# State as a Tragic Hero?

AN IRANIAN PERSPECTIVE ON TRAGEDY, CHOICE AND HUBRIS IN THE CONTEMPORARY INTERNATIONAL SYSTEM

WORKING PAPER

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**Abstract**

Iran's position in the international system and its foreign policy has often been analyzed and understood from a (neo)realist perspective in the fields of Political Science and International Relations. These realist perspectives, however, have usually failed to provide any comprehensive explanation on why Iran has made such costly foreign policy decisions since its 1979 revolution. The incomprehensibility of Iranian foreign policy decision-making foundations has been, actively or passively, concealed under the 'rogue state' doctrine internationally and is misleadingly linked to Iranian domestic issues such as 'human rights' violations and the state of economy. This paper emphasizes that it is impossible to comprehend Iranian foreign policy decisions without a deep understanding of Iran's self-perception of its role and position in the contemporary international system. Consequently, the paper analyzes these perceptions systematically through engagement with the literature on tragedy and the international order, and it argues that in Iranian perception of the international system, concepts such as 'Choice', 'Hubris' and a different view on 'tragedy' constitute the core of its unique worldview. In the final analysis, failing to acknowledge these self-perceptions and their international ramifications has resulted in an 'artificial' process of 'securitization' and an unnecessary 'international threat' of our making.

**Introduction**

Can different conceptions of tragedy create different imaginations of international system and, as a result, distinct sets of foreign policies? This is one of the core research questions that has been increasingly analyzed and discussed among, especially, scholars whose main academic endeavors include ethics and aesthetics in international relations. For instance, Erskine and Lebow (2012) put the investigation of the essence and effects of tragic vision at the core of collected

writings by various authors. It is not surprising that in the discussions over the essence of tragedy, the debate, occasionally, goes back to the ontological assumptions and interpretations of "reality" itself. It might be a safe assertion to claim that the authors' attitudes toward 'tragedy' may reveal more insights about the authors themselves than what they are really discussing. However, I avoid such deconstructions in this text and try to map what general theoretical framework we can extract from the debate.

Ideally, we can map the debate in three sections: ontological, epistemological and methodological contestations. Rengger (2012), for instance, discusses Oakeshott's (1996) point of view about the essence of tragedy: that tragedy is more a dramatized narrative of art rather than a state of human condition. Rengger, moreover, triangulate Oakeshott's ideas with a discussion over Morgenthau's most fundamental ontological assumption that man "is forever condemned to experience the contrast between the longings of his mind, and his actual condition as his personal, eminently human tragedy" (Morgenthau 1946). As Rengger argues, human beings can never overcome this reality. Therefore, Rengger logically reduces the concept of 'choice' to viewing this apparent conflict as a conflict. In this vein, 'choice' becomes an epistemological option since the paradox that ontology (i.e. the unchanging reality) presents is an insurmountable part of universe: in other words, tragedy does not exist anymore as a state that can be changed.

Erskine and Lebow (2012) assert that tragic vision of international politics provide us with two overarching insights: First, tragedy emphasizes 'hubris' and its consequences in international political life. Secondly, tragedy challenges our understanding of justice and demonstrates how "parochial" our conceptions of justice are and how readily they are undercut by too unwavering commitments to them (p. 10). This observation links the three themes that is being discussed in this paper: tragedy, hubris and choice. As I mentioned earlier, the ontology will provide us with

epistemological options. For Rengger, Oakeshott and Morgenthau, the fixed 'reality' limits the 'choice' to a purely epistemological decision: the choice to embrace the inconsistency as the fundamental element of political life or the choice (or mistake) to seek a coherent and consistent plan of action which would be naïve and ultimately doomed to fail. In this sense, 'choice' is an illusion and a misinformation about the reality. The ontological/epistemological decision before the scholar should be obvious by now: whether 'choice' exists in 'reality' and the agency is acknowledged or 'choice' is an epistemological afterthought which leads to a much narrower sense of agency. Chris Brown (2012) has highlighted this dimension of 'tragic choice'. Brown, in fact, concludes his essay by asserting that analytical clarity has deprived us from recognizing the tragic nature of the dilemmas in international politics and human existence itself. This is a correct observation even though it requires qualifications: analytical clarity is often achieved when structural forces impose a sense of certainty. In this view, a true (human) agency emerges in 'moments' of uncertainty when structural forces do not dictate the orientation of agents. I will come back to elaborate on this in the following sections. Before linking and connecting 'choice' to tragedy and hubris, however, it is necessary to discuss the ontological discussion that Richard Ned Lebow (2010) brought into the discussion of tragedy and a critical triangulation between Clausewitz, Morgenthau and Thucydides as Lebow's intellectual engagements with tragedy as a starting step to tackle the epistemological/ontological distinction that I have made in this section.

