“America First”:

An Exceptionalist Break in the Tradition of Meliorism toward Iran

Julia Koenen
1029750
Pre-master North American Studies, Radboud University, 2018-2019
BA Thesis
Julia.Koenen@student.ru.nl

Supervisor: Jorrit van den Berk
Second reader: Peter van der Heiden
Engelse Taal en Cultuur

Teacher who will receive this document: J. van den Berk & P. van der Heiden
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Signed,

Name of student: Julia Koenen
Student number: 1029750
Abstract
This thesis focuses on Donald Trump’s ‘America First’ policy in relation to the concepts of American exceptionalism and meliorism (traditional components of American foreign policy), and the policy’s attitude toward the Middle East, specifically Iran. The U.S.-Iran relation has been complex since the Islamic Revolution in 1979 and the 9/11 attacks, and has not been as unstable as it is today for quite some time. Trump has pledged to focus solely on the United States and the domestic economy, and has cut ties with several long-standing international deals, among which the nuclear deal. Trump’s nationalist and unilateral objectives are not unique, but his rejection of all involvement with the Middle East might be. The research question of this thesis is: Is Trump’s policy of “America First” a break with the American tradition of meliorism toward Iran? This thesis illustrates that, in fact, Trump’s policy is a continuation of views and ideas already established and executed in previous presidencies, although it does break with the essential tradition of promoting democracy in undemocratic regions. It also argues that it might in fact be preceding president Barack Obama who broke the tradition of (the absence of) meliorism toward Iran.

Keywords: American exceptionalism, meliorism, Donald Trump, the Middle East, Iran, foreign policy, America First

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I hope you find this thesis as interesting as I found writing it.

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Introduction

It seems like the United States has always seen itself as the prime example of everything, a leading force, both throughout history and today. This sense of exceptionalism is deeply rooted in American society, and has been present since the founding of Anglo-America. European Americans perceived their initial migration to the North-American continent as their God-given right and duty. Two centuries later, westward expansion was carried out with a similar motive. All expansions of land, both domestically and globally, have come with interference, guised as help, with the land’s native people. This rhetoric of aid has always been problematic and often continues to be so. After completing expansion on a national scale, the United States progressed to establishing its place in international politics by participating in a new, more global version of territorial expansion: imperialism. This spread of economic, cultural and political control beyond American boundaries in the nineteenth century was primarily carried out through exceptionalist and religious ideologies. This involvement with other nations has traditionally gone hand in hand with the concept of meliorism: the belief that the world can be made a better place by human effort. American involvement, and meliorism, have been part of American foreign policy and relations for decades. The United States has taken on the role of the leader, the role model, and the good samaritan, always aiding its allies.

For decades, foreign policy has traditionally focused on repairing or establishing good relations with other nations. While it is without question that U.S. presidents have acted with American interests above all else, the election of Donald Trump in 2016 changed everything. His mottos ‘Make America Great Again’ and especially ‘America First’ seem to reflect a break from this tradition of meliorism. His controversial policies, or lack thereof, especially in the regions of the Middle East, have been hot topics. This thesis will focus on the historical and current relation between the United States and Iran. While Iran used to be one of the United States’ closest allies after World War II until 1979, Iranian religious Supreme Leader Ali Khamenei banned all direct communication with the United States in 2018. Iran’s explanation, besides the enormous effect of the 1979 Hostage Crisis, stresses the “natural and unavoidable conflict” between the Islamic Revolution and the American “arrogance” and desire for global hegemony. (Sadjadpour, 2009) The United States imposed an embargo on trade with Iran in 1995, which was lifted by President Barack Obama in 2016. In 2018, however, President Donald Trump reinstalled these sanctions, and instated even more in 2019. Recent polls also show that American and Iranian citizens have negative views on each other’s populations and governments. A significant amount of Americans also share the conviction that limiting Iranian influence and powers should be of top foreign policy priority. (Pew Research Center, 2018)

The tense relation between the United States and Iran is not only important and relevant to analyze because it has been one of America’s ‘hot topics’ in foreign affairs for four decades. During the first half of 2019, tensions between the two nations have risen to new, incredibly dangerous highs. While most of the world has, sometimes reluctantly or
involuntarily, endured American influence and power, Iran has oftentimes resisted and rejected it. Trump’s campaign of pressure contains a list of 12 concessions Tehran, Iran’s capital, would have to make in order for the sanctions to be removed. While previous presidents have not been mild on Iran either, Trump does not shy away from putting the United States at risk of serious military conflict with Iran. McKean & Granfield (2019) underline this idea by claiming that “the changes he has made to his Cabinet, the disregard he has shown for diplomacy and his choices in the Middle East all conspire to make war with Iran a growing danger.” He has pulled out of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (nuclear deal) with Iran, has become allies with Saudi Arabia, one of Iran’s nemeses and has continuously threatened Iran in the first half of 2019.

Stewart M. Patrick (2018a) argues that ever since Franklin D. Roosevelt’s presidency (1933-1945), America has held a position of the global leader, executing a continuous policy that goes beyond self-care. Trump has “torn at the roots and hacked at the branches of Western solidarity that his predecessors painstakingly cultivated over seven decades, [...] promising a foreign policy that is nationalist and transactional, focused on securing narrow material gains for the United States.” (Patrick, 2018a, 2017) With the appointment of Donald Trump, the United States seems to have shifted its focus away from their “traditional role as defender of the free world.” Patrick (2018a) also insists that “in embracing the doctrine of ‘America First’, Trump has signaled that the United States will look after number one, rather than serve as the custodian of world order and the champion of human freedom.” All of these notions are included in Trump’s exceptionalist ideology. Since the beginning of the presidential race, Donald Trump has “vowed to shake up world politics by reassessing long-standing U.S. alliances, ripping up existing U.S. trade deals, raising trade barriers against China, disavowing the Paris Climate Agreement, and repudiating the nuclear accord with Iran.” (Patrick, 2017) So far, it seems like Trump is executing his 2016 promises.

The hypothesis of this thesis is that with the establishment of his ‘America First’ policy, Trump has broken with the traditions of meliorism, and thus cut ties with its traditional rhetoric of care toward Iran, to shift its focus to caring for America first.

**Method**

To answer the research question, a historical approach to policy analysis is used, focusing on the differences and continuities in American foreign policy in the Middle East, and Iran specifically. This entails the telling of a story based on credible sources and includes two important approaches. The first is the hermeneutics approach, which goes into countries’ leaders to examine the actions and beliefs that shaped or developed their policy. The second is the nomological approach, which seeks generalities in history. (Hoefer, 2011) Both of these approaches are used throughout this thesis.

This thesis works with two overarching organizing principles: (American) exceptionalism and meliorism in Trump’s ‘America First’ policy. These concepts will guide the analysis of speeches and documents, primarily those of Donald Trump. These speeches will also be used to compare the president’s rhetoric to his practice, and the rhetorics of his
predecessors, and to highlight differences and similarities. The essential focus of this thesis is the comparison between traditional foreign policy and Trump’s nationalist foreign policy, extending to his rhetoric and practice, and eventually toward the complex U.S.-Iran relation. I expect this thesis to shed new light on the significance of Trump’s radical shift in foreign policy, and investigate whether his (foreign) policy is actually as big of a move as people make it out to be. As it also combines two important American issues, namely exceptionalism and meliorism and the relation with Iran, I believe it adds a new view on current affairs, especially in the light of current events.

Chapter one offers information on the concepts of (American) exceptionalism and meliorism. Their origins, place in American history, society and (foreign) politics will be examined, as well as the connected belief in the American right and duty to intervene with other nations. Finally, this chapter provides a framework of concepts and theories for the rest of the thesis.

Chapter two focuses on the Middle East and zooms in on Iran specifically. What are the traditions in foreign policy toward this region, and how does meliorism fit into it? These notions will be discussed in the light of the Cold War, the 1990s and the War on Terror. The chapter then offers a brief history of the U.S.-Iran relation, and the history of America’s foreign policy toward the nation.

Chapter three discusses Donald Trump’s ‘America First’ policy in terms of rhetoric and action, before examining its use in the Middle East. It then offers a comparison between Trump’s rhetoric and practice, to analyze its place in the traditional relation America has with Iran. Do his actions reflect his words? To strengthen this analysis, three case studies, all of significance in relation to Trump and Iran, are utilized: the 2017 Muslim Ban, the nuclear deal, and Iran’s handling of human rights. For this chapter, a set of primary sources such as speeches, are used. Concluding, the question on whether Trump’s ‘America First’ policy is a break with traditional foreign policy will be answered.
Chapter 1
The Tradition of American Exceptionalism and Meliorism

To be able to effectively discuss the matters of American exceptionalism and meliorism, it is essential to define what is exactly meant when we are speaking about these terms. In this chapter, we will go into what meliorism is, how it is connected to American exceptionalism and what their place in American history is. Thereafter, we will go into why the United States feels like it has the right and duty to interfere and intervene in other countries.

