The Causes of the Last Great War of Antiquity

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"And so Chosroes … mobilized that world-destroying trumpet: for this became the undoing of the prosperity of the Romans and Persians."[1] Theophylact Simocatta forebode the end of the world as he and his fellow historians had known it. In 600, The Byzantine and Sassanian Empires held sway over great swaths of the Caucasus, Mesopotamia, and Arabia. Less than 25 years after the end of the Last Great War of Antiquity (602-628), the last Sassanian shahanshah, Yazdegerd III, was killed in Central Asia while fleeing from the Muslim Arab army. And yet, we still do not know why these two great states went to war with one another. Most historians hold that the war began for the sake of the murdered emperor Maurice and from the Sassanid shahanshah Khusrow II's wish for revenge. In this paper, I will claim that this reading is too shallow and that the death of Maurice and the squabbles within the Byzantine Empire that followed the rise of emperor Phocas made bare it weakness to the Sassanids, who, after all other means to reshape the international setting failed, began a hegemonic war to fulfill their want for security.[2]

To think about why the war started, we first need to retell the tale that the writers of the time have given us. In 226, the founder of the Persian House of Sassan, Ardashir I (224-242), overthrew the last king of kings of the Parthian Empire, Artabanus IV. He also began a war with the neighboring Roman Empire, seemingly to retake the lands that Alexander the Great had won

from the Achaemenid Empire of old.[3] This war did not end for almost 50 years. At its end, the emperor Shapur I could boast of taking the Roman emperor Valerian captive and killing the emperor Gordian III. The ongoing crisis of the 3rd century in the Roman Empire gave the Sassanids time to bring all of the Iranian highlands and Mesopotamia under their rule. However, Armenia stayed out of their reach. As Touraj Daryaee tells us, "[t]he Armenian situation was quite complex and important for both sides, because of the strategic and economic interests, and the fact Armenia served as a buffer between Persia and Rome."[4] Things grew worse for the Sassanids when Armenia converted from Zoroastrianism to Christianity under King Tiridates IV.[5] This made the Armenians more likely to take the side of their fellow Christians – the Romans – in warfare. The squabble over Armenia would lead to even more wars for the Roman-Persian borderlands in the 4th century.[6] For a time, a bigger outside threat made the two enemies bond against it. The Eastern Roman Empire, which we might now call Byzantine, and the Sassanian Empire did not fight during the 5th century to deal with the threat of the Huns and Hephthalites, striking from west and east. Also, they set up guards along their shared border in the Caucasus.[7] Both showed restraint and did not entangle themselves in costly wars with one another, even when the raids weakened one of the two sides.

The peace ended in 502 when the shahanshah Kavad II began persecuting Christians in Persian Armenia, leading to a war with the Byzantine emperor Anastasius.[8] Three more wars

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[3] Herodian of Antioch, *History of the Roman Empire from the death of Marcus Aurelius to the accession of Gordian III,* trans. Edward C. Echols (Berkeley; Los Angeles: University of California Press, 1961), book VI, chapter 2, section 2, HathiTrust Digital Library, and Cassius Dio, *Roman History, Volume IX, Loeb Classical Library 177,* trans. Earnest Cary and Herbert B. Foster (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 1927), epitome of book LXXX, chapter 4, page 484-485, Loeb Classical Library.
[4] Touraj Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia. Rise and Fall of an Empire* (London; New York: I.B. Tauris & CO. Ltd, 2009), 8.
[5] Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*, 15.
[6] Edward Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Byzantine Empire* (Cambridge, MA: Harvard University Press, 2009), 393, http://www.jstor.org/stable/j.ctvjhzrf5.
[7] James Howard-Johnston, *East Rome, Sasanian Persia and the End of Antiquity: Historiographical and Historical Studie*s (Aldershot, England: Ashgate/Variorum, 2006), 162, HathiTrust Digital Library.
[8] Petar Mutafchiev, *Lektsii po istoriya na Vizantiya* (Sofia: Anubis, 1995), 140.