### *Lebow's Ontological question: what is tragedy and where is the agency located?*

In treating classical realists, Lebow goes beyond Thucydides to challenge mainstream Realism in IR in their understanding of 'reality' and 'agency'. That is why he triangulates his vision with Clausewitz and Morgenthau. If Athens is the tragic protagonist of Thucydides' story,

the US and Prussia play almost the same role in cases of Morgenthau and Clausewitz respectively. However, here the recognition of the main content of tragedy in Lebow's writing is undetermined. In other words, if Lebow considers tragedy in its broader definition (as in "tragedy of knowing one's limits"), then certainly Clausewitz and Morgenthau fit in the picture. This is how we remember from Mervyn Frost's (2012) conception of tragedy: "tragic accounts display for an audience an actor who is enmeshed in a specified social context, who confronts an ethical conflict, and who acts out an ethical imperative that leads to an outcome that from an ethical point of view is hurtful to the actor themselves" (p. 41).

However, if we narrow down the definition of tragedy to approximate of what Greeks (according to Lebow himself) perfected in their texts, he has overstretched the scope of "tragedy" to just a *thin* tragic "vision". In this sense, nor Prussia, neither Europe (as a republic) do not play the same role as Athens did for Thucydides, as they refuse to play the character that Athens projects in Thucydides' work as a tragic character in itself. Clausewitz is related to these tragic visionaries by other means.

What is different in the Clausewitzian vision of 'reality' then? For Clausewitz, "friction" plays the crucial role in both ontology and epistemology. Friction is located between *thesis* and *antithesis.* Philosopher's systemization, in the world of abstracts, meets reality with friction. This is what happened to Clausewitz's scholarship as we read in his biography. Just as Thucydides, Clausewitz had a first-hand access to the political context of his era. He was looking at the world from a viewpoint that was changing rapidly. The tensions between Prussia, France and Russia (and to different extents, the whole Europe) was Clausewitz's sociopolitical reality. In addition to this, Clausewitz was also experiencing another tension: that between Enlightenment's promises and Counter-Enlightenment's pessimist perspective. These two tensions were crucial in constructing

Clausewitz's views. Political conflicts provided him with an abundance (and overabundance) of experiences (as his *antitheses*). Intellectual conflicts resulted in heavy revisions and a satisfyingly complex views on theory, reality and wars. Lebow declines the mainstream writers' simplifying approach towards Clausewitz. Clausewitz himself, according to Lebow, was too conscious about his abstractions and theory-building goals and their limits. To simplify his complex thinking is a disservice towards both the field of IR and, more fundamentally, our conception of reality. This is better understood when we consider the very first quote that Lebow uses in his chapter: Clausewitz complaining about finding satisfaction in abstracts and forgetting *the real*. Lebow's comparison between Clausewitz's and Thucydides' intellectual capacities, however, is an unfounded inference: Thucydides was able to *transform* every detail in a complex story about different conflicts (Corinth/Corcyra; Athens/Sparta; Athens/Corinth; etc.) in different levels of analysis (dialogues as processes of decision-making; hubris as a structural logic of power; etc.) into a Greek tragedy. However, it is unfair to make this comparison since this evaluation ignores Clausewitz's intellectual and political environment at the time as well as his over-attention to *the real*.

*Unlike* Thucydides, Clausewitz had a mission to teach a lesson to the world of *policy*. For Clausewitz, it is important to know how to *act*, because it was his own mission: to transform the Prussian military's culture in response to the rise of France. Clausewitz, as a result, was a tragic visionary by other means: he had a vision based on Mervyn Frost's notion of tragedy, i.e. the limits of our action and understanding. In this thinking, friction polishes abstractions and acts as a teacher for philosophers and anyone who decides to draw his lessons from history. In Clausewitz's vision, friction always exists. In other words, friction's ever-existence signifies our insurmountable limits in understanding and action. Clausewitz's point of difference stems from his not-purely-intellectual awareness and engagement with crucial political actions and his experiences with

military. For instance, Clausewitz's differentiation between "limited wars" and "absolute/extreme/total wars" is not only an analytical differentiation, but it also has major practical implications. I explain this by comparing the concept of "balance of power" as understood by Morgenthau and Clausewitz.