American Exceptionalism: A Definition
American exceptionalism can be traced back to the founding of the Anglo-American nation. It is the conviction that the United States “differs qualitatively from other nations due to its unique history, origins, and special institutions, and that it serves as a beacon to other nations.” (Safrin, 2008) The concept was founded by French diplomat and writer Alexis de Tocqueville, through the phrase “The position of the Americans is therefore quite exceptional, and it may be believed that no other democratic people will ever be placed in a similar one.” (1840) According to Wilson (2015), the notion of American exceptionalism reflects a political culture that is “asserted to be unique to the United States”, along with a specific set of typically American values and a traditional intellectual system, which has indelibly shaped the public opinion, policy and both institutional and political arrangements. The ideology is embedded and interwoven in American history, which will be discussed in depth in a following paragraph. The historical absence of a feudal past and an established aristocracy, the American Revolution, the open frontier and westward expansion, and the rise of American evangelical Christianity have aided the establishment of a strong sense of individuality, “reinforced the values of democracy, equality and freedom; and produced hostility toward a centralized authority and passion for democracy and limited government.” Exceptionalism has thus become closely intertwined in civic religion too. (Wilson, 2015; Sachs, 2018)

According to Restad (2017), the concept of American exceptionalism could be regarded two ways: subjectively and objectively. ‘Subjective exceptionalism’ entails a constructed identity or set of ideas that Americans themselves identify with. American exceptionalism, then, is an American identity, nationalism, or civil religion. It reflects the ideas “central to the belief Americans have about themselves as a nation apart from and above others.” These ideas are interrelated, and consist of the notions that the United States is inherently distinct from the Old World (Africa, Asia and Europe), has a significant and unique role in world history, and possesses and will retain great power, without it ever declining. ‘Objective exceptionalism’ depicts the ideology as a set of qualities that can be used to compare the United States to other nations. These ideas do not only imply a
fundamental difference between the United States and the rest of the world, it entails a sense of superiority, which can be traced back to the Puritan founding of New England (religious superiority) and the American Revolution (political superiority). The American Revolution brought new (domestic) politics and government. Because of America’s “exceptional founding and political geniality, it was and is believed that the United States should play a unique role in shaping the world.” (Restad, 2017) The United States therefore has a missionary role in the world. This will be discussed more in-depth in a following paragraph.

The concept of American exceptionalism is often linked to unilateralism, entailing the belief that America is unbound by rules that apply to other nations. It is an approach in which states act without regard to the interests of other nations or without their support. (Wani, 2018) This belief justifies the United States’ choices in international law and behavior, and explains foreign interventions. (Ruggie, 2004) Although unilateralism is often portrayed as something bad, while it could also be argued that on issues like national self-defense and when used on occasion, it could have positive results. (Wani, 2018) Unilateralism is a big part of Trump’s policy, and will be discussed in a later chapter. Oppositely, multilateralism means the cooperative acting with other states, and is utilized by Europe, for example.

American Exceptionalism in American History

The exceptionalist ideology, is rooted in American history, especially stemming from the era of the American Revolution between 1765 and 1783, in which America separated from Great Britain. This independence was predicated and expanded in America’s prime documents, such as John Winthrop’s sermon, the Declaration of Independence, and the U.S. Constitution, among others. All of these documents imply several lections of superiority: religious, political, or other. To create a better understanding of the basis and framework of contemporary feelings of exceptionalism in America, the three documents mentioned above will be discussed.

American exceptionalism starts with the Puritan migration in 1630. Led by John Winthrop, 700 Puritans sailed to the New World on the Arbella ship. These people did not simply wanted to find a new life elsewhere, they wanted to establish a ‘City upon a Hill’, a second Promised Land, led there by God like the Israelis. It entails some sense of religious superiority, which has been referred to many times by presidents such as Ronald Reagan. Sachs (2018) calls this “messianic vision”, which we can link to the missionary role mentioned earlier. With the aid of this vision, and the belief that the Puritans were God’s chosen people, the European people overcame hardships, famine, distance from their old homes, resistance from indigenous peoples and wars between European powers and governments. This success was not merely America’s success; it was God’s success. This tradition of divinity has been continuously present throughout American expansion. “In more than 250 years of almost continuous expansionist wars and bold investments in farms, factories, and infrastructure, Americans interpreted their successes as proof of the divinity of their cause.” (Sachs, 2018) American exceptionalism is thus closely interlinked with religion. John Winthrop, and the Puritans’, ideas were reflected in his sermon *A Model of Christian*
Charity. In this sermon, which was delivered during the voyage to the North American continent, he describes the problems the Puritan people might encounter, and how to overcome them. He also introduces the famous notion of the ‘city upon a hill’ and the belief that “the eyes of all people are upon” them. (Winthrop, 1630) This belief shows the conviction that they are doing something of great significance, serving as an example for the rest of the world. The sermon is seen as a precursor to the concept of American exceptionalism. (Hodgson, 2009) This era mainly reflects American superiority in terms of religion.

The Heritage Foundation (n.d.), a conservative source, evidently eulogizes America’s greatest ideology, and argues that the United States is the only nation in the world that “is founded on a creed, which is established in the Declaration of Independence, a timeless statement of inherent rights, the proper purposes of government, and the limits on political authority.” The entire nation is built on the concept of freedom: it is built on the belief that everyone is both equal and free. The Declaration of Independence was signed on July 4, 1776 and marks the union of the original thirteen states of America, the Thirteen Colonies, and their separation and sovereignty from Great Britain. The document depicts the Anglo-American people’s opposition against the King George III and consists largely of a list of grievances. It is a fundamental building block of the key document of the United States: the Constitution. It introduces the democratic ideals and values of the Colonies. Although these ideas were not new, America was the first nation to actively employ them as the foundation of a government, and has attracted people from all over the world to this day. From then on, American superiority revolved slightly less around religion, and more around politics.

The first words of the US Constitution, “We, the People of the United States” (US, 1787) implies a special sovereignty of the citizens of the nation. The document delineates the framework of American governance and politics. It is unique in the sense that it represents a government designed to serve its citizens, protects individual rights and restricts the power of the government. It does not only protect citizens from aggressive foreign nations, but also from aggression coming from the own governmental powers. It has kept the powers of the three branches of government, legislative (Congress), executive (President) and judicial (Supreme Court and federal courts) separate and limited, making sure none can become tyrannical. Over time, the presidential branch has been given more power, included in added amendments. One could argue that the nation’s fundamental document has gone beyond its original purpose, possibly forming a threat to the American citizens, as abuse of power thus becomes more likely. The constitutional system allows for the freedom that citizens of the United States enjoy, at least on paper. This notion of freedom was enacted with nineteenth-century expansionism, in the form of Manifest Destiny. The modern edition of the Puritan voyage to the New World, and the domestic version of imperialism, expansion was seen providential, the Americans’ God-given right to take land from the uncivilized people inhabiting it.
**American Exceptionalism in Foreign Policy**

Another aspect of American exceptionalism is the belief that the United States has the unique mission or duty to transform the world. Restad (2017) argues that, in terms of foreign policy, American exceptionalism can be depicted in two ways: exemplary and missionary. In the exemplarist exceptionalism, the United States as seen as the perpetually superior to the Old World. This version is closely tied to isolationism, because this superior can only be obtained and maintained through isolation the New World, America, from the Old, and shines with example while not directly engaging with the rest of the world. (Restad, 2014) This was the original approach intended for foreign relations, dating back to the Founding Founders. Missionary exceptionalism, however, grants the United States the self-evident role of missionary, and highlights the need to spread its ideology of democracy and capitalism around the world, and active involvement in international politics. The approach believes that “the primary responsibility of the United States is to defend the freedom and well-being of the American people. To do this, the United States must apply America’s universal principles to the challenges this nation faces in the world.” (The Heritage Foundation, n.d.) This approach is tied to the foreign policy tradition of internationalism, or interventionism. (Restad, 2014) This concept goes hand in hand with meliorism. These approaches have been alternated throughout American history. While the United States was founded on sole exemplary-isolationist principles, foreign policy shifted to missionary-internationalist during the early twentieth century, when the Spanish-American War began. After World War I, the American focus again lay exclusively on domestic progress, returning to exemplary-isolationism. During the 40s and onward, America reverted to a missionary stance. (Restad, 2014) In the 1950s, the United States organized several ‘development programs’, as it was believed that people in the newly emerged Third World wanted to be modernized and make use of the American economic systems. These projects ought to bring economic growth, stability and prosperity to the nations. The American government also set up propaganda campaigns, using widespread media, to promote America’s economic success. This however, was not habitually met with positive responses from Third World people, and anti-Americanism rose during this era. (Norton et al., 2015) Current policy, under the Trump administration, suggests a shift back towards exemplary schemes. This shift will be discussed in a later chapter.

Holsti (2010) asserts four criteria in a exceptionalist foreign policy: a mission to liberate others in the pursuit of a universal common good, a sense of being free from external constraints, the need to have an external enemy in a hostile world of universal threats and regarding oneself as an innocent victim. The first and third criteria could be considered missionary-internationalist, the second and fourth exemplary-isolationist.

The notion of American exceptionalism has been contested in both international and domestic politics. Obama has been criticized for not believing in the concept, and Cha (2015) notes that “the self-righteous discourse narrating America has been the greatest human force for good that the world has ever known, sanitizes the violent trajectory of American foreign
policy towards the ‘Rest’. From the historical perspective of African Americans, Native Americans and all other non-Western peoples dominated by the white American ‘empire’, the contradiction of American exceptionalism is evident. There exists the genealogy of ‘American Orientalism’ that relies on an ontological distinction between barbarianism and civilization in the American political tradition in contrast to the universalist claim of exceptionalism. This idea of Orientalism will be discussed in a later chapter. Cha (2015) also argues that the contemporary debate on the legitimacy and accuracy of American exceptionalism could be interpreted as an identity crisis, and the rise of it in current politics a “product of anxiety about a hostile international environment.” The concept is then used as a political tool to “mobilize and reassure the American people in distress.” American Exceptionalism thus gives the American people a shared identity, a common goal and good.

