

# Agents 'all the way down': An Iranian critique of structure-war linkage

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## Abstract

The inquiry into the causal origins of war remains a foundational concern within the philosophy of International Relations (IR). However, the causes of war have been examined at different levels from micro to macro. While at the micro level, for example, human nature and the quality of political systems are taken into account, at the macro level, most IR thinkers have addressed varying impacts of the anarchic nature of the international structure in starting wars. The purpose of this article is to show that there is no significant link between the anarchic structure and war. So, in this study, I adopt a non-Western lens and use Ferdowsi's views to argue that individual decision-makers, on a micro level of analysis, play a prime role in initiating as well as concluding wars. To confirm this statement, I first examine the relationship between anarchy and war in the western IR literature. Then, using Ferdowsi's thoughts, I demonstrate how agency is the prime matter in initiating and ending wars. By introducing Ferdowsi's conceptualization of "wisdom" (khirad) and the role of the "wise leader," this research proposes a novel conflict resolution model that transcends the limitations of structural determinism. Ultimately, this individualistic approach provides a framework for analyzing conflicts simultaneously at the domestic and international levels.

**Keywords:** Agency, structure, non-Western theory, Iranian literature, Ferdowsi's thought

## Introduction

It is widely believed that Political Science and International Relations (IR) are distinguished by Hobbesian authority/anarchy, respectively (Onuf & Klink, 1989, p. 149). Although 'in recent years, a growing number of IR scholars have used the conceptual framework of authority to analyze patterns of hierarchical relationships among actors' (Voelsen & Schettler, 2019, p. 557), a review of IR literature indicates that anarchy still holds a prominent place among the causes of war discussed by IR thinkers (Thies, 2010; Levy & Thompson, 2010; Cerny & Prichard, 2017; Sjoberg, 2017). This position goes back, in part, to the historical-philosophical approaches of Thucydides and Hobbes, who have significantly con-

tributed to the concept of anarchy in the international system. Although Thucydides sees the problem of anarchy as essentially unsolvable, Hobbes believes that, thanks to Leviathan, it can be overcome (Ahrens Dorf, 2000, pp. 581-587). In the absence of Leviathan in the international system, anarchy becomes the inevitable reality of international relations. As such, explaining international politics requires a sound understanding of the concept of anarchy.

A review of the IR literature shows that there are at least two definitions of anarchy, namely, 'lack of order' and 'lack of government' (Milner, 1991, pp. 69-70). Many scholars of IR have proposed this distinction in various ways (Waltz, 1959, 1979; Bull, 1977; Guzzini, 2004, p. 504; Brown, 1992, pp. 20-21; Mercer, 1995, p. 229; Oye, 1985). Obviously, if each of these definitions is chosen for anarchy, different externalities are imagined in the international system. In this regard, it seems that the approach of IR thinkers could be divided into three categories: The first group attaches considerable importance to anarchy, whether with a positivist approach (Waltz, 1979) or with a non-positivist one (Wendt, 1999; Sjöberg, 2012); The second group, such as thinkers of liberalism (Keohane, 1984), the English School (Bull, 1977), and critical/post-structural theories (Linklater, 2007; Walker, 2003), attribute a lesser and more controllable role to anarchy; And the third group, which is more limited and mainly works in the field of Foreign Policy Analysis (FPA), focuses on micro level and does not pay much attention to the role of anarchy (Hudson, 2005; Hudson & Vore, 1995; Hudson & Day, 2019).

However, there is a relative consensus among IR scholars that anarchy and war are interrelated. This linkage has been considered at various levels and through different approaches in IR. Snyder (2002, pp. 7-45), for example, discusses the approaches of anthropologists and skeptics from a cultural perspective on the relationship between war and anarchy. Rosenau and Durfee (1996, p. 14) argue that anarchy creates a situation in which states must resort to self-help to maintain order and obtain the resources they need. According to Grieco (1988, pp. 497-498), states are aware that in anarchic conditions there is no universal authority to prevent others from using or threatening to use violence to destroy or enslave them. Levy and Thompson (2010, pp. 28-55), in their prominent work on the causes of war, specifically emphasize this connection at the systemic level. Anarchy, along with uncertainty about the enemy's intentions, creates a situation in which political leaders focus on 'short-term security needs' and are always ready for war (Levy, 2011, p. 16). Of course, there are thinkers who, relying on the 'first image' and the 'second image', are less concerned with the linkage between anarchy and war and do not accept it (Hudson, 2005; Byman & Pollack, 2001; Horowitz & Fuhrmann, 2018).

Here, it is necessary to define war. War, along with its causes, dimensions, and types, has been specifically studied by many IR scholars (Suganami, 2002; Gat, 2009; Lebow, 2010; Johnson, 2017; Wight, 2019). Lebow (2010) examines wars over three and a half centuries and argues that, contrary to conventional wisdom, only some wars were fought for security or material gain. Instead, most wars result from attempts to stand up and take revenge. War is one of the patterns of interaction between political units and has had a profound impact on the evolution of international actors and world politics. It can be defined as 'sustained, coordinated violence between political organizations' (Levy & Thompson, 2010, pp. 1-5). In this study, a broad definition of war, encompassing inter- and intra-state conflicts, is adopted, consistent with the Iranian/Ferdowsi lens applied in this article. This both helps us transcend the narrow, realistic boundaries between the domestic and external arenas and allows us to adopt a more comprehensive approach to understanding war.

Hence, the main question of this article is what role does anarchy play in starting a war? Explaining

and answering this question contributes significantly to understanding the causes of war. The greater the role of anarchy in initiating the war, the more deterministic approaches naturally prevail, and the more difficult it seems to limit the war. In contrast, the less anarchy plays a role in initiating a war, the easier it is to deal with war, and the greater the reliance on voluntarist approaches. IR thinkers seem to have, more or less, accepted the role of anarchy in initiating and concluding wars. However, in this article, using Ferdowsi's view, it is argued that there is no meaningful relationship between anarchy and war. "The methodology of this research is grounded in thematic textual analysis. By utilizing this method, the verses of the Shahnameh are analytically examined to identify the underlying patterns of agency and decision-making in Ferdowsi's thought."

