi’ite Muslims in Iran from smoking tobacco. Because of great public pressures, the government finally withdrew the concessions. For the role of the clergy in the Tobacco Movement see further Keddie, N.R. *Religion and Rebellion in Iran: The Tobacco Protest of 1881-1882*, (London: Frank Cass, 1966).


\(^{15}\) In the beginning of the 1950s, Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq nationalized the British owned and operated Anglo-Iranian Oil Company. He was removed from power by a coup in 1953 of Mohammad Reza Shah, in cooperation with the British and US intelligence agencies, see further Gasiorowski, M. and M. Byrne *Mohammad Mosaddeq and the 1953 Coup in Iran-Modern Intellectual and Political History of the Middle East*, (Syracuse: Syracuse University Press, 2004); Katouzian, H. *Musaddeq and the Struggle for Power in Iran*, (London and New York: I.B. Tauris, 1990); Mosaddeq, M. *Musaddeq’s Memories*, (ed.), introduced by H. Katouzian, (London: JEBHE, 1988).


\(^{17}\) On the involvement of Western powers in Iran since the 19th century see: Curzon, G. *Persia and the Persian Question*, (London: Longman, Green, 1892); Lenczowski, G. *Russia and the West in Iran (1918-1948): A Study in Big Power Rivalry*, (Ithaca, N.Y.: Corneall University Press, 1978); Rezun, M. *The Soviet Union and Iran: Soviet Policy in Iran from the beginnings of the Pahlavi Dynasty until the Soviet invasion in 1941*, (Institut Universitaire de Hautes Etudes Internationales, Collection de Relations Internationales, 1981); Rubinstein, A.Z. *Soviet Policy Toward Turkey, Iran, and Afghanistan: The Dynamics of Influence,
also influenced by the failed attempts at modernization, starting in the 19th century, with those of the Qajar Shah,\textsuperscript{18} and later, after the disintegration of the Persian Empire and the establishment of Iran as a nation state, with those of the two Pahlavi Shahs (Reza Shah 1921-1941\textsuperscript{19} and Mohammad Reza Shah 1941-1979).

Furthermore, the geopolitical culture in Iran has been influenced by the question of whether the Iranians should identify with: the\textit{ ummah} (Islamic community), as was proclaimed by Ayatollah Khomeini; or with Iran as a nation state, as former Presidents Rafsanjani and Khatami, and probably also current President Ahmadinejad see it. This has been termed geographical imagination.

\begin{itemize}
\item \textit{Ummah vs nation state}
\item Institutionalization of Shi’ite ideological doctrine (velayat-e faqih system)
\item Historic experiences of external political and economic involvement and failed modernization in Iran
\item Factional visions of the place of Iran in international relations
\item Foreign Policy practices by other countries
\item Geopolitical visions of other countries
\item Political and Economic interests of political factions
\end{itemize}

\textit{Foreign Policy Practices in IRI}

\cite{18}\cite{19}

\textsuperscript{18} On Modernization during the Qajar Empire see: Bakhsh, S. \textit{Iran: Monarchy, Bureaucracy & Reform under the Qajar (1858-1896)}, (London: Ithac Press, 1978).

Khomeini’s geopolitical visions of Iran manifest themselves in the two main ideological foreign policy principles of the Islamic revolution: “Neither East nor West” and the “Export of the Revolution.” These are to be explained further in chapter 5.3, but can be summarized as: Iran should refrain from relations with the West and support those Muslims who are suppressed by the West or their un-Islamic rulers. Those, who advocate Iran as a nation state, see Iran a key player in international relations. They advocate good relations with the West as well as with neighboring countries.

The definition of the nation state in Iran is closely connected to the setting of the boundaries of the Iranian territory. Like anywhere else in the world, boundary issues between Iran and its neighbors have often led to conflicts. As Pirouz Mojtahed-Zadeh notes (2006: 9) Iran is in a unique geographical situation as, of all the countries in the world, it has the highest number of boundaries with neighboring countries (currently 15). This has had a significant influence on Iran’s diplomatic and economic relations with its neighbors. Recent examples: are the disputes on the legal regime of the Caspian Sea with Russia, Azerbaijan, Kazakhstan, and Turkmenistan; and on the territoriality of the Abu Musa and Greater and Lesser Tunb Islands with the United Arab Emirates (UAE).