Meliorism

In American policy, the concepts of exceptionalism and global meliorism are inherently intertwined. To understand the position of meliorism in American policy, a brief history of the concept in American foreign affairs will be given. McDougall (2009) argues that meliorism is about promoting economic growth, human rights, social reform, and democracy; its core position being that the causes of revolution and militarism are poverty, ignorance, oppression and despair. The concept can be traced back to the nineteenth century, through missionary missions in the Pacific and East Europe. It started to influence official policy during the imperial era in the Caribbean and the Philippines. Global meliorism became an essential part of the U.S. strategy under Woodrow Wilson, who proclaimed that the United States had the infinite privilege of fulfilling her destiny and save the world. The principle was moved to center stage during World War II. Along with the occupations of Germany and Japan after the war, and the Marshall Plan, the American power to democratize and uplift entire nations seemed proven, as stated by McDougall (2009). Meliorism obtained new urgency again with the Cold War, in which the rhetoric and methods for foreign aid became primarily meliorist. This approach continued, through John F. Kennedy’s social establishments. The concept of global meliorism had until then been inherently tied to the establishment and upkeep of American power. During the Vietnam War, for example, McDougall (2009) argues that the main American objective was not to defeat the enemy, but to keep an American ally from losing. He states that the overthrowal of Saigon was not to contain communist, but because the authoritarian government refused to install the reforms America saw as necessary. This was separated when Jimmy Carter turned his focus away from communism, and to human rights and third-world development, even though this was revoked under Reagan in the Cold War.

The concept of meliorism can be justified by arguing that the United States acts as a primary agent in the world, seeing to the restrainment of violence and disorder, the maintenance of democracy and economic growth. By means of meliorism, the United States has arguably provided and aided economic, societal and political improvement in Somalia, Haiti, Bosnia, Cuba, North Korea, Iran, Iraq and Libya. (Graebner, 2003) There is, however,
a contrasting opinion on meliorism, mainly coming from nations outside the United States. Critics question whether this supposed aid is actually helpful or positive. Sachs (2018) also challenges this positive outlook on America's rhetoric of help. Although even countries that rejected America for its arrogance have depended on it as the “single guarantor of world stability” (Graebner, 2003), one could argue that American interference has equally damaged said economies, societies and politics. Paterson (1943) states that the United States pursues freedom and equality for other people in other countries, even if that entails killing them “by the hundreds of thousands and wrecking their entire society.” She also argues that “the humanitarian in theory is the terrorist in action.” (1943) Robert Penn Warren (1960) calls this “moral narcissism”, a justification for American wrongdoings in international spheres, such as the murder of Filipinos resisting American imperialism and America entering a European war ‘to make the world safe for democracy’. This also includes military interventions, primarily in the Middle East.

Framework of Concepts and Theories

This chapter has introduced many ideas, arguments and theories. Throughout the rest of this thesis, we will be utilizing the following definitions and ideas. American exceptionalism is the foundation of many American attitude, policy and behavior. An exceptionalist foreign policy meets several criteria. (Holsti, 2010). Firstly, it has a mission to liberate others in the pursuit of a universal common good. It also has a sense of being free from external constraints, which is reflected in the concept of unilateralism. This approach in international relations entails the act of states without regard for other states’ interests, or without their support. (Wani, 2018) Next, the policy carries the need to have an external enemy in a hostile world of universal threats. Finally, the nation executing the policy regards itself as an innocent victim. The thesis will be working with meliorism as both a positive and negative contribution to the outside world throughout the core of the text. In the conclusion, the concept will be discussed again. Finally, the exemplary and missionary approaches will be used in framing the analysis.
Chapter 2

The Traditional Foreign Policy toward the Middle East and Iran: Carter to Trump

This chapter starts with a discussion of traditions in U.S. foreign policy toward the Middle East. What have the main issues and approaches used in the last decades? It then zooms in on Iran. The chapter offers a brief description of the American history with the nation and the established foreign policy toward it. Maintaining the focus of this thesis, the concept of meliorism will be used as a guideline.

Traditions in Foreign Policy toward the Middle East

Before we will delve deeper into the American relation with Iran, it is important to understand how the tradition of foreign policies and relations toward the Middle East has been established. The era in which this American-Iranian relation was of significance has covered nearly four decades, and seven presidents. How did these presidents deal with foreign relations and policies, especially in relation to the Middle East? What have been the main topics, and are there any greater patterns? How have these policies shaped the image America has of the Middle East, and has this influenced America’s treatment of the region? To maintain a meaningful focus, three eras in which significant foreign policies were designed will be discussed in this paragraph: the Cold War, the 1990s, and the War on Terror. Finally, the attitude of Barack Obama toward the Middle East will briefly be discussed.

The Tradition of Meliorism

An example of American meliorism, and the exceptionalist aspect of it, can be retraced to 1942. As the Allies of World War II (the United States, the Soviet Union, the United Kingdom and China) were convinced they could keep Germany out of the Middle East, they spread a message to win over the Muslims, stating the following lines.

“Behold. We, the American Holy Warriors, have arrived. We have come to fight the great Jihad of Freedom. We have come to set you free. Speak with our fighting men and you will find them pleasing to the eye and gladdening to the heart. We are not as some other Christians whom ye have known, and who trample you under foot. Our soldiers consider you as their brothers, for we have been reared in the way of free men. Our soldiers have been told about your country and about their Moslem brothers and they will treat you with respect and with a friendly spirit in the eyes. Look in their eyes and smiling faces, for they are Holy Warriors happy in their holy work.”

(Roosevelt, 2000)
This quote hints at soft power aimed toward people who ‘need to be saved from evil’. The motivations of the pursuit of meliorism in the Middle East can be questioned. While one could argue that it is the traditional goal of global promotion of democracy, another argument could be the notion, or American belief, that Arab states are backward and need to be helped. This view is called orientalism, and can be linked to American exceptionalism. Orientalism is often used as a patronizing attitude, generally from the West toward the Middle East and Asia, and hint at the underdevelopment and inferiority of these regions. (Mamdani, 2004) McDougall (2009) states that before U.S. interference in the region, “Arabs, Persians, and other Muslims were hardly the focus of U.S. geopolitics than that they are today. During World War II they seemed just backward, superstitious, and thieving peoples who happened to be in the way of the armies fighting for control of the world.” According to Little (2002), the United States has made an incredible effort to modernize and westernize the Middle East. He speaks of the American frustration about the slow pace in which this social change is generated, and calls this a byproduct of a major contradiction within American foreign relations: “an irresistible impulse to remake the world in America’s image and a profound ambivalence about the peoples to be remade.” Both of these ideas confirm the orientalist view. According to Schaar (2012), this concept continues to be present in foreign policy and fosters paranoia already present in public attitudes after the 9/11 attacks.

The Cold War

Aspects of meliorism are also included in policies or doctrines developed throughout the Cold War, all having some connection to aiding the Middle East. The Truman Doctrine of 1947, for example, sought to support free people against oppression by armed minorities or outside pressure. The Eisenhower Doctrine of 1957 was meant to prevent the Soviets from intruding Arab land. With the Nixon Doctrine, the United States sent military aid on the Iranian shah, to fill the gap the British had left when they retreated from the Middle East. In the Carter Doctrine of the early 1980s, the United States pledged to revolt against any Soviet attempt to regain control over the Gulf region. (Little, 2002)

The United States had other (strategic) objectives during the Cold War. American leaders saw the region as a pivotal point of importance for containing Soviet expansion and securing Western Europe. (Cropsey & Brown, 2014) This might be interconnected with meliorism, as America sought to protect their own interests by using the concept of meliorism as a diplomatic cover-up. America also has a history of supporting dictators around the world. According to Cristol (2018), this is a product of the Cold War, a “necessary evil in the global fight against communism.” America supported Arab dictators for a number of reasons, namely the assurance of oil, maintaining stability with Israel, balance against Iran, or simply because another leader was thought to be worse than the one in power. This could be argued in the 1953 ousting of the Iranian Shah.
The 1990s

In the early 1990s, the Cold War came to an end, and the Soviet Union ceased to exist. Clinton felt like his predecessor, George H.W. Bush, focused too much on foreign affairs. Therefore, Clinton’s priority became domestic affairs and the American economy. He implemented the dual containment strategy, meant to contain Iraq and Iran like during the Cold War, which will be discussed more in-depth further into this chapter. He did apologized to Iran for the 1953 overthrow of Mossadegh, paid reparations for the accidental shooting of an Iranian passenger plane in 1988, but also became involved in the launch of missiles on Iraq, and urged the containment and countering of Iran, as well as a cut of U.S. trade with the nation. (Clinton, 1995)

United States has continuously supported Israel in its foreign policy for decades. It offered protection during the Iraqi attack, under the presidency of George H.W. Bush. Israeli-Palestinian peace, however, did not gain presidential priority until the election of Bill Clinton in 1992. In several discusses accords, the status of Jerusalem, final borders, Israeli settlements and Palestinian refugees was discussed. (Cristol, 2018) These issues seemed close to be finalized at the time with the signing of the Oslo Accords in 1993, but remain unsolved until today. In the 1990s, Iraqi President Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait, intending to annex it. The United Nations Security Council demanded his immediate withdrawal - President George H.W. Bush gave Hussein a single opportunity with withdraw, before they would use “all necessary means” to remove his troops from the nation. Hussein refused, causing the United States and 31 other nations to fight against Iraq (supported by Yemen). Hussein was defeated in 1991, but was not removed from power. It did bring new American bases in Middle Eastern nations and new highs in both American power and global influence, and popularity of the president on duty. (Cristol, 2018) This ensued in the 2003 Iraq War, with heavy U.S. involvement in the country’s government.