The selection of the Shahnameh from among the vast corpus of classical Persian literature is predicated on its unique dual nature. While categorized as an epic, the Shahnameh maintains a rigorous engagement with the historical realities of the ancient Persian Empire and offers sophisticated analyses of warfare. Furthermore, its explanations regarding the origins of conflict provide a critical alternative to IR orthodoxy, offering novel theoretical insights. Although the Shahnameh sits outside the traditional IR 'canon,' this study contends that integrating such non-Western sources into contemporary disciplinary debates is both feasible and necessary for a more pluralistic understanding of the field. To this end, the article proceeds in three stages: first, it re-evaluates the link between anarchy and war through the lens of dominant IR paradigms; second, it interrogates the philosophical foundations of the anarchy/hierarchy dichotomy and demonstrates how a Ferdowsian approach shifts the focus away from structural determinism; and finally, it explores the causes of warfare within specific political 'situations' rather than rigid systemic structures.

### **Anarchy and war in IR: structure/agency dichotomy and beyond**

Regarding the link between anarchy and war, two attitudes could be distinguished in IR: an approach that accepts this linkage and a view that rejects it or is silent about it. The older, western-oriented views of IR are mainly within the first category, but the critical approaches proposed over the past couple of decades have gone beyond the dilemma. Given the former, there seem to be two conceptions of anarchy in IR: anarchy as situation (Bull, 1977; Waltz, 1959; Singer, 1994; Keohane, 1984) and anarchy as structure (Waltz, 1979; Mearsheimer, 1995). The difference between an anarchic structure and an anarchic situation in relation to war is that the former is constitutive, whereas the latter is not. If anarchy is considered a structure, it has a causal relationship with war and is explained by the Aristotelian principle of causality (anarchy as the 'final cause' of war). It should be noted that the concept of Aristotelian causality has both epistemological and ontological aspects (Kurki, 2008, p. 26). That is, anarchy as a structure both helps us explain the war and causes it to start.

In contrast, if anarchy is considered a situation, it often correlates with war, and Hume's principle of correlation explains this. The point, here, is that statesmen do make decisions to go to war, but that they do so under certain conditions that are more or less pressing (anarchy amongst them). In this concept of anarchic structure, agency is also important. Agency, in general, is 'the capacity to act in international politics. To be more precise, an agent is an entity that can act in a specific context, and 'agency' is the corresponding ability to act (Braun, Schindler & Wille, 2019, 788).

These two conceptions of anarchy reflect the two definitions of it mentioned above: 'lack of order' and 'lack of government'. That is, those who believe in anarchy as a lack of order actually explain it as a

deterministic structure, and those who believe in anarchy as a lack of government see it as a situation. Many perspectives within IR take up the puzzle of anarchy and its relation to war: realist/liberalist views, constructivist conceptions, critical-theoretic perspectives, postmodern/poststructuralist accounts, among others. However, an anarchic structure/situation can be seen as a reflection of Neorealism/IR debate in this regard and traced to their approaches.

While a substantial body of literature has explored the nexus between anarchy and war (Glaser, 1994; Jervis, 1978; Mearsheimer, 1990; Booth, 1991; Walt, 1987), this discussion takes neorealism as its primary point of departure. Despite its dominance, neorealism has been criticized for promoting a profoundly Eurocentric interpretation of international systems—a limitation that undermines its claims to transhistorical and universal applicability (Buzan & Little, 1996). The core tenet of neorealism is anarchy (Kratochwil, 2000, p. 85). This is especially true of the Waltz approach in his two most famous works, *Man, the State, and War*, and *Theory of International Politics*. In the first book, Waltz (1959, p. 188) argues that anarchy is a situation in which every government must rely on its own resources and tools to ensure its well-being. In this case, anarchy is the facilitator or underlying cause of war (Waltz, 1959, p. 232). So, he sees force as a means of achieving a government's external goals because, in anarchy, there is no credible process for resolving conflicts of interest between similar entities.

Foreign policy in such circumstances is neither moral nor immoral, but merely requires a rational response to the world around us (Waltz, 1959, p. 238). Thus, Waltz considers war at three levels/images: the individual, the state, and the international system. Anarchy, as a structural feature of the international system, is just one of the causes of war. However, he later argues that anarchy is a decisive structure in which war is inevitable (Waltz, 1979, p. 102). In this work, Waltz developed a theory of international order that is admired for its parsimony but criticized for its simplicity (Griffiths, 2018). According to him, units run their affairs in the shadow of violence. Because some states may use force at any time, all of them must be prepared to use force. Hence, the natural state between states is war. This does not mean that war always happens, but it does mean that it is possible to start a war at any time. This view is strongly influenced by Hobbes' definition of war in the state of nature (Hobbes, 2006, p. 158) and Rousseau's metaphor of deer hunting. In addition, Waltz's analysis of the relationship between anarchy and war is largely influenced by the quality of the balance of power. Waltz's recent lens (anarchy as structure) has been widely criticized (Donnelly, 2009). Williams (2005, p. 65-6), for example, believes that Waltz's mistake is to describe the metaphor of deer hunting as an eternal determinant of the relationship between autonomous actors, while Rousseau sees it as the initial stage of human progress. Of course, the centrality of anarchy in the realist analysis of international politics is not limited to Waltz. Realists, either before Waltz or after him, explain international relations through anarchy. In this regard, Smith (1986, p. 13) considers Hobbes' analysis of the natural state to be the defining feature of realism. In other words, most realists assume that the international system has always been anarchic (Buzan & Little, 1994, p. 248), and this has affected their analysis of the war as well.