Lebow, in explaining Morgenthau's complex understanding of politics, writes:

"[Morgenthau] recognized that even something so fundamental to politics as the balance of power was only a general tendency and not a law" (Lebow, p. 227).

This is a more complex realization than Morgenthau's first conceptions of balance of power. As Morgenthau writes in *Politics Among Nations,*:

"...the balance of power and policies aimed at its preservation are not only inevitable, but an essential stabilizing factor in a society of sovereign nations" (p. 227).

Lebow, later in the chapter, explains Morgenthau's differentiation between *principle* and *practice* of balancing. According to Lebow, Morgenthau asserts that balancing (as the *practice*) "was most successful in the seventeenth through nineteenth centuries when there were *many great and not so great powers* which allowed many possible combinations of alignment" (Lebow, pp. 227-8). Lebow claims that, "for Morgenthau, the success of the balance of power … was less a function of the distribution of capabilities than it was the underlying values and sense of community… in the system" (p. 228). As I discussed above, for a Clausewitzian, Lebow is wrong as well as Morgenthau. To see why, let us review Clausewitz's less-abstract and more-practical treatment of "balance of power". In the story that Clausewitz tells us, the gradual process of the formation of nations is concomitant with an increasing distance between European governments and people: "[Governments] parted company with their peoples and behaved as if they were themselves the state" (p. 204). This means that these governments became dependent on the

amount of resources that they could extract from their own people to hire mercenaries and necessary equipment to go to war. In other words, states, at this level, looked more like corporate bodies rather than a unified, territorial and nation-inclusive entities. As a result, without an army, a state could not claim any tangible legitimacy and domination over the people it ruled. This explains why, at that stage, governments could not afford to engage in wars which could be taken to absolute fighting till annihilation. In other words, an ontological counter-argument would be that *structure,* not community's values, ruled "limited wars". Community's values only followed this 'reality'. As a result, what Morgenthau praises as the successful practice of balancing was not a law nor a tendency: it was a reality which imposed itself. In this dual tradition, tendencies stem from within via cultural, social, and ethical considerations while limitations are imposed from outside, which ultimately, will shape the tendencies. Therefore, Lebow's Morgenthau was wrong to see balance of power as a "practice". It was the 'reality' of politics: Neither "law" nor "tendency". This can completely discredit Lebow's argument since he loses Morgenthau's authority in his framing. The community values were only secondary to that 'reality' that governments could not go to "total wars". As Clausewitz cogently observed, "war was thus deprived of its most dangerous feature -its tendency toward the extreme, and of the whole chain of unknown possibilities which would follow" (Quoted from Lebow, p. 205). The moment of truth (philosophical truth) finally arrived when sociopolitical and technological shifts heralded the rise of France. Only then, war reached "its absolute perfection". The possibility of total annihilation without any pause coupled with a rise of national sentiment reversed the very Clausewitz's own assumption: war was not, anymore, only politics by other means. It could have its own life. It could become an ever-present Schmittian state of nature.

To summarize, the ontological debate regarding tragedy will fall into two Kantian extremes of real/abstract which are in a constant 'friction'. In a Hegelian worldview, however, the thesis and antithesis and the constant synthesis will lead to the prominence of 'practice'.

Richard Beardsworth (2012), in his treatment of the concept of tragedy, emphasizes the Hegelian side of equation that I have described in the previous section. Beardsworth, with the authority of Hegel, emphasizes "the impossibility of separating the communal bond of social humanity from political organization" (p. 101). With this assumption, any tragic movement is constituted of three phases: the first phase is to depart from the "community of life" by "delimiting [oneself] from manifold web of interdependence". This phase is what is usually labelled as 'hubris'. The second phase is the confrontation with "fate" (*causality of fate*) by the "sinning" individual. Although, Beardsworth mentions "death" and the ultimate punishment of fate as the result of this departure, a possible third phase could be added to this cycle: the possibility to return to community by 'forgiveness'. This "forgiveness", however, can have multiple manifestations: forgetfulness by generational change, structural opportunities which activates agency's opportunity to come back to community.