followed in 540, 573, and 590-591. Two of these three wars ended in big gains for the Sassanians, which used emperor Justinian's fight against the Vandals and Ostrogoths in North Africa and Italy to take over Iberia, Eastern Arabia, most of Armenia, and Mesopotamia.[9] But in 590, Bahram Chobin, a Persian nobleman, overthrew the emperor Khosrow II, who fled to Constantinople. The Byzantine emperor Maurice welcomed Khosrow and then helped him retake his lands. This war ended with a peace that gave Armenia back to the Byzantines.[10] The two emperors became good friends. However, Phocas, a Byzantine soldier, killed Maurice and all his sons in an uprising and became emperor in 602. War followed.

The writers of the time give us almost the same story. Al-Tabari in Arabic,[11] John Mamikonean[12] and Sebeos[13] in Armenian, and the Khuzistan chronicle[14] and Michael the Syrian[15] in Syriac all tell us that Khosrow II was either sad or angry, or both, at the news of Maurice's death. He then gathered his men, asked them to pledge to avenge Maurice, and besieged the border town of Dara. Moreover, al-Tabari, Sebeos, and the Khuzistan chronicle all share the tale that Theodosius, a son of Maurice, had reached Khosrow, who welcomed him, "crowned him, and set him up as king of the Byzantines, then sent him back with a mighty army…"[16] This unity among the writers might make us believe that the war truly began to bring about revenge for the death of

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[9] Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*, 30.

[10] Georgi Bakalov, *Vizantiya* (Sofia: Vek 22, 2000), 210.

[11] Muhammad ibn Jarir al-Tabari, *The History of al-Tabari. Volume V. The Sassanids, the Byzantines, the Lakhmids, and Yemen*, trans. Clifford E. Bosworth (New York: The State University of New York Press, 1999), 317-318, chapter 1002.

[12] John Mamikonean, *John Mamikonean's History of Tarōn*, trans. Robert Bedrosian (New York: Sources of Armenian Tradition, 1985), 11, HathiTrust Digital Library.

[13] Sebeos, *Sebēos' history*, trans. Robert Bedrosian (New York: Sources of Armenian Tradition, 1985), 81, HathiTrust Digital Library.

[14] Nasir al'Ka'bi, trans., *A Short Chronicle on the End of the Sassanian Empire and Early Islam. 590-660 A.D.* (Piscataway, NJ: Gorgias Press, 2016), 28.

[15] Michael the Syrian, *The Syriac Chronicle of Michael Rabo (the Great): a universal history from the creation*, trans. Matti Moosa (Teaneck, NJ: Beth Antioch Press, 2014), 431.

[16] Al-Tabari, *History*, 318, chapter 1002.

Maurice at the hands of Phocas and to give back the empire to Theodosius, thus paying back Khosrow's debt to the dead Maurice. However, the mournful words and seemingly fair anger of Khosrow, as well as Theodosius's good luck in getting away from Phocas's hands, were all debunked as lies just after the war by Theophylact Simocatta. This is what he wrote in his book, just before the line that started this paper: "And so Chosroes exploited the tyranny as a pretext for war… For Chosroes feigned a pretence of upholding the pious memory of the emperor Maurice".[17] The writer had already said that Phocas had, indeed, killed Theodosius along with his father: "For, after laboriously investigating the matter as far as possible, we discovered that Theodosius also shared in the slaughter. For those who profess that the boy did not die are blustering with meagre evidence…"[18] This is also the outlook of the Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium.[19] So, the Theodosius, whom Khosrow had sent to Dara with his army, was not the true son of Maurice.