The liberal school, in contrast, is optimistic about the logic of anarchy and, in any case, emphasizes international cooperation. For example, scholars such as Nye (2000, p. 4) define anarchy as the absence of a superior government. Despite criticizing the anarchic structure of neoliberals and neoliberal institutionalists, David Lake (2001, p. 130-32) argues that international relations is a complex system consisting of institutions that are both anarchic and hierarchical. So, as Wendt (2003, p. 492) argues, most liberals in IR argue that international institutions, interdependence, and democratic states can

lead to cooperation and peace in anarchy. While different generations of liberalism differ slightly in their explanation of anarchy, they have all sought ways to facilitate cooperation under it and overcome war: some have emphasized the pluralism at the national level (Schmidt, 2002); Others have addressed the factors that perpetuate cooperation under anarchic conditions through economic interdependence or international regimes (Axelrod & Keohane, 1985; Keohane, 1982; Keohane, 1984); And the third group focuses on the relationship between democracy and war (Doyle, 1983a; Doyle, 1983b; Doyle, 1986; Doyle, 2005). In sum, liberals see anarchy not as the absence of order but as the absence of government, indicating a situation in which statesmen can choose to cooperate or fight others.

One of the most serious objections to Waltz's approach comes from Wendt (1992, 1999). He categorizes Waltz's three approaches to the relationship between war and anarchy in *Man, the State and War* as follows: (a) Anarchy as the permissive cause of war (war in anarchy is always possible); (b) Anarchy as the effective cause of war (expansionism of one or more actors provokes the reaction of others); And (c) anarchy as the 'active' cause of war (war is inevitable at any time) (Wendt, 1992). Wendt argues that these three approaches are reduced to the third in *Theory of International Politics*, and that the logic of anarchy is constituted by self-help and power politics. Wendt's critique suggests that, in his first book, Waltz sees war as a result of structural and agency factors (an anarchic situation). However, in the second, he emphasizes only structural factors (an anarchic structure). The very acceptance of the agent-oriented cause of war (the 'effective' cause) seems to reduce the anarchic structure to an anarchic situation, because it diminishes the structure's determinative state. Despite his critique of Waltz, Wendt himself offers differing views on anarchy and its impact on relations between states. First, Wendt argues that the structure has no existence or causality apart from the process. In his view, self-help and power politics are not the main features of the process. Thus, 'anarchy is what states make of it' (Wendt, 1992). Then, in explaining anarchy and the formation of self-help and power politics, Wendt emphasizes processes in state interaction rather than within states (Wendt, 1992, pp. 424-425). Third, Wendt defines an anarchic situation as a culture of anarchy and holds that culture can constitute cooperation or conflict. He goes on to name three types of anarchic cultures: Hobbesian, Lockean, and Kantian ones. Relationships among the actors in these three cultures are based on enmity, competition, and friendship, respectively, and war is explained in the context of these cultures (Wendt, 1999, pp. 246-312). In addition to Wendt, constructivists such as Onuf (2002, p. 224) and Kratochwil (1982, 1984) discuss the relationship between anarchy and war, reflecting their interpretations of anarchy as a situation.

Critical/poststructuralist thinkers have also made serious criticisms of Waltz's structuralism and neorealism. Linklater (2007, p. 54) argues that critical theory has been one of the most important theories to challenge the neorealist claim that anarchy forces all states to behave in the same way. For Ashley (1988, p. 236), anarchy refers to a situation characterized by the presence of states and the absence of global authority. Along with critical theory, the poststructuralist interpretation of anarchy also contradicts the universal, transhistorical, and given conception of it, and this is, to a large extent, equivalent to denying anarchy (Walker, 2003; Walker, 1995; Prozorov, 2009). Thus, anarchy is practically a situation in which decision-makers choose to cooperate or fight.

Over the past couple of decades, the link between anarchy and war has remained a subject of debate. However, the balance has shifted sharply in favor of critical approaches to this linkage. These approaches are based on different theoretical and meta-theoretical platforms in their criticisms.

Prichard (2017), for example, argues that contemporary theories of collective intentionality force us to think about anarchy in new and challenging ways. Anarchy reveals the contingency and inconsistency of hegemonic identities in IR, as well as the autonomy of the political (Newman, 2012). Drawing on Habermas, Jennifer Mitzen (2005, pp. 405-406) argues that containing anarchy in the international system requires strengthening 'communicative action' through three strategies: 'global positive law', 'the democratic peace', and 'interstate regimes.' In a free reading of these strategies, they could be interpreted as factors of war control in the anarchic conditions of the international system. Another platform that has been a frequent target of criticism of the structural approach, especially over the past two decades, upholds psychological lessons. While most IR models concern patterns of collective decision-making in units such as states, bureaucracies, armed groups, and so forth, the fundamental unit of interest in psychology is the individual (Gildea, 2020).

In this context, some recent critical approaches have focused on individual analysis, while others have explained the causes of war in a hierarchical (not anarchic) framework. Saunders (2011, p. 2-5), for example, argues that 'leaders vary systematically in how they perceive threats, and these different threat perceptions help explain when and how states intervene'. In her view, 'the critical variable distinguishing leaders is the degree to which they believe that the internal political, economic, or social characteristics of other states are the ultimate source of threats'. Accordingly, 'the most important source of willingness to intervene is the perception of a threat to national security, but even within the same state, leaders may differ in how they identify such threats.' Cerny and Prichard (2017, p. 380), in contrast, argue that anarchy becomes the ontological condition for all politics, an 'order without an orderer' in Waltz's (1979) words. Regardless of approaches such as this that rely on an anarchic structure, in recent years, we have seen a strong tendency toward analyses that rely on hierarchical structures across different lenses. Since 1919, world leaders have sought to uphold and advance international order by sponsoring a succession of global security hierarchies, understood as authoritative arrangements of global scope dedicated to mitigating international security challenges. These hierarchies have progressively broadened their inclusivity of security referents (Phillips, 2019). Adopting an oriental model, Phillips (2018) critically engages research that has cast Confucian hierarchy as a peaceful alternative to violent Westphalian anarchy.