### *The question of agency in tragedy: Hegelian vs. Kantian assumptions*

Although the dialectic approach promises new insights in exploring the links between 'choice' (individual act) and 'tragedy' (communal consequences), the Kantian criticism still remains strong and often is mentioned by policymakers and key decision-makers: the 'real' world, and the fast processes of decision-making defy any sense of control over the course of events on a daily basis. In this view, critical constructivist approaches, such as the path-breaking method that has been adopted in David Campbell's *Writing Security*, can be rejected completely: it is true that

practice, as a set of repeated actions, will ultimately constitute the so-called structure, but the structure itself is not a mere production of those actions per se in a multi-actor and complex decision-making environment. So the dilemma still holds. The question is how to reconcile the Kantian view with the Hegelian one in a way that can push forward the discussion over tragedy. In this vein, the core question is where to find the real agency in the daily decision-making processes. If the Kantian view is true, then the 'real', ontologically, is external, and the agency can be rooted in the external structures. On the other hand, if the Hegelian assumption is deemed to be more accurate, one of the sources of agency can be rooted internally as 'practice'. How do we reconcile these views?

## Structural Opportunities as Tragic 'Moments'

To reconcile the two extremes of agency (in which the world begins with action) and structure (in which the external world determines the action) in the debate over tragedy, we need to reformulate the daily political experience as a combination of *structural forces granting intermittent opportunities to practice agency*. In other words, while the policymakers' familiar grievances are acknowledged that the political world is too complex and too indeterminate to even ponder the issues of morality and ethics in national security, it can be argued that the structural forces in 'uncertain moments', in which they do not dictate the course of events, open a space of true agency for actors. True agency, in other words, are the 'moments' and not a constant state of being. Following this assumption, tragic state of being is not either as Oakeshott's Kantian view nor Beardsworth's Hegelian approach –i.e. tragedy does not exist as a *constant* or *detectable* mode of being. Tragic vision exists in 'moments' of true agency. Oedipus and Creon as two major characters of Greek tragedy, despite their fictional construction, face the tragic moments via

'choice'. Oedipus refuses to back down at the crossroads *despite multiple warnings* by believing in his own capacities to control the situation. By this act, Oedipus choose not to acknowledge the structure which is set up against him (epistemological choice). He makes a choice (in its ontological sense as I have discussed earlier) by *practicing his individual action.* By the same token, Creon, as the sovereign, disregards his epistemological limitations and chooses not to grant Antigone's brother the proper rites in violation of his edict. Even though the whole setup of the tragic structure is deliberately engineered in these plays, the tragedy reveals itself in the moments of decision making. Unraveling tragic story, in other words, is happening in two levels: on an epistemological level (Kantian assumption) where the actor fails to see or acknowledge the limitations or the "unintended consequences" of their action, and on an ontological level (Hegelian assumption) where the perceived solution is formulated above the community and as an individual 'problem solver'. In the last part of the paper, I propose a methodological alternative through which we can analyze these tragic moments in the contemporary international system by applying this point of view to the history of US-Iran relations.

***By the way of conclusion: Shaping the International Structure through Repeated 'Tragic Moments'; a case study of US-Iranian relations pre- and post-1979 revolution***

In an attempt to answer the criticism that has been provided by the critics of tragic vision of the international system that by the acceptance of tragic state of being one will automatically disregard the concept of 'progress', James Mayall argues that "an awareness of the possibility of tragic outcomes is a necessary antidote to the hubris of the progressive thought and the constant liberal temptation to avoid accepting responsibility for well-intended actions that go wrong" (p. 45). However, even Mayall admits that "the injunction 'act so as to avoid tragedy' makes no sense"

(ibid.). This shows a ubiquitous confusion over the definition of 'tragedy'. Mayall assumes that tragedy is any undesirable course of events in its general sense. By this definition, Mayall is correct. However, as I discussed in the previous sections, this generic definition of 'tragedy' is not what is intended in classical writings. It is crucial to emphasize again that tragedy occurs when action fails to save the community and it becomes counter-productive. Therefore, values and community are at the core of tragedy: poverty, inequality, and other forms of human suffering falls under the generic definition of tragedy. Therefore, 'avoiding tragedy' about which Mayall speaks is the Kantian assumption and it is essentially addressing the external limitations of human existence. However, tragedy that has been defined so far in this paper includes a less analytically-studied dimension of tragedy –i.e. tragic outcomes regarding community and values.