Most present-day historians also seem to mistrust the Armenian, Syrian, and Persian writers.[20] Indeed, John B. Bury followed Theophylact's line of thought 130 years ago: "That the acts of Phocas were not the real cause of the war is proved by two things – by the express statement of a contemporary historian, hostile to Phocas, that Chosroes' holy plea was hypocritical, and by the fact that, some time before the death of Maurice, the Sassanid had become restless and an outbreak of war had been with difficulty avoided."[21] Bury is here talking about a fight between Maurice and Khosrow over the border in Arabia. Michael Whitby tells us in his book on Theophylact Simocatta that "Khusro considered using this as an excuse for war, but was dissuaded

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[17] Theophylact, *History,* Book VIII, chapter 15, section 7, page 234.

[18] Theophylact*, History,* Book VIII, chapter 13, section 5-6, page 231.

[19] Alexander Kazhdan, ed., *The Oxford Dictionary of Byzantium* (Oxford; New York: Oxford University Press, 1991), 2050. https://www.oxfordreference.com/view/10.1093/acref/9780195046526.001.0001/acref-9780195046526.

[20] Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity* (London: Thames and Hudson, 1971), 169; Bakalov*, Vizantiya*, 210; Mutafchiev, *Lektsii*, 281; Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*, 33.

[21] John Bury, *A History of the Later Roman Empire: From Arcadius to Irene, vol. II* (395 A.D. to 800 A.D.) (London: Macmillan and Co., 1889), 198, HathiTrust Digital Library.

by dissension in Persia and by the Roman ambassador George".[22] If Khosrow and Maurice were such good friends, why would Khosrow go to war over a small border misunderstanding with the Byzantine general Narses, who held sway over the border and the Arab Ghassanid puppet kings? Also, if Khosrow's goal was to kill Phocas in revenge for Maurice, why then did he not stop the war and make peace with Heraclius, who in 610 lopped off Phocas's head and became emperor? Beate Dignas says that, after the death of Phocas, "Xusrō II's activities … indicate that the Sasanian ruler was not interested in a settlement."[23]

Why then did Khosrow forgo all diplomatic talks with Phocas, but went to war quickly after the death of Maurice? Historians clash in the reasons they put forward to try and untangle the start of this war. Peter Brown blames it on the change in the international setting, after the Sassanians lost Central Asia to the Hephthalites: "Khusro I unwittingly destroyed the balance of the Persian empire. He had tacitly abandoned Iran and Central Asia for Mesopotamia. Deprived of the former horizons, the Sassanian shahs of the late sixth and early seventh century were forced against Byzantium… for the hegemony of the Near East".[24] Edward Luttwak highlights the spread of Zoroastrianism as one of Khosrow's main goals in the war: "Finally, it was also the proclaimed aim of Khusrau to propagate the ancient Zoroastrian religion of Persia and Iran, the dualist cult of Ahura Mazda, "God of Light and Goodness," which had once been the closest competitor to Christianity within the Roman empire as the old pagan cults were fading."[25] Clive Foss links the beginning of the war with the uprising of Narses in Mesopotamia: "The war began soon after the accession of Focas in 602, when the Roman commander in Mesopotamia revolted. The Sassanian

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[22] Michael Whitby, *The Emperor Maurice and his Historian: Theophylact Simocatta on Persian and Balkan Warfare* (Oxford: Clarendon Press; New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 305, HathiTrust Digital Library.

[23] Beate Dignas and Engelbert Winter, *Rome and Persia in Late Antiquity: Neighbours and Rivals* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2007), 116, https://doi-org.ezproxy.princeton.edu/10.1017/CBO9780511619182.

[24] Peter Brown, *The World of Late Antiquity*, 168.