Hence, the anarchy-war linkage has been contested both theoretically and practically in recent decades. On the one hand, hierarchical theories hold that anarchy is impossible in the international environment. This could be seen both at the theoretical and practical levels of international relations. While anarchy is conventionally associated with the emergence of an autonomous discipline of IR, Donnelly (2006, 2009, 2015) has argued that anarchy has never been central to IR (hierarchy is more weighty). His criticism targets not just concepts of anarchy but also theories of anarchy, thereby expressing an anti-theory ethos tacitly accepted in the discipline (Lechner, 2017). Practically, it seems that 'there is no anarchy in the international system. The world system is hierarchical, not anarchic, and the fear of 'anarchy' itself is used as a red herring by states in the context of the antagonism between statist, hierarchical structures and network social logics (Karatzogianni & Robinson, 2017, p. 283). On the other hand, atomistic approaches argue that agents are not influenced by any structure (anarchy or hierarchy). The end of the Cold War reduced the structural constraints that states normally face in anarchy (Walt, 2018).

Lastly, there is a growing tendency in IR to attribute anarchy and its consequences to developing

countries and failed states. Securitization theory, for example, finds 'primal anarchy' especially in 'Africa', which it casts as irrationally oversecritized, making it a foil to 'civilized politics' (Howell & Richter-Montpetit, 2020, p. 5). Accordingly, 'primal anarchy' and the 'state of nature' serve as foils to this 'normal politics' within a teleological hierarchy of civilizational advancement from securitization to politicization. 'Following Hobbes, securitization theory locates this supposed progress in the West, particularly Europe' (Howell & Richter-Montpetit, 2020, p. 8). Howell & Richter-Montpetit (2020, p. 16) have illustrated that 'classic securitization theory is structured not only by Eurocentrism, but also by civilizationism, methodological whiteness, and antiblack racism.' Beyond this, Muggah defines fragile cities as entities in which the social contract crumbles and 'anarchy rules', thereby reproducing the normative characterization of fragile states as zones of anarchy (Lemay-Hébert & Jerrems, 2023, p. 10). So, explicitly racist and civilizational answers to the question 'security for whom' have given way to more cosmopolitan visions of security hierarchy (Phillips, 2019).

In sum, almost all schools of IR have equated anarchy with a self-help system and a lack of central authority capable of enacting and enforcing international law (Adem, 2002, p. 23). In the meantime, neo-realists believe in anarchy as a structure, and the rest of IR scholars mainly see it as a situation (if they see it at all). Thus, as explained, a debate between the two lenses of anarchy could be imagined, pitting neo-realists against many IR theorists; the gap between these perspectives is also crucial for explaining the causes of the war. The adoption of either of these two perspectives offers a different interpretation of the intensity of the relationship between anarchy and war. Despite their differences, both perspectives remain anchored in the presumed causal link between anarchy and war. This study seeks to transcend the structure/situation impasse by proposing an 'Oriental' alternative to the anarchy-war linkage. While certain critical and postmodernist scholars have attempted to bypass this dichotomy by 'generalizing the international' (Edkins & Zehfuss, 2005), the following analysis introduces a distinct framework rooted in an Iranian conceptual lens. Within this framework, an agent-centric approach takes precedence, demonstrating that the genesis of conflict is driven by influential factors situated outside the constraints of systemic anarchy. Furthermore, while anarchy and hierarchy are foundational to IR theory, their conventional definitions often fail to capture the complexities of political life throughout much of history (Haldén, 2017). The subsequent sections will elaborate on these dynamics through the lens of Ferdowsi's political thought.

### Structure is at stake: Ferdowsi's view

Ferdowsi in the *Shahnameh*, focusing on the agents of war, explicitly does not address the role of anarchy, either as a structure or as a situation. However, the anarchic situation and the agent-centric approach could be inferred from his explanation of the war. To advance this argument, it is essential to delineate the conceptual boundaries of agency within the Ferdowsian tradition. In contemporary social theory, agency is frequently conceptualized through the lens of the human subject, characterized by historical consciousness, intentionality, and autonomous decision-making capacity. Conversely, more recent scholarly efforts have sought to decenter this anthropocentric understanding, redefining agency as a quality of 'vibrancy' or 'activeness' inherent in both human and non-human entities. Despite its ubiquity, IR scholars often struggle with conceptual clarity regarding 'what agency is, what it means to exercise agency, or who and what might do so' (Braun, Schindler & Wille 2019, 788). This study addresses this ambiguity by situating agency within the specific ethical and political parame-

ters of the Shahnameh. However, Wendt (1987, p. 359) discusses three capacities for agents, namely 'to have a theoretical understanding (however inaccurate) of its activities', 'to reflexively monitor and potentially adapt its behavior', and 'to make decisions'. Applying these capacities, Ferdowsi's approach could be better analyzed.

In an agent-centric approach, human nature becomes central as the basic agent of war, approaching the classical realist view of the cause of war (Hobbes, 2006; Morgenthau, 1948). The explanation of Classical Realism for the cause of war is rooted in the views of human nature held by Hobbes and Machiavelli (Ahrendsdorf, 2000). In addition to emphasizing human evil, Hobbes goes to war over several other assumptions. According to him, human beings are equal by nature. The result of equality is fear of each other, and war breaks out of fear (Hobbes, 2006, pp. 156-7). This makes anarchy in the state of nature. Of course, the 'new anarchy' in the international system is populated by 'uneven, unequal and only dimly perceived social, economic and political forces and processes' (Cerny & Prichard, 2017, p. 389). Anyway, if Hobbes's assumptions about inherent equality and human nature are accepted, the question arises of how human beings have lived together for thousands of years and how the subordinate/supraordinate classification has been formed.

Hobbes (2006, p. 157) answers the above question by fabricating a 'social contract' between bad people, which has almost no historical precedent. This creates a dichotomy between the natural/civil states. Hobbes' realist followers draw on his concept of the natural state to explain international relations (Morgenthau, 1948; Rosenau, 1990). Critics of this view rightly acknowledge that, despite repeated references to Hobbes as a theorist of international anarchy, most accounts of world politics show that states are not equal (Walker, 1995, p. 324; Donnelly, 2006, p. 144), whereas Hobbes's natural state requires the inherent equality of individuals. This approach has influenced Walker's (2003) explanation of inequality and violence in the international context. Furthermore, the use of 'anarchy' in IR theory differs significantly from its incarnations in political philosophy. Whilst realist scholars have used the term 'anarchy' to describe the absence of centralized political authority in which states wield differential power, political philosophers in the anarchist tradition have mounted a critique of the coercive and compulsory powers of states themselves (Cudworth & Hobden, 2010).