Thus, the geopolitical culture in the IRI is the product of past experiences, questions of identity and territorial boundaries. After the Islamic revolution, the geopolitical culture in Iran manifested itself in the institutionalization of the veelayat-e faqih system, as developed by Ayatollah Khomeini in the 1960s (see 1.6).

Furthermore, the rivalry between different political factions for power has had a great influence on foreign policy practices in the IRI. As will be elaborated in detail in chapter 2, each political faction has different views and interests on politics, the economy, socio-cultural issues, and foreign policy. These views and interests have also changed over time. Consequently, each faction develops different visions of the place of Iran in international relations, based on these views and interests.

Additionally, the geopolitical visions and foreign policy practices of other countries have had a great influence on foreign policy practices in Iran. As will be shown in chapter 5-7, the foreign policies of the US, European Union (EU), Russia, China, India, Central Eurasia (CEA) and the Persian Gulf countries have had great effects on the foreign policies followed by the IRI.

Furthermore, Shi’ism, since its political institutionalization in the beginning of the 16th century, has greatly influenced geopolitical traditions in Iran.

1.6 The Role of Shi’ism in the Foreign Policy of the IRI

The basis of the political system of the IRI is the veelayat-e faqih system, which finds its origins in the Shi’ite branch of Islam. How political is Shi’ism? Has it really been a driving force of policy formulation in Iran since the Islamic revolution, or is it rather one component of the nationalist movement of Iran that, since the late 19th century, fought against Western influences and domination in Iran?

Originally, in Islam there was no distinction between state power and religious
thought (Lambton 1980: 404). Prophet Muhammad, who was both the spiritual as well as the temporal leader of Islam, laid down the essential principles of the religion. After the death of Muhammad, the legitimacy of his successor became a dispute between the Shi’ite and the Sunni branches of Islam (see Amineh and Eisenstadt 2007).

Shi’ism became politically institutionalized in Iran when, in 1501, Shah Esmail I founded the Safavid Empire and adopted Shi’ism as the official state religion. This separated the Empire from and identified it in opposition to, its main competitor, the Sunni Ottoman Empire. Thus, since the Safavid Empire, Shi’ism has been serving as a means of national identity and state building (Thual 2002: 33). The politicization of Shi’ism can be drawn back to four developments: (1) the triumph of the usuli over the akhbari; (2) ijtihad; (3) marja-e taqlid; and (4) the khums. In the 17th and 18th centuries, a theological debate emerged among the Shi’ite clergy with regard to the right to interpretation (ijtihad). Two schools developed out of this debate, the akhbari and the usuli. The akhbari believe that, since the disappearance of the Twelfth Imam, there was no right to interpretation and that the hadith (tradition of words and deeds of Prophet Muhammad) was sufficient as legal source for Islamic jurisprudence (fiqh). Therefore, it was not necessary to follow the interpretations of a mojtahed (highest learned clergy). In contrast to the akhbari, the usuli believe in ijtihad and the leadership of the mojtahed. The usuli argue that religion has to be interpreted based on current circumstances. The usuli ultimately won the dispute between the two theological schools (Keddie 1995: 97-98) and, therewith, legitimized policy formulation within Shi’ism (Mirbaghari 2004: 557). The victory of the usuli over the akhbari paved the way for the creation of the modern Shi’ite clergy and the formation of an autonomous clerical body separate from the state. Only the mojtahed or ayatollah, and later, in the mid-19th century, the centralized leadership marja-e taqlid (source of emulation) had the right to ijtihad, and each believer had to follow his interpretations (Roy 1996/1999: 171; Mirbaghari 2004: 557).