The War on Terror

The Middle East, at least for the United States, is inherently linked to Al-Qaeda, and Osama bin Laden. Linked to attacks in 1993 on the World Trade Center, 1996 on a U.S. military installation in Saudi Arabia and 1998 on U.S. embassies in Kenya and Tanzania, both quickly gained notoriety. The United States retaliated with missiles on an supposed Al-Qaeda facilities containing chemical weapons and trainees. This attack received major criticism when these facilities turned out to be pharmaceutical firms. Al-Qaeda and Osama bin Laden are most widely known for the 9/11 attacks on the World Trade Center in New York City and the Pentagon. These attacks resulted in the Authorization for the Use of Military Force, authorizing president George W. Bush to use all force necessary to prevent any future act of international terrorism against the United States. Originally meant to authorize the invasion of Afghanistan (as the country refused to turn Bin Laden over to the United States) and the tracking down of Osama bin Laden and Al-Qaeda, it has been used as justification for at least 37 military deployments in the Middle East and Africa. (Cristol, 2018) This all amounted to
Bush’s War on Terror. Announcing that “any nation that continues to harbor or support terrorism will be regarded by the United States as a hostile regime.” (Bush, 2011)

In 2002, Bush mentioned Iran, together with North Korea and Iraq, as an ‘axis of evil’, accusing them of supporting terrorism and nuclear proliferation. With this statement, he drew the nations into his War on Terror, causing outrage in Iran. (Bush, 2002) The objectives for this ‘war’ were primarily the identification, location and destruction of terrorists and terrorist organizations, the rejection of support for these terrorist groups and the states sponsoring it, and the protection of the American people, domestically and internationally. Although Bush states that America “is unalterably committed to protecting our (American, ed.) citizens, [...] building a safer, better world of greater opportunity and freedom for all peoples” (2003), no statement includes talk of the protection of Persian or Arab people against oppressive regimes or terrorism. The War on Terror thus seems to be an act of pure self-protection.

Another hot topic in the contemporary war on terror is Syria. After previous involved in Syria, The Islamic State of Iraq and Syria (ISIS) drew the United States back to the country. The group’s threat to both Kurdish and Iraqi allies and Westerners, and its brutal behavior towards the local population pushed the United States to get involved: something that Obama had long resisted. He sent a small amount of US military forces, which was increased to 2000 under the presidency of Donald Trump. Cristol (2018) argues that Trump’s approach towards the Middle East was in stark contrast with that of his predecessors. His policies included isolationist and hyper-aggressive sentiments, along with some exceptionalist statements. This view is arguable, however, as will be discussed further in the conclusion.

Barack Obama

Obama believed that Bush, his predecessor, squandered American power and position with his unilateral interventions. His devotion lay with retreating America as much as he could, while trying to rebuild the bridged he felt Bush had burned. Critics label his rhetoric utopian and unrealistic, as he breaks with the American tradition of force, and installs diplomacy: soft power over hard power. Obama’s policy, Stephens (2008) argues, fits into the tradition of global meliorism. He explicitly referred to, for example, the Iranian people after the 2009 Iranian election protests, stating that “This is not about the United States and the West. This is about people of Iran, and the future that they - and only they - will choose.” He explicitly rejects any American involvement or interference in the matter. However, during the Arab Spring in 2010, in which protests took place in Tunisia, Egypt, Libya and Bahrain, President Obama had to choose between supporting the democratic desires of the protesters, or backing American allies. As France and the United Kingdom led operations to protect the protesters from Gaddafi’s brutal suppression, Obama reluctantly promised to support the operation. Gaddafi was defeated, but Egyptian gained a new military dictatorship. Obama remained silent. (Cristol, 2018) This shows that Obama was not always purely meliorist in his approaches.
The American History with Iran

To introduce the American history with Iran, we will first look into a brief overview of American problematic involvement with the nation. The relation between the United States and the Middle East dates back to the late nineteenth century, although American interest in the area, especially Iran, did increase only after the discovery of oil. From that point onwards, the United States developed a commercial interest in the nation, making it a central point of the American foreign economy. For the United States, Iran’s strategic location was beneficial. Iran saw America as a protector against Britain and later the Soviet Union, but also thought that the United States could help them become a great power in their region. (Bakhash, 2009) The relation remained unchanged until the mid-1940s, when the United States found a natural ally in Iran, and provided both economic and military help. (Hussain, 2015) The relationship was close, and the two nations found an ally in each other. (Bakhash, 2009) In 1953, the first cracks in the relation between American and Iranian officials began to appear. Britain and America combined forces to oust Iranian prime minister Mohammed Mossadegh, who had been democratically elected, and replaced him with monarch Shah Mohammad Reza Pahlavi. America’s motivation to oust Mossadegh was the fact that he planned to nationalize Iranian oil industry. (Tharoor, 2015) Iranians perceived this ousting as a signal of the meddling of the West in their domestic affairs, motivated by greed and the wish to force Western interests upon the Middle East. In 1957, the United States established a nuclear cooperation program with the Shah, initially promising Iran technical aid and the lease of commodities. This allowed Iran’s capacities to grow significantly over time. During this time, Iran was incredibly dependent on the United States, as they provided protection, support and aid. Eventually, the relationship turned into a political partnership. (Bakhash, 2009) Despite the nation’s prosperity, the American meddling had sowed “anti-imperialist sentiments”, Tharoor (2015) argues, which formed the foundation for the revolution in 1979. In November 1979, Iranian students occupied the American Embassy, resulting in one of the most well-known issues between the two nations: the Hostage Crisis. For 444 days, 52 American diplomats and citizens were held hostage. This event has impacted and shaped the (political) image the United States and Iran have of each other. (Bakhash, 2009) After this, the US-Iran relation went downhill. In 1980, the two nations decided on cutting all diplomatic contact.

Although the United States was not a direct, or active, participant in the Iran-Iraq war (1980-1988) and positioned itself as neutral, it silently began to support Iraq as the odds looked in favor of Iran. America started to aid Saddam Hussein, president of Iraq, both diplomatically and with intelligence. When the administration of Hussein utilized weapons of a chemical nature against Iranian troops, the United States remained silent. (Bakhash, 2009) In 1983, American marine garrisons were bombed in Beirut, Lebanon. This deadly attack was connected to Hezbollah, a militia supported by Iran. Because of this fact, Iran was proclaimed dangerous by then-ruling President Ronald Reagan. Between 1985 and 1986, the Iran-Contra scandal took place, in which the United States covertly transported weapons to Iran in
exchange for help in freeing hostages held by Hezbollah. The financial profit was distributed to rebels elsewhere, placing the United States and President Ronald Reagan in a crisis. In 1988, an airplane containing 290 Iranian citizens travelling to Mecca, was shot down by an American warship. America dismissed this as an accident, but Iran considered this yet another indication of the United States’ determination to knock down the Islamic republic. During the early 1990s, Iran was again linked to attacks in Argentia and Saudi Arabia. In the late 1990s onward, it seemed like the US-Iran relation was improving. The election of Mohammad Khatami in 1997 brought new hope for the possibility of improvement of the US-Iranian relation. Khatami called for the breaking down of mutual mistrust between the two nations, and insisted that Iran had no desire for nuclear weapons. He expressed the desire for open communication between Iran and the United States. In 2000, the United States publicly spoke out about the harm it had done to Iran’s development in politics by assisting in the 1953 coup. In 2001, the United States and Iran worked together in Germany to find a solution for Afghanistan’s government after the overthrow of the Taliban. (Tharoor, 2015) These developments ceased in 2002, when President George W. Bush mentioned Iran, together with North Korea and Iraq as an “axis of evil”, accusing them of supporting terrorism or nuclear proliferation and making the nations part of the “War on Terror”. (Bush, 2002) Later in 2002, a Iranian group announced the existence and development of two nuclear sites. Iran denies all accusations pointed at them by the United States. Between 2006 and 2010, the United Nations places four sanctions on the nation. Other nations, among which the United States, and the European Union, impose sanctions on the nation as well. In 2005, right-wing conservative Mahmoud Ahmadinejad becomes president. His controversial ideas, especially his alleged participation in the hostage crisis, him denying the Holocaust and his belief that the American government organized the 9/11 attacks, caused the Iranian relation with the West to decline even further.

Hassan Rouhani was elected president in 2013, promising to end Iran’s isolation and offer relief to the Iranian economy that was crippled by sanctions. President in power, Barack Obama, had a phone call with Rouhani in September: the first contract between the United States and Iran since 1979. (Tharoor, 2015) After many negotiations and the mutual desire to settle the nuclear issue, Iran and a number of world powers agreed on lifting the sanctions burdening the nation, in exchange for restraints on Iran’s nuclear program.