However, by taking Hobbes's approach in IR for granted, three fundamental ambiguities are formed: first, despite the importance of historicity in the social sciences, this approach does not pay attention to history in the discussion of inherent human equality and the formation of state based on social contract; Second, by modeling Hobbes's natural state to explain international relations, inequality between states is ignored; Third, when the international arena is likened to the natural state, the domestic arena is automatically equated with the civil state, and this leads to the disregard of internal conflicts and civil wars. Hence, anarchy's roots in, and association with, social contract theory and the state of nature have unduly narrowed how we might understand the concept and its potential in IR (Havercroft & Prichard, 2017).

Ferdowsi's view of human nature differs from Hobbes's approach. He believes in an inherent duality in human nature. This duality may be due to the dualistic approach in the religions and ideas of ancient Iran, which believed in the separation of the divine and evil worlds. Ferdowsi saw some people as good-natured and called them human beings (*adami*) or people (*mardom*) (Ferdowsi, 2003, pp. 220-23), and considered others as bad-tempered and called them demons (*div*) or evil devils (*Ahriman*) (Ferdowsi, 2003, pp. 253-54). In addition, he describes some as wise (in his own sense) and some as

foolish or brainless (Ferdowsi, 2003; Ferdowsi, 1998). So, it can be said that Ferdowsi considers man as unequal by nature. The result of inequality is the formation of government (Ferdowsi, 2003, pp. 251-52) and the emergence of the upper and lower classes. In other words, 'substantial material inequality creates an informal hierarchy that removes men from a state of nature' (Donnelly, 2009, p. 59). More importantly, because Ferdowsi does not distinguish between the domestic and foreign arenas, he considers war possible at both levels and adopts a coherent approach to its analysis. So, the distinctiveness of Ferdowsi's argument at this point comes from two things: first, he holds a different view of human nature; second, his transition from the dichotomy of hierarchy/anarchy (internal security/external insecurity) opens up the question of security in the internal sphere.

While the statist idea of 'anarchy', as seen in Hobbes, is actually a misperception of the affirmative power, the 'power-to', of social networks and social movements (Karatzogianni & Robinson, 2017, p. 284), it must be acknowledged that Hobbesian analysis of human behavior under the conditions of state of nature is a deliberate thought experiment devised in order to demonstrate the necessity of central authority. Ferdowsi's *Shahnameh*, in comparison, is a mythical epic that is more concerned with the social sources of injustice, power, greed, wisdom, jealousy, and hatred under unequal conditions. While the *Shahnameh* is not a self-consciously articulated treatise on political philosophy, it remains a profound repository of political thought from which a sophisticated philosophical framework can be extrapolated. Through a rigorous textual analysis, the following section conceptualizes Ferdowsi's perspective on the interplay between anarchic situations and the onset of war, offering an alternative to conventional structural interpretations.

If Ferdowsi's approach to structure is examined from the perspective of the historical period he is considering, it can be considered a situation among empire (Buzan & Little, 1994, pp. 247-48), heterarchy (Donnelly, 2009, p. 64), heteronomy (Onuf & Klink, 1989, p. 168), and hierarchy. However, when we refer to the text of Ferdowsi's work, a different interpretation is inferred. The history of *Shahnameh* developments can be divided into two periods, from a structural point of view: the period before the formation of separate countries (from the beginning to the rule of Fereydun); and the period after the formation of independent lands (after Fereydun). No image from the whole period before Fereydun can be found that shows anything like international relations (Ferdowsi, 2003, pp. 254-55). In other words, this period can be defined as the era of the world state of kings or of God's representatives<sup>1</sup>.

Ferdowsi's assumption about the inherent inequality of man is evident at the beginning of the *Shahnameh*. In his view, the first man on earth (Keyumars) is also the first ruler. His rule was universal, encompassing both domestic and wild animals. Hushang, Tahmuras, Jamshid, Zakhākand, and Fereydun were also the second to sixth universal rulers, respectively. Fereydun divides the world among his three sons (Salm, Tur, and Iraj), and from this time on, an international interpretation of Ferdowsi's thought can be offered.

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1. Ferdowsi's assumption about inherent inequality of man can be well seen at the beginning of *Shahnameh*. In his view, the first man on earth (Keyumars) is also the first ruler. His rule was universal and even ruled over 'domestic and wild animals'. Hushang, Tahmuras, Jamshid, Zakhākand and Fereydun were also the second to sixth universal rulers, respectively. Fereydun divides the world among his three sons (Salm, Tur and Iraj) and from this time on, an international interpretation of Ferdowsi's thought can be offered.

Moreover, this differs from what contract theorists such as Hobbes and even Rousseau say about the pre-contractual status. That is, in Ferdowsi's view, the conditions before the formation of states are not only different from the natural state depicted by Hobbes, but also a kind of global empire that prevents the growth of conflicts.

In *Shahnameh*, from the beginning to the rule of Zāhhāk, the wise are the upper and the ruling class. However, after that, unwise and irrational individuals came to power alternately, and periods of peace and war alternated (Ferdowsi, 2003, 1998, 2001, 2005). From Ferdowsi's point of view (2003, 254-55), the battlefield is formed in conditions of inequality and has little to do with internal hierarchy or external anarchy. Therefore, Ferdowsi's first step in explaining the causes of war differs from the Hobbesian view, which is useful for exploring many of the *Shahnameh*'s wars. In addition, a significant point evident in the *Shahnameh* is the insecurity in the internal hierarchical structure. Accordingly, the internal situation of many contemporary (failed) states could be explained.