The considerations of values and community occurs at the 'moments of decision-making' when the courses of events are uncertain due to a balance in or absence of structural forces. As a result, we need analytical tools by which we can capture the 'tragic moments' in which the uncertainty opened this 'true agency'. Benjamin Schuppman (2011) highlights the 'moment of uncertainty' and emphasizes Nietzsche's insight that tragedy and the ability to affect the international system have a direct correlation. In this view, the greater a power is, the more acute its sense of tragic existence will be. The same attitude is also apparent in Mayall's discussion about 'empire'. Superpowers' and great powers' dilemma resides in this notion: an unequal distribution of capability in the international system and an over-accumulation of such capabilities in a limited number of actors widens and even breaks (even if momentarily) the chains of structure for these powers and offers the decision-makers the luxury to 'go alone' in any decision that, by nature, is about the community (i.e. international society). The structural forces, logically, are much more overwhelming for international actors with less capabilities. As a result, the frequency of 'tragic

moments' are higher for the actors with greater capacities and capabilities. The cost of 'doing the right thing' at the moments of uncertainty, consequently, is lower for the powerful actor in an unequal decision-making scenario. Tragedy happens when the perceived 'right' course of action turns out to be counter-productive. By "counter-productive", I do not mean to refer to the desired course of action in a generic term (e.g. overcoming poverty or underdevelopment). On the contrary, 'counter-productive' means the loss of community and/or values by which actors build trust and form a 'sense of belonging to a community'.

This theme is epitomized in the US-Iranian relations since the mid-20th century. The resulting mistrust that has been usually traced back to the 1953 coup against the democratically elected government of Mossadegh, and became amplified by a chain of significant events after the 1979 Islamic Revolution in Iran exemplifies this loss of the sense of belonging to the international community led by the US and pushed Iranians to create alternative spaces in their international relations. As Mohisaddin Mesbahi (2013) argues, there are two generally distinct inclinations among Iranian and American politicians in defining moments of cooperation and potential return of the Iranian state to the sense of normalcy. Iranians, seeking a source of ontological security and sense of normalcy in the international system, have contributed to the first Gulf War, the war on terror in Afghanistan, and the stabilization of Maleki government in Iraq after 2003 (Parsi 2012). In his piece, Mesbahi argues that, from a game theory's viewpoint, the type of the game that Iranians play is assurance game which is rooted in their 'security seeking' strategic culture. On the other hand, the distinctive American strategic culture shows a pattern returning to prisoners' dilemma in mistrusting conditions. The core feature of a "mistrusting condition", accordingly, is an environment of uncertainty. For both players, the uncertainty projects the same structure (since the structure is exogenous to the actors' perceptions). That is why non-behavioral camps in the

field of IR attribute different behavior of actors to different orientation or dispositions (Kydd 2005, Larson 1997, Rathbun 2012). Prisoners' dilemma framing projects the highest suspicion over the intentions of other actors. Assurance game sets a certain level of trust to others as the primary assumption of the interactions. This distinction establishes Rathburn's (2012) typology of trust in which two types, namely *general trust* and *strategic trust* arises. The uncertain nature of 'trusting' enables different approaches towards it: scenarios in international politics which require a minimum level of trust, as a result, initiate opportunities and uncertainties which in turn open a space for 'true agency' in those circumstances. Here the fundamental assumptions about tragedy enter into the scene: in *general trust*, the actor expects that 'the others' respect the values of community and to *'do the right thing'* (Mesbahi 2013). On the other hand, *strategic trust* is essentially the logical result of an individualistic culture –trust, in an uncertain world, is a *transactional* affair and the structure rules the outcome in each transaction. The currency of structure, in international relations, is power (Morgenthau 1993). Thus, agent is an individual who has to perpetuate its power in order to shape the outcome of transaction. *'Doing the right thing'* or *'winning each transaction'* are the essence of *tragic moments* and the most fundamental question that any tragic hero should answer. Here, 'the right thing' is defined in its simplest form of definition: the most basic values of the community define it and the actors know it by heart.

Tragic moments, in the final analysis, can be reduced to the simplified rational games in which the basic assumptions about the human existence, and NOT purely rational calculations, define the orientation towards decision-making. Accordingly, the foundational argument of this piece ensues: the assumptions in each game, that requires some form(s) of cooperation in the international system, are the *analytical* manifestations of the deepest understanding of *tragedy* in the actors' political culture. This goes directly against Oakeshott's view of tragedy in politics:

tragic vision and its influence on 'choice' and 'options' have an analytical manifestation in real world. Granted, there is no grand tragic master-plot as imagined in Greek tragedy in the 'real' world; however, there are tragic visions at play in those 'moments' when structure enables 'true agency' in the stage of international politics.

**Notes**

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