American Foreign Policy in Iran

The 1979 fall of the Shah, a key American ally, devastated the U.S.-Iran relation. After the takeover of the American Embassy in Tehran, resulting in the Hostage Crisis, president Carter decided to end relations with the newly established regime. In April, 1980, the United States cut all relations with Iran. The hostages were released minutes after the inauguration of Ronald Reagan, early 1981.

Reagan (1981-1989) deemed Iran supportive of terrorism in 1984, after their aid of the 1983 bombings of barracks in Beirut. He also favored Iraq in the 1980-1988 war between Iran and Iraq. Despite this fact, the Reagan administration provided Iran with arms, in
exchange for help in releasing American hostages in Lebanon. In 1988, American forces mistakenly shot an Iranian aircraft, and killed all 290 passengers. This incident pushed Iran to accept an armistice in the war. In 1989, succeeding president George H.W. Bush (1989-1993) stated in his inaugural address that relations between the United States and Iran could be improved, if they helped releasing the remaining hostages in Lebanon. Iran, however, continued their support for violent anti-American groups. Bill Clinton (1993-2001) campaigned a “dual containment” strategy of Iran and Iraq, entailing keeping both nations weak. In response to Iran’s support for terrorist groups in Israel, Clinton imposed sanctions on Iran, along with a ban on U.S. trade and investment in the nation. With the election of the moderate Khatemi in 1997, dialogue with Iran seemed possible again, but the Iranian president refused. As mentioned earlier, George W. Bush (2001-2009) included Iran in his ‘axis of evil’, together with North Korea and Iraq. However, there was more involvement than there had been for two decades. America accepted Iran’s help in stabilizing Afghanistan and Iraq, helped the nation with military aid after the 2003 earthquake in Bam. Bush also helped form the foundations of a first attempt at establishing a nuclear deal with Iran. During the inaugural address of his second term, he claimed that America could be an ally to a democratic, free Iran. With this statement, Bush shows a support for regime change in the nation. Barack Obama (2009-2017) argued diplomacy and rebuilding the U.S.-Iran relationship, in order to persuade the nation to limit its nuclear activities. He desired dialogue, and referred to the nation as the ‘Islamic Republic of Iran’ - renouncing a policy of regime change. In 2009, the administration shifted to a ‘two track’ strategy: increased economic pressure, along with the offer of negotiations and the possibility of sanction relief. Sanctions were imposed between 2010 and 2013. In early 2013, Obama’s administration initiated direct, but covert, talks with Iran to discuss a nuclear accord. A phone conversation with Iran’s newly elected president was the first direct contact since the Iranian Revolution of 1979. The Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action was completed in 2015, and was hoped to aid improvement of the U.S.-Iran relation.

Donald Trump (2017-now), however, did not agree on this notion, as he felt the JCPOA failed to address other vital issues, and did not allow the United States to prevent Iran’s ‘evil’ activities. (Katzman, 2019) This notion was reinforced by other leading figures. Richard Haass, an American diplomat and president of the Council on Foreign Relations, argued in 2015 that the JCPOA was a compromise between the United States and Iran, in which the United States continue to allow certain unforgivable qualities of Iran. (2015) General Kenneth F. McKenzie (2019), Commander of U.S. Central Command, refers to the National Security Strategy as he states that the United States must work with its partners to neutralize Iranian “malign activities” in the Middle East. According to him, Iran is America’s most significant threat to global stability: especially their “hegemonic ambitions, their misbehavior and their threats.” He also refers to their direct engagement with terrorist activities, arguing that the Islamic Revolutionary Guard is Iran’s predominant means of directing and executing its “global terrorist campaigns.” The regime, according to McKenzie (2019), provides funding, equipment, training and logistical support to numerous terrorist and militant organizations, aided in the smuggling, construction and deployment of ballistic
missiles into Yemen. The public opinion on the matter is quite evident too. “Partisan opinions about limiting the power and influence of Iran and Russia are nearly mirror images: 52% of Democrats say reducing Russia’s power and influence should be a top priority, compared with 32% of Republicans. By contrast, 52% of Republicans rate limiting Iran’s powers as a top goal, compared with 29% of Democrats. While the power and influence of China is not a leading goal for either party (39%/26%), the greatest partisan agreement is on North Korea. 43% of Republicans and 35% of Democrats argue that limiting North Korea’s power and influence is of top priority.” (Pew Research Center, 2018)

The main American interests in terms of material in Iran is oil. Ideologically, and traditionally, the promotion of democracy has been an essential part of American foreign policy. This has been the case for decades. The Iranian motivations and interests, however, are more ambiguous. Katzman (2016) argues that Iran seems to be torn between “their revolutionary and religious ideology against the demands of Iran’s national interests.” The Iranian objectives are thus fundamentally different than the American objectives. Iran’s goals are: “preserving the regime, become the dominant political and security broker in the region, and lead the resistance against the United States and Israel, in that order.” (Bipartisan Policy Center, 2018) The nation is motivated by threats to their established regime and national interests, especially posed by the United States and its allies. Iran feels like America consistently rejects the Islamic revolution, imposes sanctions and supports Iranian adversaries such as Israel and Saudi Arabia.
Chapter 3

Trump’s ‘America First’ Policy toward Iran

This chapter will begin with a description of Donald Trump’s ‘America First’ policy, and its actions and foreign policies, focusing specifically on Iran. How does Trump see foreign policy and what is America’s place in it? How does his policy differ from his predecessors’ policies? Thereafter, Trump’s rhetoric will be examined and compared to his practice. Do his actions match his words? Three issues within the current US-Iran relation will be adduced as case studies: the 2017 Muslim ban, the Nuclear Deal and human rights.

Trump’s Policy of ‘America First’: Rhetoric

Donald Trump is notorious for the statement and policy of ‘America First’. To be able to understand his rhetoric, it is essential to examine his ideas and ideology, and their origin. First, we will look at what has already been said about the policy, both by Trump himself and critics. Then, the concepts of exceptionalism and meliorism will be looked into and analyzed in terms of Trump’s rhetoric. Are they as evident as they have been in several preceding presidents’ policies and speeches?

The ‘America First’ Rhetoric

The main points of Trump’s policy are nationalism and unilateralism. The phrase has been used by American presidents before. Woodrow Wilson used it to emphasize the neutrality of the United States during the onset of World War II. He urged the United States to lead and aid Europe in the war. Some of the history of the phrase, however, was characterized by anti-semitic, isolationist and pro-fascist rhetoric. Supporters of the initial America First movement believed that democracy was declining and that the future was in fascism. (Bennett, 2017) The America First Committee was against American aid of Nazi Germany. In a similar manner, it was also used by journalist and politician William Randolph Hearst, who intended to secure the security of the American land and people. (Rauchway, 2016) The essence of this interpretation would later be used by Donald Trump. The interwar period, in which the America First sentiment grew, is similar to the time in which Trump was elected president. (Bennett, 2017) Both eras show economic and social unrest in the United States, together with general nativism and populism. In his inaugural address, Trump argues the following.

“We are transferring power from Washington, D.C., and giving it back to you, the people. For too long, a small group in our nation’s capital has reaped the rewards of government while the people have borne the cost. Washington flourished, but the people did not share in its wealth. [...] The establishment protected itself but not the citizens of our country. Their victories have not been your victories. Their triumphs
have not been your triumphs. And while they celebrated in our nation’s capital, there was little to celebrate for our struggling families all across our land. That all changes starting right here and right now. Because this moment is your moment. It belongs to you. [...] January 20th, 2017 will be remembered as the day the people became the rulers of this nation again.” (2017a)

This quote carries a populist message, and plays with the notion that something within the political system is broken and does not serve the citizens. This idea is also reflected in a statement he made during his speech at the 72nd United Nations General Assembly (2017b), stating that he “was elected not to take power, but to give power to the American people, where it belongs.” Trump also states that “the forgotten men and women of our country will be forgotten no longer.” With this, he promises betterment to the ‘silent majority’ in the “carnage” that was 2016 America: plagued by economic devastation, crime and a bad education system. This is striking, as most of Trump’s base are actually white populists, echoing what Patrick (2018b) calls the “sucker narrative”: the belief that “foreigners have long been taking the United States for a ride, freeloading on U.S. military contributions while gouging the U.S. blind in one-sided trade arrangements.” During his inauguration, Trump claims that the United States has “enriched foreign industry at the expense of American industry, subsidized the armies of other countries while allowing for the sad depletion of our (the United States’, ed.) military. We defended other nation’s borders while refusing to defend our own. And spent trillions and trillions of dollars overseas while America’s infrastructure has fallen into disrepair and decay.” (2017a) After describing all that the United States has lost, he speaks of a new vision.

“From this day forward, it’s going to be only America first - America first. [...] Protection will lead to great prosperity and strength. I will fight for you with every breath in my body. And I will never, ever let you down. America will start winning again, winning like never before. We will bring back our jobs. We will bring back our borders. We will bring back our wealth, and we will bring back our dreams. We will build new roads and highways and bridges and airports and tunnels and railways all across our wonderful nation. We will get our people off of welfare and back to work rebuilding our country with American hands and American labor. We will follow two simple rules - buy American and hire American.” (2017)

During his speech at the 2017 United Nations General Assembly, Donald Trump (2017b) discusses how the United States will remain friendly towards the rest of the world, especially to its allies, but will no longer be used for a one-sided deal, where the United States gains nothing. He again pledges to defend American interest above all else.