[25] Luttwak, *Grand Strategy of The Byzantine Empire*, 394.

king, Chosroes II, accepted the invitation".[26] Warren Treadgold seems to share this outlook: "Ignoring Phocas's efforts to make his usurpation seem less revolutionary, neither the Persian king Khusrau II nor the eastern commander Narses recognized the new emperor… Narses gathered his forces in Edessa and appealed to Khusrau to join him".[27]

However, all these reasons are not at all useful. Jeffry Frieden underscores the need to distinguish between the *preferences* and *strategies* of the "relevant social actors", and the *context* of the strategic setting.[28] So far, these historians have given us knowledge about the *context* of the war, but not about the *preferences* or *strategies* of the Sassanids and Byzantines. Without them, we cannot know Khosrow's goals and so also the reason for the war. Theophylact Simocatta already debunked the tale of Khosrow's fight for revenge. To understand the goals of the Sassanid Empire, we need to go back to the first centuries of warfare among the Romans and Sassanids. Ardashir's wishes for a rebirth of the Achaemenid Empire under his rule were unfulfillable, given the bigger armies and wealth that the Romans had, even during the Crisis of the 3rd century. Why then would Ardashir set such a goal for the scions of his house? Touraj Daryaee believes Ardashir went to war "due to the fact that the stable borders between the two empires of Rome and Parthia had previously been Oshroene, Hatra, and Armenia, but [emperor Septimius] Severus had conquered Oshroene which put the heartland of the Arsacid and later Sassanian dynasty in danger".[29] Indeed, it seems that the goal of the Sassanids was to not feel the heartland of their empire "in danger", or, to put it in another way, their goal was what realists call "security" within a self-help, anarchic international

[26] Clive Foss, "The Persians in Asia Minor and the End of Antiquity," The English Historical Review 90 (October 1975): 722, https://www.jstor.org/stable/567292.

[27] Warren Treadgold, *A history of the Byzantine state and society* (Stanford: Stanford University Press, 1997), 237-238, https://hdl-handle-net.ezproxy.princeton.edu/2027/heb.02871.

[28] Jeffry Frieden, "Actors and Preferences in International Relations," in *Strategic Choice and International Relations*, ed. David A. Lake and Robert Powell (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 1999), 39-76, https://j.mp/2nyqJU8. Author's italics.

[29] Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*, 8.

system.[30] The world of the Classical Near East was fully bipolar[31] after Rome and the Parthian Empire took over the lands that were under the rule of the Seleucid Empire in the 2nd and 1st century B.C. This meant that it was a self-help world, as there was no way to get help if put under threat by the other side. The only way for the Sassanid Empire to feel secure in such a world was to have more power than the Byzantines on the grounds that "states look to their comparative power positions because of the "security dilemma," born of a condition of anarchy, that confronts them."[32] Therefore, Ardashir was not fighting for the lands of the former Achaemenid Empire only to make his empire bigger, but to rebuild the unipolarity and security that the Achaemenids had boasted of. Now, after we have found that the goal of the Sassanids was security, we need to understand how that goal shaped the *context* for the war.

The Roman Empire was, for the longest time, the one that tried to use "hegemonic expansion" and later "preclusive defense" to check outside threats.[33] For 250 years before the rise of Ardashir, the Romans had tried to crush the Parthian Empire. This made the Sassanids balance against the Romans, wherever they could. An example of internal balancing[34] were the changes in the weaponry of the troops, the government, and taxation that Khosrow I began in the middle of the 6th century.[35] We can see "external" balancing along the border between the two empires, running from the Caucasus to Arabia, where they backed puppet kings against one another – the Ghassanids and Lakhmids in Northern Arabia and the kingdoms of Axum and Himyar in the Horn

[30] Kenneth Waltz, *Man, the State, and War* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2018), 201 and 216, EBSCO Connect.

[31] For discussion of bipolar and multipolar international systems and their characteristics, see Raymond Aron, *Peace and War: A Theory of International Relations*, trans. Richard Howard and Annette Baker Fox (Garden City, N.Y.: Doubleday & Co., 1966), 125-149, Blackboard.

[32] Waltz, *Man, the State, and War*, 37.

[33] Edward Luttwak, *The Grand Strategy of the Roman Empire from the First Century A.D. to the Third* (Baltimore: John Hopkins University Press, 1976), 74-75.

[34] For a thorough discussion of external and internal balancing, see Kenneth Waltz, *Theory of International Politics* (Reading, MA: Addison-Wesley Pub. Co., 1979), 168, HathiTrust Digital Library.