According to Ferdowsi (2003, 1998, 2001, 2005), it is clear that, before any issue arises, the intentions of the agents play a role in initiating the war. In each of the *Shahnameh* wars, as soon as the agents wanted, the war started. This could support Waltz's view of structure as the permissive cause of war and, for Wendt, the "active" cause. Nevertheless, contrary to the view of these two, according to Ferdowsi's thought, no distinction can be made between the roles of these two causes in hierarchical or anarchic situations.

In explaining wars, Ferdowsi never separates internal from external or hierarchical from anarchic structures. Nevertheless, the ultimate victory in war in a hierarchical state is always achieved by a higher-status power, whereas in an anarchic state, victory is variable. On the other hand, the only war that resembles Waltz's determinist structure and Wendt's "active" cause occurred at the domestic (not international) level at the outset of the war, in stark contrast to Waltz and Waltz. Eleven of the twenty-two battles under review here have occurred in the domestic sphere, and the other eleven in the external sphere. The causes of war in Ferdowsi's thought are often consistent with those of contemporary theorists of IR. However, regardless of the prevailing discourse of today (influenced by Hobbes's natural/civil state), Ferdowsi differs in that he understands the real causes of the war and does not limit it to internal or external circumstances. In other words, he sees tangible causes at the beginning of wars that can be explained in terms of human behavior.

Ferdowsi seems to attribute the same role to the lack of superior power or external anarchy and to the existence of ruling power or internal hierarchical conditions at the beginning of the war. More precisely, he does not necessarily relate anarchy to the conditions of war and hierarchy to the conditions of the absence of war. However, in Hobbes's two-dimensional interpretations, anarchy is assumed to play a positive role in initiating war. At the same time, the internal hierarchical situation is the realm of the good and desirable life (Wight, 1960). Thus, in Ferdowsi's thought, the dichotomy of structure/agency loses its importance in the case of war, because this is effective if the role of the internal structure is different from the impact of the external structure at the beginning of the war. In other words, what is important in Ferdowsi's attitude is the agents of war, and this merely reduces both the internal structure (hierarchy) and the external structure (anarchy) to the situation in which wars take place. If hierarchy and anarchy are equally influential in starting a war and both serve as permissive causes, then both Wendt's "active" cause and the permissive cause itself lose their significance, because these causes are important only when we consider the difference between internal and external situations.

In these conditions, only the effective cause of the war is considered, and the agent-centric approach prevails. Thus, war agents play an important role at the beginning and end of wars in both anarchic and hierarchical situations, not just in anarchic ones.

Lastly, if the dichotomy of hierarchy/anarchy is questioned by the equal influence of both in war and the duality in human nature (Ferdowsi, 2003, 1998, 2001, 2005), the situational/structural conceptions of anarchy are reduced to the anarchic situation, since war is not considered external. Anarchy cannot be seen as the determining structure of war. In such circumstances, the agents of war, their characteristics, and capacities in explaining and analyzing the causes of war in anarchic and hierarchical situations are of great importance. These are discussed in the next section.

#### **Agents and wars: textual analysis of Shahnameh**

As mentioned, war in the modern sense of IR is mainly meaningful in the external arena, and the civil war represents an exceptional situation. Despite the new definition of war as an institution, Holsti (2004, pp. 275-283) believes that this phenomenon has been part of the interaction between independent political communities for 10,000 years. Nevertheless, exploring the verses of the Shahnameh reveals a very broad concept of war. War in Ferdowsi's Shahnameh is used in the same sense as the concepts of conflict, campaign, battle, invasion, attack, and so on. The heroes of Ferdowsi's poems narrate most of his views on war; Heroes that Ferdowsi praises as wise persons. Among these people, we can mention Fereydun, Iraj, Rostam, Zāl, and so on. The distinctive feature of all the above people is that, despite their superior power, they have never started a war and have always sought to prevent war and chaos (Ferdowsi, 2003, 1998, 2001, 2005). This shows the role of the powerful in peacebuilding, which, of course, is also expressed in modern IR literature through ideas such as Bull's (1977) approach to "real power management." Also, this indicates the role of individuals and their personalities in belligerence and pacifism. This point has been confirmed by experimental IR research to this day. For example, as leaders' age increases, they become more likely to both initiate and escalate militarized disputes (Horowitz, McDermott, Stam, 2005). Moreover, Byman and Pollack (2001, p. 109) contend that the goals, abilities, and foibles of individuals are crucial to a state's intentions, capabilities, and strategies. Indeed, individuals not only affect the actions of their own states but also shape the reactions of other nations, which must respond to the aspirations, abilities, and aggressiveness of foreign leaders. According to this interpretation, a wide circle can be given for the person's agency in war or peace.

The next most important point in studying Ferdowsi's approach to war is the agents. In his view, the agents of the war can be divided into two categories: sub-state agents, in which an individual, group or tributary local government enters into war or rebellion with another actor; and state agents, in which an individual, group or army of a country fights or suppresses insurgents on behalf of the king or on behalf of the state (Ferdowsi, 2003, 1998, 2001, 2005). The first category is a common issue in systems of scattered authority, such as the ancient Persian Empire, and the second is more limited but sometimes longer and more destructive. If three types of wars between sub-state and state, sub-state and sub-state, state and state actors are considered at both internal and external levels, a matrix of six types of wars can be drawn based on Ferdowsi's Shahnameh (See Table 1).

**Table 1:** Types and levels of war in Shahnameh

| Typology of war based on its agents | Internal level                                       | External level                                       |
|-------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|------------------------------------------------------|
| sub-state and sub-state actors      | sub-state and sub-state actors at the Internal level | sub-state and sub-state actors at the External level |
| state and state actors              | state and state actors at the Internal level         | state and state actors at the External level         |
| sub-state and state actors          | sub-state and state actors at the Internal level     | sub-state and state actors at the External level     |

The multiplicity and variety of wars in the Shahnameh are revealed in Table 1. Even though Ferdowsi sometimes refers to several countries within the three empires of “Turan”, “Iran”, and “Rome and the East”, but in describing the wars, one can find an inferior, superior, or equal position of them. Thus, the wars between them are classified according to the types in Table 1. During the period under review, Ferdowsi described twenty-two wars, in all of which the role of agents and their motives as the causes of wars were highlighted (Ferdowsi, 2003, 1998, 2001, 2005).