While the United States used to stand for global leadership, a free and open world with open societies, rule of law, free trade, collective defense and international institutions, Trump has overthrown these concepts completely, and lacerated several relations and agreements the United States has brokered in the past, abandoning America’s traditions of
multilateralism, waged trade wars against American allies, undermined NATO and attacked the European Union. These institutions, he believes, constrain the American freedom of action. (Patrick, 2018b) This relates to unilateralism, which is greatly visible in Trump’s policy. An example of this is Trump’s decision to withdraw the United States from the Paris Climate Accord in 2017. While the accord was approved by approximately 200 nations, and as climate change is a major issue that depends on the united efforts of all these countries, Trump pulled out of the accord because it “hurt American jobs and American interests.” (Wani, 2018)

The National Security Strategy, a document describing each president’s strategic plan, is a fundamental part of a president’s policy. Trump’s NSS (2017) speaks about the dangerous world the United States is facing, including the threat of nuclear weapons, missiles, radical Islamist terrorists, porous borders, unenforced immigration laws, criminal cartels, unfair trade practices, unfair burden-sharing between allies and inadequate investment in domestic defense. This, Trump argues, has caused American citizens to lose trust in their government, faith in the future, and confidence in American values. His NSS, he states, “lays out a strategic vision for protecting the American people and preserving our way of life, promoting our prosperity, preserving peace through strength, and advancing American influence in the world. [...] We will promote a balance of power that favors the United States, our allies, and our partners. We will never lose sight of our values and their capacity to inspire, uplift and renew.” (2017) It promotes four pillars: protecting the American people, the homeland, and the American way of life; promoting American prosperity; preserving peace through strength; and advancing American Influnence. The White House (2018a) also speaks of how the new policy is charting the United States into a new course. It argues that, by rebuilding the domestic strength and confidence, the United States also restores its strength and standing abroad. According to the White House, ‘America First’ does not mean that it focuses solely on America: it “revitalizes relationships with countries that share it goals and interests, while combating radicalism and extremism.” (2018, a) President Trump is pursuing ‘peace through strength’, a statement made famous by former President Ronald Reagan (1981-1989) entailing that military power is used to preserve peace. Trump claims to do this, by modernizing and rebuilding America’s armed forces, nuclear forces and positioning ballistic missile defenses. Simes (2018) argues that by increasing the military budget, Trump shows a “demonstrable willingness to use force”. In terms of force, Trump goes further than his predecessor Barack Obama, as he is taking actions that Obama consciously avoided because he feared escalating conflict. Trump is prepared to use military force not solely as a last resort, but as a legitimate and essential tool of American foreign policy. By doing so, he forces the world to take him seriously.

The concept of American exceptionalism is also very present in Trump’s policy. “No challenge can match the heart and fight and spirit of America. We will not fail. Our country will thrive and prosper again. We stand at the birth of a new millenium, ready to unlock the mysteries of space, to free the earth from miseries of disease and to harness the energies, industries and technologies of tomorrow.” (Trump, 2017) Trump speaks of how the people of the United States “share one heart, one home and one glorious destiny.” (2017) With the
latter, he is referring to American religious exceptionalism, which also becomes apparent in the following quote, when speaking about the United States: “The Bible tells us how good and pleasant it is when God’s people live together in unity.” (Trump, 2017) This is quite ambiguous, as it can be interpreted in two ways. On one hand, one could argue that by “God’s people”, Trump is referring to the Puritan belief that they were God’s chosen people when they voyaged to the North American continent, and is thus speaking of American people. On the other hand, speaking of harmony is in contrast to the emphasis on the notion of putting America first and the idea that “it is the right of all nations to put their own interests first.” (Trump, 2017)

In the light of Holsti’s (2010) criteria, the ‘America First’ policy toward Iran is an exceptionalist policy. Trump has an external enemy in Iran: his top concern in foreign affairs. Unilateralism, as mentioned before, is unquestionably evident. Trump does see America as an innocent victim, but the mission to liberate others in the pursuit of a universal common good (meliorism) is not present in the policy of ‘America First’.

‘America First’: Rhetoric to Practice

Rhetoric toward Iran

Trump has always had a strong opinion on the Middle East and Iran. In an interview with Polly Toynbee in 1988, he revealed that he region, together with Asia, was making the United States look ridiculous. His main platform, he states, would be respect. On the issue of Iran, he states the following. “I’d be harsh on Iran. They’ve been beating us psychologically, making us look like a bunch of fools. One bullet shot at one of our men or ships and I’d do a number on Kharg Island. I’d go in and take it. Iran can’t even beat Iraq, yet they push the United States around. It’d be good for the world to taken them on.” (1988)

In October 2017, Trump presented four ideas in countering Iran: working with allies to counter Iran’s “destabilizing activity” and support for terrorism in the region, place sanctions on the nation to block their financing of terror, address Iran’s rapid increase of missiles and weapons that threaten Iran’s neighbors, global trade and freedom of navigation, and deny Iran all access to a nuclear weapon. He pledged to either aggressively enforce the JCPOA, or to abandon it entirely. He argued that the United States would no longer abide the agreement, as it was a one-sided deal. The president encouraged the rest of the world to join the United States in demanding Iran’s termination of its support of terrorists, and encourage its respect of its neighbors’ (Yemen and Bahrain) sovereignty. (Feierstein, 2018) The position of the United States in the Middle East has been weakening continuously, since Bush’s Iraq invasion in 2003. During the presidency of Barack Obama, this deterioration of strategic dominance was accelerated, according to Feierstein (2018). Barack Obama was eager to repair any damage done in George W. Bush’s presidency, for example by significantly reducing troops in Iraq, rejecting new large military interventions, and mainly addressed problems through diplomacy and communication. He also requested American allies to account for more security in the region. His goals were clearly defined, his policy in line with the “historic U.S. bipartisan views of American hegemony.” (Gauvin, 2017) Trump’s policy
displays a shift away from this rhetoric. Thompson (2018) confirms this idea. Although Trump has continued to urge allies to accept more of the burden in terms of regional security, he did increase U.S. troops in Syria, improved relations with both Saudi Arabia and Israel, withdrew from the JCPOA, reinstated sanctions on Tehran and showed no interest in promoting political reform or democracy. This could be considered to be a positive move, as the Middle Region has been a region that has been both unwilling and unready to accept democracy - something which Trump’s predecessors (among whom Obama) have tried to reinforce in the area.

Trump’s National Security Strategy (2017) called for a Middle East that rids itself of jihadist terrorists, is not dominated by anti-American entities, and that contributes to a stable global energy market. The document blames the main issues in the region on Iranian expansion, state collapse, jihadist ideology, socio-economic stagnation and regional rivalries. Neither the American effort to democratize or disengage the Middle East has proven successful in the past, causing the United States to remain tied to the region. It deems Iran the “world’s leading state sponsor of terrorism”, having taken “advantage of instability to expand its influence through partners and proxies, weapon proliferation, and funding.” (The White House, 2017) The NSS (2017) argues that opportunities have risen to promote American interests in the Middle East: some Middle Eastern partners are collaborating to reject radical ideologies, Islamist extremism and violence. It deems it important to encourage and aid political stability. By boosting partnerships between both the United States and other nations and between regional partners, the United States is able to advance American interest. The Strategy lists several priority actions, which are primarily political, economic and military. Forming and strengthening partnerships, supporting reform and the countering of violent ideologies, denying Iran nuclear weapons and neutralizing its influence, facilitating peace between Israelis and Palestinians, encouraging the modernization of economies, protecting America and its allies from terrorist attacks and maintaining favorable regional balance of power form the pillars of the plan of action. During Trump’s inauguration, he promised to “unite the civilized world against radical Islamic terrorism, which we will eradicate completely from the face of the earth.” (2017a) Ewing (2017) argues that this promise is a complete turn away from President Obama’s policy, who abandoned George W. Bush’s goal to pursue a ‘war on terror’. While Obama desired diplomacy and communication, Trump has returned to Bush’s rhetoric, wishing to eliminate the threat of terrorism altogether.

In Trump’s inaugural address, he stated the following. “We will seek friendship and goodwill with the nations of the world. But we do so with the understanding that it is the right of all nations to put their own interests first. We do not seek to impose our way of life on anyone but rather to let it shine as an example. We will shine for everyone to follow.” (2017a) This statement suggests a distancing of the missionary approach, in which America aids other nations, and a shift towards the exemplary approach, in which America is a distant example. This approach, which includes the concept of American exceptionalism, is confirmed in his address at the United States General Assembly (2017b), where he says America does not to impose the American way of life on anyone, but simply “lets it shine as an example for everyone to watch.” He refers to the American Constitution, which he
describes as “the foundation of peace, prosperity, and freedom for the Americans and for countless millions around the globe whose own countries have found inspiration in its respect for human nature, human dignity, and the rule of law.” (2017)