The centralization of power among the clergy was accompanied by financial centralization, and financial autonomy of the clergy from the state, through the concentration of the khums and zakat (religious tax) in the hands of the marja-e taqlid. The khums are unique to Shi’ism. Originally, the khums (which is one fifth of the annual net profit of a Shi’a Muslim) were paid by Iranians to local and provincial ulama (clergy). With the emergence of the marja-e taqlid, the khums became concentrated in his hands (Enayat 1982). The khums bring the clergy and the rest of the Muslim population into direct contact. Members of the traditional economic sector, the bazaari, have, especially, been using the khums to increase their influence in politics.

Furthermore, the partial financial dependence of the clergy on the bazaari has made them reluctant to support policies that could go against the bazaari interests. At the same time, however, the independence of the clergy from the state, through the khums, has given them the freedom to act independently from the state, which has been particularly important during times of political crises (Mirbaghari 2004: 557), such as during the Tobacco revolt, the Constitutional revolution, the Oil Nationalization Move-
ment of Prime Minister Mosaddeq and, finally, in the Islamic revolution. The politi-
ization of Shi’ism culminated in the 1960s and 1970s with the Iranian monarchy, the
Constitutional revolution and the post-constitutional clergy being heavily criticized by
intellectuals, of whom Ayatollah Khomeini and Ali Shari’ati are two outstanding fig-
ures (see chapter 4.2.3.1). Social movements also arose, such as the People’s Mujahedin
Organization of Iran (now Mujahedin-e Khalq of Iran) 20.

Ayatollah Khomeini revolutionized the traditional Shi’ite dogma on worldly political
power by his new ideas on the velayat-e faqih system. The origins of the velayat-e faqih
system can be traced back to the discourse between the usuli and the akhbari schools of
thought in the 18th century mentioned above. It was Khomeini, however, who developed
the concept into a political project and institutionalized it in the IRI (Arjomand 1988b:
193-203). With his concept of the velayat-e faqih Khomeini radically broke with the
traditional Shi’ite dogma over political power21 (Khomeini 1363/1979). Khomeini did
not only restore Shi’ite traditions but actually initiated an ideological revolution within
Shi’ism (Arjomand 1988b: 191-192). According to the theory of velayat-e faqih, the su-
preme leader (vali-e faqih) is the legal leader of the ummah. His function thus is equal
to that of the imam (successor to Muhammad as the lawful temporal leader of the
Islamic community). In 1988 the constitution of 1979 was augmented when Khomeini
provided the faqih with powers greater than the imam. This is also known as velayat-e
motlaqah-e faqih (absolute governance of the jurist). The velayat-e motlaqah-e faqih
gives the supreme leader far-reaching power over all Muslims. The supreme leader is
even entitled to temporarily cut short pillars of Islam such as prayer and the hajj (pil-

Since the Islamic revolution, the velayat-e faqih system has been the main principle
of the political power structure of the IRI and until now is one of the major obstacles
to fundamental economic reform and democratization.

Almost three decades after the Iranian Islamic revolution a discourse has evolved,
between high-ranking clerics and intellectuals, on what role religion and what role the
clergy should play in politics. These questions touch the very heart of Shi’ism. Even
the concept of the velayat-e faqih is subject to debate in questions such as: Is there
indeed a need for the velayat-e faqih system? Should it be absolute (velayat-e mot-
laqah-e faqih), limited, or should it only be symbolic and ceremonial? The answers to

20. For an overview on the origins and activities of the Mujahedin-e Khalq Organization see: Abrahamian,
21. The Islamic world can be distinguished into two basic theoretical schools: Sunnism and Shi’ism. The
latter school emerged in 637 A.D. out of a dispute on who should be the successor of the prophet. While
the majority of the Sunni Muslims accept the rulers who succeeded the prophet after his death, the Shi’ites
do not accept any earthly ruler except for Muhammad’s cousin and son in law Kalif Ali ibn-e Abu Talib.
Khomeini changed this dogma by introducing his interpretation of the velayat-e faqih and the hokumat-e
islami (see also chapter 4.2.3), according to which a religious leader should be chosen among the most
knowledgeable clergy, as long as the Twelfth Imam remained hidden.
22. On the hajj see chapter 5.3.1.
these questions have direct consequences for the legitimacy of the political system of the IRI. At the same time, it should not be forgotten, that Islam continues to play an important role in the daily lives of almost all strata of Iranian society: rural and urban; wealthy and poor (Kamrava 2003: 104, 105, 111).