A few points here need to be explained. Until the reign of Fereydun, all wars took place at the domestic level. The first three seemingly mythical cases can indicate Ferdowsi's view of man's inherent duality. Some believe that the demons in the Shahnameh represent the native inhabitants of Iran before the arrival of the Aryans in this land. In addition, demons serve as the king of Mazandaran's helpers during the Mazandaran war. If they are imaginary creatures, how can they interact with humans and even support the tax-paying kingdom of Mazandaran against the Shah of Iran and revolt? It seems that the ideas of Mithraism, especially its dualism (Ahuraian/demonic), have greatly influenced Ferdowsi's thought. In addition to the beginning of the story, which explicitly considers demons to be the companions of the devil, Ferdowsi always speaks of the devil's victory when the evils prevail (Ferdowsi 2003, 1998, 2001, 2005).

Even though all the wars before Fereydun were assumed to be a civil war and, therefore, only one universal government was defined for this period, the war between Zakhāk and Jamshid seems to be different. After Jamshid's ingratitude and Ahriman's influence on him, a group of Iranian soldiers went to Zakhāk (King of the Arabs) and elected him to the throne of Iran, while Jamshid was still ruling Iran as the king of the world. Thus, the war between the two can be considered on behalf of the country, but at the domestic level. With this interpretation, this war can be considered a unique example in the Shahnameh.

The first war discussed in the Shahnameh, which is very similar to the modern interpretation of the war as a Hobbesian hierarchy/anarchy, is the battle of Manuchehr in Iran against Salm and Tur from Rome and Turan. This war takes place during Fereydun's life. During Iraj's lifetime, Fereydun divided his worldwide rule among his sons, while still retaining some authority over them. Despite the “effective” cause of the war between the three brothers (Iraj, Salm, and Tur) on behalf of the three countries, Fereydun acted as a “permissive” cause that prevented war among his sons. During this period, he prevented them from fighting with his letters to Salm and Tur. After the assassination of Iraj and the replacement of Hushang, a war took place that had long had “effective” causes and led to the defeat of

Salm and Tur (Ferdowsi, 2003, pp. 440-53). Fereydun's role in this war is somewhat similar to that of international organizations in the contemporary era. These organizations operate successfully within the agents' operating environment until the "effective" cause of the war has not been strengthened.

Most of the wars after Fereydun take place abroad and between Iran and Turan. The description and explanation of the events of these wars culminate the story of *Shahnameh* and represent Ferdowsi's thought. A detailed description of the wars in this period helps clarify Ferdowsi's perspective on them. Although he always wants the glory of Iran and its victory in the wars of this period, in the margins of the verses, he tries to condemn the war and its initiators (Ferdowsi, 1998, 2001, 2005).

The two wars of Zāl/Turanians and Kashvād/Aghriratare are slightly different from each other. Although these two wars took place during the reign of Nowzar, and Zāl and Kashvād both fought the Turanians on behalf of Iran, the wars are described in two different ways. When Zāl fights the Turanians and defeats them, Nowzar is still alive and bears the title of Shah of Iran. Therefore, Zāl is considered the representative of Iran, and this war is defined as a state-to-state conflict at the international level. However, when Kashvād goes to war, despite fighting as an Iranian, the Turanians had occupied Iran, and Nowzar had been killed. In such circumstances, the war appears to be a battle between sub-state and state actors at the external level.

In addition to being careful about the causes of the wars, Ferdowsi also addresses the conditions of the two sides' alliance against a third party, the precedence in the war, the role of equal interests in the formation of the alliance, and so on. For example, Ferdowsi (2003, pp. 433-35) describes the injuries Salm and Tur sustain at the hands of Iraj and their extravagance. This causes the two to unite against their common enemy, Iraj. In addition, Ferdowsi is aware of the benefits of a balance of power and precedence in war. In the words of Fereydun (as a wise man), in his advice to Iraj, he points out that weakness versus power leads to destruction. "Ferdowsi acutely recognizes the existential necessity of defense, acknowledging that failing to neutralize an adversary often invites one's own destruction.

Nevertheless, he consistently prioritizes ethical truth and condemns warfare as a tragic endeavor (Ferdowsi, 2003). A comprehensive review of conflict in the *Shahnameh* reveals that the origins of war are invariably rooted in the psychological dispositions and character traits of individual decision-makers. This emphasis aligns with, yet expands upon, Kenneth Waltz's (1959) 'first image' of international relations, which situates the causes of war within human nature and individual behavior. Even in contemporary conflicts, the temperaments and personal ambitions of political leaders remain a decisive factor in driving aggression. Ultimately, these individual agents are central not only to the escalation of violence but also to the architecture of peace; as contemporary scholarship reaffirms, it is leaders who negotiate and conclude conflicts, rather than abstract state entities (Horowitz et al., 2018).

According to Ferdowsi, anarchy is reduced to a situation, and the causes of war are reduced to 'effective' ones. Hence, the agents of war become important, and their nature, instead of an anarchic structure, is influential in starting a war. This reductionist approach to wars is discussed in international relations today more than in the past. Byman and Pollack (2001, 114) argue that individuals play a central role in shaping international relations, including the causes of war, alliance patterns, and other areas that international relations scholars consider important. On the other hand, the war in *Shahnameh* is not limited to the external sphere but also includes the internal sphere. It may now be imagined that the agents of war in the *Shahnameh* become unbridled actors whom no element can confront. It should be noted that this is not the case.