Action toward Iran

The NSS, as well as Trump’s inauguration, dates back to 2017. In actually, speaking in June 2019, the United States has taken a step back from its diplomatic leadership in the Middle East. Recently, only Iran has sustained a focus, which has changed the geopolitical dynamic. (Feltman, 2019) Twelve days after taking office, Donald Trump’s threats toward Iran began, resulting in an increasingly complex relationship throughout his presidency. In April 2019, Trump designated Iran’s IRGC, a branch of Iran’s armed forces, a terrorist organization and imposed sanctions on the Iranian economy, specifically on the industrial metals. The Administration has pledged to continue pressuring Iran until it changes its behavior in their development of weapons, human-rights violations, support for militant movements and its interventions in other Middle East countries. Iran has made some aggressive moves too. Also in April 2019, Iran threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz, if the United States would hinder them from exporting their own oil. This would cause severe problems, as one fifth of the world’s oil supply passes through this channel. In May 2019, Iranian President Hassan Rouhani stated that Iran would no longer adhere to two parts of the 2015 nuclear deal: the export of excess uranium and heavy water from the nuclear program. On May 5th, Trump allowed a fleet of battleship and a bomber task force to be sent to the Iranian coast. The goal, as stated by U.S. national security advisor John Bolton, was to send a clear message that any attack on the United States, their interests or their allies, would be met with severe force. It should be noted that Bolton had previously advocated bombing Iran, before joining the Trump Administration. This is significant, because this illustrates Bolton’s bias and motives for pressuring for the threats. Five days later, the Pentagon announced that a second fleet and a missile system would join the first. (Wright, 2019) This all happened because the Trump Administration is concerned about Iran’s, or its proxies’, possible attack in the Middle East. According to Kenneth McKenzie, head of U.S. Central Command, Iran has “demonstrated the willingness and ability to attack our (the American, ed.) people, our interests, and our friends and allies in the confusing, complex zone short of armed.” (2019) Iran’s response to Trump’s pressure has been an increasing unwillingness to negotiate, as long as the United States is not part of the nuclear deal. This has led to a stalemate, and Trump consistently rising pressure. (Dudgeon, 2019)

Trump seems to view radical Islamic terrorism as the top threat to America. One could argue that this view is orientalist, and although Simes (2018) argues that this is neither a sign of volatile behavior nor of inherent racism, this conception is debatable. In terms of combatting this, the White House (2018a) states that President Trump will pursue any threat to American security, prioritizing all effect to confront and defeat radical Islamic terrorism and the ideology behind it. This goes hand-in-hand with the reassertion of American leadership among the Middle East. “This includes bringing America’s Middle Eastern allies into the struggle, empowering credible voices to counter terrorist propaganda, and promoting
open society (democracy, ed.) as the great alternative to repression and extremism.” (The White House, 2018a) In a sense, this both reinforces and contradicts The White House’s (2018b) statement that they “do not expect diverse countries to share the same cultures, traditions, or even systems of government. We do expect all nations to uphold these two core sovereign duties: to respect the interests of their own people and the rights of every sovereign nation.” The United States thus acts as some sort of global policeman, forcing everyone to get along, but it also contrasts the earlier claim that the Trump administration promotes open society as an alternative to the established aggression. In Trump’s speech at the United Nations General Assembly (2017b), he puts great emphasis on sovereignty in his domestic agenda, which can also be linked to their support of Israel, while also pressing for democracy. He states that “strong, sovereign nations let their people take ownership of the future and control their own destiny.” (2017b) The National Security Strategy, besides speaking about issues mentioned above, also goes into human rights. It explains that a commitment to fundamental human rights is essential to be able to advance American influence abroad. As respecting these rights produces peace, prosperity and stability, it makes it an essential component of national security, according to the White House (2018b). It also argues that the United States will continue to press American values and encouragement for those struggling for human dignity in oppressive societies. “There can be no moral equivalency between nations that uphold the rule of law, empower women, and respect individual rights and those that brutalize and suppress their people.” (The White House, 2018b) To secure this notion, the Trump administration had consistently used tools such as diplomacy and sanctions to isolate states and leaders whose actions are in contrast to these American values. Trump makes clear to other allies that they cannot be allied with America while supporting or condoning terrorism. Maintaining sovereignty over American borders and preventing illegal immigration seem to be the next most important national interest in Trump’s eyes.

“Trump wants, indeed needs, to achieve at least one of three strategic security goals to prove his international credentials to both domestic and foreign audiences. Iran is one goal and North Korean denuclearisation and reconciliation in Afghanistan are the others.” (Dudgeon, 2019) Feierstein (2018) states that, because Trump has achieved so few successes regarding his promises on the Middle East in his first year in office, the elimination of violent Islamic extremism, containing Iran, and ending the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, it is highly unlikely that they will eventually be met. He especially refers to Trump’s pledge to ‘bomb the hell out of’ ISIS. While Trump claims that he is responsible for decreasing ISIS’s territory, he has not offered a strategy for achieving this goal, other than using kinetic action including active warfare and lethal force. Simes (2018) also takes a critical stance on President Trump’s policies and achievements. He claims that both the president and other members of his government are often inconsistent in actions and words. He also argues that “the administration continues to lack a coherent strategic framework that defines national security priorities. To be more precise, the administration has yet to define American priorities in a serious analytical manner and has acted as if the United States can escape hard choices and the risks of potentially costly unintended consequences.” He also argues that Trump’s foreign policy rhetoric has a fresh and unorthodox take on American national security priorities.
Looking at his professional background as a business leader, he possesses a practical sense of looking at America’s national interests. The author states Trump started his presidency by questioning conventional assumptions, about American allies and opponents, established norms and ‘cliches’, and asked himself what these allies were doing for the United States and what these alliances cost. By doing so, Trump has become subjected to criticism, as he often seems prepared to risk important relationships without clear goals or gains.

Donald Trump also vowed to take a tougher stance on illegal immigration, to demand more trade arrangement beneficial to the United States, downplay the struggle against climate change, and avoid change of regimes and meddling in the domestic politics of other states. Especially the latter is of interest for this thesis, as this would entail that Trump in fact has distanced himself and the country from the concept of meliorism and foreign aid. Trump executes a foreign policy that focuses (solely) on American interests, while preceding U.S. presidents intended to project American values onto other nations through their foreign policies. (Gauvin, 2017) It seems like Trump has reduced, or is at least more selective, the defence and promotion of the (American) universal values of freedom, democracy and human rights. Also, the resistance and critiquing of authoritarian or illiberal governments has declined. (O’Rourke & Moodie, 2019) Trump also abandons the established policy of opposing Shia and Sunni extremism, by backing the nations Saudi Arabia, the United Arab Emirates and Israel, which all favor confrontation with Tehran. (Thompson, 2018) This confirms the idea mentioned previously that Trump is moving away from the missionary approach.

Case studies: Trump and Iran

The 2017 Muslim Ban

The Muslim ban came into effect in early 2017, banning citizens from seven predominantly Muslim countries (Iraq, Iran, Libya, Somalia, Sudan, Syria and Yemen) from visiting the United States for three months, and prohibiting other refugees from entering the country for four months. The ban was later expanded to include people from North Korea, Venezuela and Chad, while lifting the ban on Iraqi people, as a result of negotiations and increased cooperation. (Homeland Security, 2017) Although the order was ultimately blocked by federal courts, the policy might be one of the most significant in immigration policy in decades. Trump’s justification for the ban is his pledge to reverse the influx of “terrorist and criminal” foreign nationals, maintaining the protection of the American people as his highest priority. (Homeland Security, 2017) It is noteworthy that, despite Trump’s claims of wanting to counter terrorism and protect his citizens, the actual ‘perpetrator’ of the 9/11 attacks, Saudi Arabia, is not on the list of banned countries. The countries that have been banned are responsible for zero terrorist attacks in the United States in the last few decades, and are globally the most likely to be affected by domestic terrorism. (Giorgis, 2019) The ban does not only demonstrate a severe abuse of power, it also hints at an underlying subordination of the Muslim community. The people affected by this ban are predominantly Muslims who
hold Western values. (Ghaemi, 2017) While it is in the interest of the United States to strengthen these values in the region, and especially in Iran, the United States is doing the exact opposite. By isolating Iran from Western engagement, which might be what the Iranian government is striving for, Trump is countering his predecessors’ strategies. While the Iranian people are actually desiring to break free from this isolation, Trump is blocking this with this ban.

The Nuclear Deal

The nuclear deal was brokered by President Obama in 2015, and lifted established international sanctions on Iran, in exchange for restrictions on the nation’s nuclear program. The aim is to keep Tehran from developing a dangerous nuclear weapon. (Maza, 2019) Although this proved to be a successful deal, in May 2018, Trump pulled out of the nuclear agreement with Iran. Since then, Europeans have tried to reinforce it by continuing trade with Iran, so it has an incentive to remain in the deal. (Gordon, 2019) American officials have pressured states that import oil from Iran to cut their sales or face sanctions. (Atlas & Davenport, 2018) Iran threatened to close the Strait of Hormuz following the withdrawal, if the United States would continue to impose oil-based sanctions. The withdrawal was also the direct cause of the banning of all direct talks between the United States and Iran.