1.7 Summary
This chapter developed the theoretical framework of the study. It was organized around the following main questions: who has power in a society? What is the position of elites and their related institutions in society? What impact has ideology (politicized religion/Shi’ism) on policy formulation? What is the place of geopolitics in foreign policy formulation?

Based on Linz and Chehabi, the political system of the IRI between 1979 and 1989, when Ayatollah Khomeini was the supreme leader, was classified as close to totalitarian and, since 1989, as authoritarian with some limited democratic features. In the discussion of elite studies the following shortcomings of elite theories were identified:

(1) Elite theories are generally not concerned with the direct and indirect interaction between a political elite and the rest of society;

(2) There is no systemic distinction of elite theories that study elites in industrialized and in developing countries. This distinction is important, as power relations between state and society in countries where a comprehensive industrialization has taken place, differ from those in countries where industrialization has failed or only partly been successful. Industrialized countries are usually characterized by a certain extent of cohesion, whilst developing countries often exist in a socially fragmented society;

(3) The social context in which political elites act is not only national but also international;

(4) Many elite theories only focus on those individuals who are powerful and control the power resources of a society. But the political elite can, in addition, also consist of people who have indirect influence on policy formulation through participation in the political discourse.

The political elite, or more precisely the politically relevant elite, of the IRI can best be categorized in three concentric circles:

(1) The inner circle or (clerical) inner circle elite consists of those members of the political elite who have the power to take strategic decisions or object to them;

(2) The second circle, the administrative elite, are those members of the political elite who have a decisive influence on strategic decisions or can take political decisions that are less relevant;

(3) The third circle, the discourse elite, consists of members of the inner circle elite or administrative elite together with other individuals who engage in the political discourse on issues of economic, socio-cultural, or foreign policy relevance.

The inner circle and the discourse elite stand in continuous conflict with each other. Through introducing new ideas into the political discourse (e.g. the questioning of the
velayat-e faqih system) the discourse elite challenges the status quo of the political power structure of the IRI. Thus, the concept of the velayat-e faqih is subject to debate, with direct consequences for the legitimacy of the political system of the IRI.

Finally, the critical theory approach of IR and IPE, and its related critical geopolitics, were introduced for the study of foreign policy. The critical theory and critical geopolitics approach reject the state centric approach of IR and IPE theories. They refute the use of agency-structure dualism, a-historic structuralism, and determinism in the analysis of world politics and the historical structure of IR. They, instead, believe in the transformative character of the world and assume that any social structure has its limits. The most important aspect of the critical theory approach is that it believes in the transformative abilities of human beings and that collective human action leads to historical transformation. Critical geopolitics adds to this the geographic dimension for analyzing complex systemic realities. It not only looks at the “material spatial practices” that constitute the global political economy but also the way they are represented and contested. Thus, the study of foreign policy should not only be about foreign policy practices, but also on how they are arrived at and are influenced by certain representations of space.

In Iran, geopolitical traditions have, over the last 200 years, been greatly influenced by the country’s experiences of foreign intervention. Furthermore, Shi’ism has since its political institutionalization, at the beginning of the 16th century by the Safavid Empire, been an important feature of policy making. The politicization of Shi’ism culminated, in the 1960’s, in the development, by Ayatollah Khomeini, of the concept of the velayat-e faqih. With his concept of the velayat-e faqih, Khomeini radically broke with the traditional Shi’ite dogma over political power. Khomeini did not only restore Shi’ite traditions but actually initiated an ideological revolution within Shi’ism. Since the revolution, the velayat-e faqih system has become the main principle of the political power structure of the IRI and, up to now, remains one of the major obstacles to economic reform and democratization in Iran.