[35] Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*, 28-30.

of Africa and Yemen. A "balance of power"[36] set in with the start of the 5th century. As the Roman Empire split in two in 395 and as the Western Empire fell in 476, the troops and wealth of the Romans were halved. The Sassanids then took more and more lands from the Byzantines. By 570, the Sassanids had gained a fairly secure setting. Armenia was in their hands. In Southern Arabia, "[t]he Abyssinian dynasty, established with Byzantine help, was overthrown under Persian pressure and replaced by a pro-Iranian ruler. For the remaining 50 years until the conquest of the Himyarite kingdom by the by the Arabs, Persian influence dominated in Yemen".[37]

And then, the uprisings of the Armenians[38] and Bahram Chobin led to the overthrow of Khosrow II. When Maurice helped Khosrow retake his lands, it was for a fee. The Persians lost Armenia once again in the peace of 591, as well as border towns in Mesopotamia. Also, the Lakhmids, the Sassanids' puppet rulers in Arabia, converted to Christianity. As Michael Whitby writes, "[t]he Persians clearly had more reason than the Romans to be discontented about the peace settlement, since what appeared to the Romans as a moderate agreement, involving the return of Roman property and the surrender of areas that had already rejected Persian control, was a serious blow to the prestige of the Persian king: the size of his empire had contracted, a slight to his dignity".[39] This was not only a slight to Khosrow's dignity, but also Persia's security. This may be why Maurice tried to "defuse potentially disruptive issues", such as the Arab border squabble and "the allegiance of the Armenian nobility, and [Maurice] even proposed the wholesale removal of this troublesome people from the border area."[40] Therefore, Khosrow II was itching to rebuild the

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[36] The meaning of the term balance of power denotes the policy of the achievement and preservation of a power equilibrium between the Sassanid and Byzantine Empires through balancing activities. For a thorough discussion of the term, please see Inis Claude, *Power and International Relations* (New York: Random House, 1962), 17-18, HathiTrust Digital Library.

[37] Bakalov, *Vizantiya*, 208. Author's translation.

[38] Sebeos, *History*, 77-78.

[39] Whitby, *The Emperor Maurice*, 306.

[40] Whitby, *The Emperor Maurice*, 306.

security of the Sassanids. To do this, Khosrow II "consolidated his power around the Persian Gulf and sent envoys to Arabia, as far as Mecca, to inquire about the situation. The last king of al-Hira, al-Nu'man III ibn al-Mundir, was killed and the Lakhmid state put under other Persian loyalists in 602."[41] He also crushed the uprisings of Bahram Chobin and later of Vistahm.[42] So, the *context* was one of a rising Persia, trying to strengthen its hold over the border with the Byzantines in Arabia, Mesopotamia, and Armenia, the latter of which was still out of Khosrow II's reach.

Now that we know the goals of the Sassanids and the *context* of the international setting, we can see what the *preferences* and *strategies* of the Sassanids were. Most historians seem to fall into one of two ends in the game-theoretical range. On the one hand, historians of culture and trade see a positive-sum game, where both empires were better off with one another than without one another.[43] On the other hand, historians of warfare and international relations see the wars between the two empires as an embodiment of a zero-sum game: "[T]he game itself had become destabilising, with the gains unevenly distributed geographically, the Romans making significant advances in Transcaucasia while the Sasanians acquired a decisive advantage in Arabia. Worse still, the growing determination of both sides to extract every ounce of advantage from each other's entanglements in other spheres… showed that they were prepared to disregard the partnership which both had implicitly acknowledged".[44] However, Thomas Schelling has shown that "the only thing that could make war appear zero-sum would be a *belief* [his own italics] that war were zero-sum".[45] War for the Sassanid Empire against the Byzantines was not an end in itself. It was only a

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[41] Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*, 33.

[42] Whitby, *The Emperor Maurice,* 306.