Throughout the *Shahnameh*, Ferdowsi (2003, 1998, 2001, 2005) cultivates a concept that solves this problem: wisdom (Kherad). Wisdom, in Ferdowsi's view, is different from the instrumental rationality of the Enlightenment, which Adorno and Horkheimer (2006, p. 243-59) criticize and introduce its dialectical property as the cause of human confusion. Indeed, they contest the artificial separation of ethics and instrumental reason as a practice of domination and exploitation (Soudias, 2024, p. 3). This criticism does not apply to Ferdowsi's interpretation of wisdom, as he sees it primarily in the context of ethics. On the other hand, Ferdowsi's emphasis on wisdom as an individual trait may evoke Machiavelli's Virtue. However, given his emphasis on pacifism and the popularity of the wise, the concept of wisdom is fundamentally different from Machiavelli's Virtue. It may be thought that, in Ferdowsi's view, wisdom is an exceptional and ideal concept that is not achievable. However, Ferdowsi's interpretation of wisdom is both different from the instrumental rationality criticized by Adorno and Horkheimer (2006, p. 243) and tangible. Wisdom, in Ferdowsi's view, is a factor that makes the rulers attractive to the people. This is exactly what can be traced in today's societies, removing dictators and militants from the ranks of the wise. In his view, the way to achieve wisdom is to move in the direction of justice (dād)<sup>2</sup>, and justice is the pillar of wisdom" (Ferdowsi, 2001, p. 205). For him, justice is incompatible with war, "guilt" and "dishonesty" and even prevents them. Justice in the *Shahnameh* is popular, altruistic, and rooted in the same wisdom (Ferdowsi, 2003).

Ferdowsi's view can help explain the relationship between wisdom and war in two ways: First, Ferdowsi sees wisdom as fundamentally incompatible with war. In his view, a good-natured and wise man never turns to enmity and war (Ferdowsi, 2003, p. 399). In addition, he believes that wisdom not only prevents war, but also prevents the formation of its grounds and contexts (Ferdowsi, 2001, p. 136). Second, in all the wars under review here, the wise men have never started a war. Compared to the democratic peace thesis, this is a significant point. Because in that thesis, democratic states do not fight only with other democratic actors, and there is always the fear that a country would be invaded by a democratic state as well. However, in the thesis derived from Ferdowsi's approach to wise actors, these agents are never the initiators of war, whether the other party is a wise actor or not. Therefore, the ruler's wisdom can prevent war. These are the things that indicate how the rule of the wise leads to a wise environment and creates a peaceful atmosphere. Using this perspective, the belligerence and militancy of many contemporary governments and politicians can be explained. Most of the great contemporary wars were started by governments ruled by authoritarian and militant persons.

Today, in comparison, Horowitz and Fuhrmann (2018) introduce the special feature of "Leaders, Crisis Behavior, and International Conflict" while individual leaders play a central role in world politics. However, international relations scholarship has downplayed or ignored leaders, focusing instead on system-wide variables and domestic political institutions. A new wave of research, however, has helped to reintroduce the leader-level back into models of international politics. Citing numerous historical examples, Byman and Pollack (2001) explain how leaders' personalities affect wars and other developments in international relations. In addition to leaders, the personality of their advisers is also important. So, the next step is a better understanding of the advisers who surround them. Saunders (2018) explores the often-hidden politics of leader-adviser interactions, focusing on how leaders strategically manage elite cues within their own circles that could mobilize otherwise dormant or per-

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1. Ferdowsi always speaks of the connection between wisdom and justice.

missive public opinion. Advisers can serve as cue-givers when leaders contemplate the use of force, but leaders can shape which cues reach the public by accommodating them. It seems that the thesis derived from Ferdowsi's thought can contribute to this new theoretical wave about the role of leaders in peace and war.

### Conclusion

Understanding the causes of war in the international anarchic situation/structure requires an awareness of the hierarchy/anarchy dichotomy rooted in Hobbes's interpretation of human nature, the inherent equality of man, and the distinction between the natural/civil state. In this way, it is seen how each of these clauses helped strengthen the others, culminating in the structuralist approach of anarchic determinism at the beginning and the conclusion of the wars. In contrast, this research draws on Ferdowsi's thought to challenge the traditional view of the individual nature and anarchic structure as the primary drivers of conflict. It seeks to deconstruct the presumed relationship between anarchy and war, presenting a novel explanatory framework. Through this Persian intellectual tradition, the article demonstrates that the causal link between systemic structures and the outbreak of hostilities is far more contingent and agent-dependent than contemporary IR theory suggests.

It is acknowledged that comparing Ferdowsi's work directly with the theories of realists and neorealists presents significant challenges. This is primarily because the ontology of the latter is predicated upon an empirically constructed international system, a conceptual framework that was not even accessible to Hobbes. Hobbes served as a starting point for scholars such as Waltz, Wendt, Walt, Jervis, and Mearsheimer. To be sure, their structuralist insights are based on an entirely different ontological unit: the modern nation-state. However, Ferdowsi's insights into human nature could certainly enrich some of these realist and neo-realist perspectives on decision-making and leadership psychology.

If we accept the dual nature of man with the interpretation influenced by Ferdowsi's thought, the inherent equality of man is questioned, the imaginary "social contract" is annulled, and the natural/civil state is challenged. The consequence of this trend for IR is the weakening of the dichotomy between hierarchy/anarchy, the disregard for situational/structural conceptions of anarchy, the invalidation of the structuralist interpretation of the causes of war, and, finally, the replacement of the agent-oriented, intentional explanation with it. It is in this context that Ferdowsi's concept of wisdom works and helps provide a solution to explain war. In this context, it seems that by focusing on willing agents, we can anticipate solutions that can help limit war by training or regulating agents. The solution that Ferdowsi proposes in this regard is the rule of wise and just people.

Finally, the question arises: to what extent can this approach be adapted to current objective conditions? Although it is difficult to apply this approach due to the significant differences between the objective conditions considered by Ferdowsi and the current state of international relations, it certainly offers new insights in this field. First of all, an approach inspired by Ferdowsi's view can explain why, despite the relatively stable international structure of recent centuries, we are at war at some periods and not at others. Secondly, we can explain the possibility of civil war, regardless of a country's hierarchical structure, using an approach influenced by Ferdowsi's view. Thirdly, according to Ferdowsi's view, the role of country leaders, especially wise leaders, in shaping the quality of their foreign policy and the peaceful nature of international relations is increasingly evident. These show the ability of Ferdowsi's view to explain war and anarchy in today's conditions.

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