Trump’s motivation for pulling out of the agreement is the Iranian aggression. “We ask all nations to isolate Iran’s regime as long as its aggression continues. We ask all nations to support Iran’s people as they struggle to reclaim their religious and righteous destiny.” (Trump, 2018) Another reason is the asserted weakness of the agreement and American accusations of covert Iranian violations. Haass (2015) also speaks about how, for example, Iran has misled the International Atomic Energy Agency, failed to provide sufficient data on its nuclear past, delayed access to inspectors to specific areas that caused concerns in the past. Trump’s approach might be seen as tactics of pure pressure and an effort to prevent Iranian oil sale. While he denies having a goal of regime change, he attempts to force Iran into new, wider negotiations, including restrictions of regional interference, ballistic missile programs and nuclear activities. As the European Union has set up a ‘special purpose vehicle’ to still be able to facilitate import and export, European countries, of which some are close U.S. allies, directly defy Trump’s rule. The United Nations is highly critical of Trump’s decision. (Atlas & Davenport, 2018)

Human Rights

Iran has a history of violating ethnic, social, and religious rights. A recent report by the United Nations Human Rights Council documents new offenses. The alleged abuses include restrictions on freedom of expression and peaceful assembly, torture, execution or cruel treatment of prisoners, the use of the death penalty in the absence of a proper means of justice, and the status of women. (United Nations Human Rights Council, 2017) Despite the evidence provided in the report, Iran denounces all notions stating that human right abuses appear to be increasing. The Iranian people themselves have protested the deterioration of
economic conditions, government corruption and frustration over their lack of political and social freedom. These protests have resulted in mass arrests, process violations and deaths. Iran also denies freedom of religion and sexuality, discriminates against people with disabilities, and is especially notorious for its treatment of women. They are held back in marriage, divorce, inheritance, child custody, travel and occupations. Women’s husbands or fathers essentially control their every move. The country also rules a compulsory hijab law, and sentences women who do not comply up to twenty years in prison. (Roth, 2019) Violations of the rights to a fair trial are common, just like the denial of a lawyer. Another noteworthy notion is the fact that Iran’s executees are predominantly children. (Kahn, 2019)

The Iranian Ministry of Intelligence and the IRGC increasingly targets human rights defenders and activists. These people, often linked to Western organizations, are arrested under suspicion of using environmental projects as a cover to collect classified information. Several detainees have died under suspicious circumstances, others receive a shocking sentence. Recently, human right lawyer Nasrin Sotoudeh was sentenced to 38 years in prison and 148 lashes. She was charged with “encouraging corruption and debauchery, colluding propaganda against the system, and disrupting public order.” (Lemon, 2019) The abuses are a severe violation of the values established by the United Nations, and the United States. While Trump condemned Iran’s treatment of Nasrin Sotoudeh, he still negotiates with other nations guilty of similar violations. According to the president of the National Iranian American Council, Jamal Abdi, Trump is not using the leverage he has with, for example, Saudi Arabia, to enforce human rights and international norms. “Yet with Iran, where the Trump Administration has sanctioned itself out of influence and isolated itself on the world stage, it issues empty condemnations while punishing and undermining the Iranian people it claims to support.” (Lemon, 2019)

Besides deciding to withdraw from the Nuclear Deal, and the reinforcement of the Muslim Ban, Trump has also put forward the notion of pulling out of the aforementioned United Nations Human Rights Council, and is thus openly supportive of right-wing autocratic leaders and regimes. What is striking in comparison, is Trump’s continued support for Saudi Arabia: one of the consistent leaders when it comes to human rights abuse, which is simultaneously the biggest buyer of American-made weapons. Critics argue that it is both the Trump administration and its predecessors that have failed at putting forward a “coherent agenda on human rights and democracy in Iran. If we (the United States, ed.) are going to sanction the government and the people, we have a responsibility to the Iranian people to leave them with a chance to open up their society. So, we need some democracy and human rights benchmarks.” (Mostajabi, 2018) It seems like Trump is choosing the American economy over other nations’ adherence to human rights. This might be exactly the essence Trump’s policy: zero interference with other nations, and no desire to promote Western values, while increasing his own economy.
Conclusion

This thesis set out to answer the question: Is Trump’s policy of ‘America First’ a break with the American tradition of meliorism toward Iran? To answer this question, chapter 1 first discussed the definitions and historical significance of American exceptionalism and meliorism, together with their role in foreign policy. American exceptionalism is the belief that the United States is unique in its nature, and serves as an example to other nations. America was founded on this creed, and the idea recurs in important American documents such as the Declaration of Independence and the U.S. Constitution. It is also used as a justification of foreign interventions, because the country has granted itself the role of missionary, which goes hand-in-hand with meliorism. The application of the concept is contested, as it is seen as aid to the less fortunate on the one hand, and as harmful interference on the other.

In the second chapter, the traditions in foreign policy toward the Middle East, with the focus on meliorism, were examined with the use of four topics: the Cold War, the 1990s, the War on Terror and Barack Obama. Finally, the history and foreign policy of Iran. It was established that the promotion of democracy, a better option than the often totalitarian regimes, has often been the motivation for meliorism in the Middle East. This is where Orientalism comes into view, as this patronizing view is commonly linked to meliorism in this area. Throughout the Cold War, many presidential doctrines were focused on the aid of the Middle East, and the protection of its people. However, the American strategic objectives seem to outweigh the desire to help the Arab and Persian populations. After a shift in policy after the 1979 Hostage Crisis, another shift occurred after the 9/11 attacks, after which President Bush declared the War on Terror. This resulted in a foreign policy of force, aimed at the destruction, instead of the aid, of the ‘axis of evil’ in the Middle East. This changed when Barack Obama was elected president. He reverted to attempts at diplomacy with Iran, and actively practiced meliorism in most instances. Most presidents (from the presidency of Carter on), with the exception of Obama, executed a hostile foreign policy toward Iran, and were mainly interested in the country’s oil and their aid to Israel.

The final chapter focused on the rhetoric and action of Trump’s ‘America First’ policy. The policy is primarily nationalist and unilateral, aims to focus solely on the United States, and carries a populist message. Trump speaks of friendly relations with the rest of the world, but no more “one-sided deals” or meddling with other nations’ affairs. This approach to the presidency is not entirely new, but is currently steering the American nation in a different way. Although Trump pledges to focus on American interest, the military defense budget is at an all time high, showing a willingness to use force. He has pulled out of long-established international deals, such as the nuclear deal, causing great conflict with Iran. This has recently led to mutual threats, and Iran becoming the prime American enemy.

But how does Trump fit into the tradition of foreign policy toward the Middle East, established by his predecessors? And is his policy an effective break with traditional policy? The answer to these questions is complex. Trump’s foreign policy toward Iran by itself is not
necessarily a break with the traditional policy. Ever since 1979, the United States has been hostile toward Iran, and relations have been complex: Trump is not alone in this. While the ‘America First’ policy is a break with the preceding diplomatic policy of Obama, internationally, it does in fact fit in with earlier policies, particularly that of George W. Bush. The ‘America First’ policy is pure self-interest, based on an exemplary approach, rather than a missionary one. Imposing sanctions, the desire for regime change, is the indirect protection of the United States. On the other hand, Trump does break with the consistent theme of wanting to promote democracy in undemocratic parts of the world. He expresses no explicit desire to promote or spread the American ideal of democracy, which has traditionally been the case with other presidents. With this, he endorses and accepts the authoritarian regime established in Middle Eastern countries. Trump’s actual sympathy and meliorism toward, and support of the Iranian people, is ambiguous. While his rhetoric, like demonstrated in his United Nations’ speech on the nuclear deal, shows compassion and the desire to help the citizens of an oppressive country, this actions show nothing of the sort. As stated in the second chapter, several presidents have urged interference and aid to the Middle East, especially in the era of the Cold War. The main objective of these doctrines was to overthrow the established regimes. If Trump’s goal was actually to bring about the collapse of an authoritarian regime, his actions would fit into the line of actions of some of his predecessors. The President would be following in Jimmy Carter’s footsteps, who aided the overthrowal of an authoritarian regime, not matching with American concerns. This raises the question whether this would be out of meliorist sentiment, or American self-interest. It would be easy to use the argument of popular unrest, and the aid of oppressed people, as a window dressing for the rhetoric of globally putting America first. One could also argue that Trump does fit in with the traditional foreign policy toward the Middle East and Iran, especially after the 1979 Revolution and the 9/11 attacks, and that, in fact, the diplomacy urged by the Obama Administration was an interval in policy. He tried to repair relations with the decades-long, top enemy, denounced the concept of American exceptionalism and actively pursued meliorism toward Iran.

It is difficult to pinpoint Trump’s exact, and true motivations for his actions. Throughout this thesis, it has become apparent that the 9/11 attacks and other terrorist attacks by Middle Eastern groups have contributed to an attitude of fear towards the region that has shaped not only public opinion, but foreign policy as well. Although we can speculate, and point to specific statements for confirmation, it would be wrong to state that Trump’s practices are purely based on racism and orientalism. We can theorize, but do not know if Trump’s personal opinion shapes his not wanting to have anything to do with Iran. It is also difficult to evaluate the credibility of Trump’s threats, as his administration is reputed for making false statements. The fact that he would actually be pursuing military conflict is not probable, although this perhaps would undermine the collective American credibility, which Trump is not likely to jeopardize.

In the months of writing this thesis, a lot has happened between the United States and Iran. The countries have continuously threatened each other, both through Twitter and actual military advances, in the sense of sending war ships. The United States is now escalating
economic pressure. Its goal is to decrease Iran’s oil export to zero. While Iran must be feeling the imposed sanctions, it is improbable that Trump will actually wage war against the nation. Just like in the Cold War, there might be the possibility of brinkmanship. It will be interesting to see how this develops, and if, and how, Trump’s policy will adapt to this situation. As this thesis primarily goes into the geopolitical aspects of the U.S.-Iran relation. For further research, it could be interesting to focus on the social aspects of this complex relation, to further examine the initial shift in policy due to the 1979 Hostage Crisis during the Carter presidency, or to look further into the shift that the War on Terror has caused.
Bibliography

Speeches


Works cited


**Cover picture:**