[43] For a positive-sum discussion of Byzantine-Sassanian relations, see Matthew P Canepa, *The Two Eyes of the Earth: Art and Ritual of Kingship between Rome and Sasanian Iran* (Berkeley: University of California Press, 2009). https://hdl-handle-net.ezproxy.princeton.edu/2027/heb.07949.

[44] Howard-Johnston, *East Rome, Sassanian Persia*, 164.

[45] Thomas C. Schelling, "The Strategy of Inflicting Costs," in *Issues in Defense Economics*, ed. Roland N. McKean (New York: National Bureau of Economic Research, 1967), 113, http://www.nber.org/books/mcke67-1.

mean to change the setting to their liking. This could be done only by taking lands and wealth from the Byzantines. Indeed, the Caucasus and Arabia bounded all wars between the two to the Armenian and Anatolian highlands, Mesopotamia, and Syria. Syria's big trade harbors and towns, such as Antioch, could feed the Persians. Its trade hubs could make the Sassanid Empire even wealthier than it already was. This is why the Byzantines and Sassanids fought in and over these lands. As Schelling writes, "[t]he idea that we have some interest in an adversary's domestic economy and that that interest is not simply opposite to his interest and measurable in the same currency as our military interests, is only one among many reasons – and surely not the most important reason – why military relations are nonzero-sum both in peace and in war."[46] Since the belief that war is a positive-sum game is laughable, we have to understand that war is a nonzero-sum game and that it is most often a negative-sum game, given that both sides lose men and wealth.

Why then would the Sassanids willingly choose warfare, if they knew that they would, needless to say, lose at least some men and wealth? The Sassanids did not seek to bring about the end of the Byzantine Empire. Their first *preference* was to get security within this bipolar setting. James Howard-Johnston calls the three wars of the 6th century that followed the Anastasian War (502-506) "[t]hree more acts of aggression (those of Khusro I in 540, Justin II in 573 and Khusro II in 603), each intended to bring about a strategically significant shift in the balance of power without upsetting, let alone destroying the established binary system of government…"[47] The Persians wanted to take Armenia and some towns in Syria and Mesopotamia to achieve a "shift in the balance of power" that kept the bipolar setting and also made the Sassanids feel secure. This is not odd, if we recall the writers who see the game between the Sassanids and Byzantines as a

[46] Schelling, "Strategy of Inflicting Costs," 106.
[47] Howard-Johnston, *East Rome, Sasanian Persia*, 163-164.

positive-sum game. Both empires gained from trade with and freedom of movement between each other. So, the Sassanids would have *preferred* to get security within this setting. But if that was not doable, then they would go for the next *preferred* outcome – to fight to become secure, even if it meant the end of the bipolar setting and the Byzantine Empire. But what this means for the *strategies* that the Sassanids could choose?

In his work "Anarchy," Skaperdas has shown that "both sides [in an anarchic setting] would have an incentive to agree on the division of the total pie in accordance with the winning probabilities."[48] Not warfare, but a settlement would have to be the chosen *strategy* in a squabble. Then, why would the Sassanid Empire start a war with the Byzantines? Well, Skaperdas writes that, "by pursuing war now, one party could weaken its adversaries permanently or even possibly eliminate them and take control well into the future. Therefore, a party that values the future highly could indeed take the chance of war instead of pursuing negotiation and compromise, despite the short-term benefits of compromise, because the expected long-run profits could be higher in case the opponents become permanently weakened or eliminated."[49] So far, we know that the goal of the Sassanid Empire was security, that the *context* of the time was one of external and internal balancing by the Sassanids against the Byzantines, and that their *preferred* outcome would be to get security within the bipolar setting of the Middle East in the 7th century. And it seems that war between the two empires could only start as the "future becomes more important." So, Khosrow II would not have gone to war, unless he deemed that, after the war, the goal of the empire would be reached and that war were the only choice he had to bring security to his empire. This means that

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[48] Stergios Skaperdas, "Anarchy: prepared for the inclusion in the Oxford Handbook of Political Economy," ed. Barry Weingast and Donald Wittman, revised September 7, 2004, https://www.economics.uci.edu/files/docs/workingpapers/2004-05/Skaperdas-09.pdf, 7.
[49] Skaperdas, "Anarchy," 10-11

the *strategies* for the Sassanid Empire in this anarchic setting were a peaceful settlement or, if that fell through, war.

If Skaperdas is right that kings go for a peaceful settlement before beginning a war, then, in line with their first *preference*, the Sassanids would first try the *strategy* of a peaceful settlement. This could have happened in one of two ways – if the Byzantine Empire gave away lands and wealth to the Sassanids to the point that the two empires were evenly matched or if they soothed the Sassanians' worries over security. But until the Armenian highlands were in Roman hands, the Sassanids would never feel secure, as without these lands they could not keep the heartland of their empire safe. The needlessly harsh settlement of 591 angered the Persians and doomed any settlement thereafter.[50] Moreover, even if Maurice did go through with his plan to resettle all Armenians, it is not likely that this would have been enough. Yielding lands in Armenia to the Sassanids would have been unthinkable, as it was also a gateway into Anatolia. Giving away other lands, such as Syria, would only make the Byzantines uneasy and maybe lead to Maurice's death even earlier. The wealth of Syria and its closeness to Egypt, the breadbasket of the Empire, were key to Byzantine troop movements and the feeding of Constantinople. So, no emperor could give these lands away, even for lasting peace. Even more so, the Byzantines could not trust the Sassanids to stop at Syria or Armenia after centuries of war. It seems that a deal that would both soothe the Persians and not upset the Byzantine Empire's pride, grain shipments, or wealth was hard to strike.

As we showed the lack of a good, long-term settlement between the Byzantines and Sassanids, we can now talk about the next *strategy* of the Sassanian Empire. Keeping in mind the goal of the Sassanids – security – the context before the war, and their *preferences*, we can guess

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[50] Whiby, *The Emperor Maurice*, 306

that, if the lands needed for Sassanid security could not be taken in peace and if the Byzantines could not soothe the Sassanid's worries, war became the only other *strategy*. But what was their best bet to bring about meaningful change to the international setting – to start many small wars or just one big war? In a small war, the losses that the Sassanids would undergo, if it did not go well, would also be small. And so, all the wars of the 6th century were small and more or less short. But the gains of these small wars came undone in the settlement of 591. The Byzantines wiped out 3 centuries of small gains for the Sassanids in 1 year. This brought forth an "[i]nflexible bipolar configuration" and left only one mean to bring security to the Sassanids – what Robert Gilpin called "hegemonic war": "[T]he rising state, as its power increases, will seek to change the status quo."[51] While both empires had held sway over Syria, Mesopotamia, and the Iranian highlands for more than 4 centuries, the Sassanids were the "rising state," largely so after the setback of 591, which left them weaker than they were before. For the next 10 years, both empires tried to "generate new resources".[52] Khosrow II put down the uprisings inside his empire, strengthened his grip over Arabia by taking down the untrustworthy Lakhmids, and sending men to Mecca to gain allies and mercenaries.[53] Maurice's thriftiness led to the uprising of Phocas. So, both empires seemed to get ready for a hegemonic war. This is maybe why Khosrow II was longing to start a war in the Arabia before Maurice's death. This also tells us why he did not stop the war when Heraclius killed Phocas in 610: "He now wanted to beat his great Western opponent into complete submission".[54] Khosrow held the upper hand in the war. He then ended the old bipolarity and trumpeted the start of a new

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[51] Robert Gilpin, *War and Change in World Politics* (New York: Cambridge University Press, 1981), 187, Blackboard.
[52] Gilpin, *War and Change*, 188.
[53] Daryaee, *Sasanian Persia*, 33.
[54] Dignas and Winter, *Rome and Persia*, 116.

time – that of Sassanid hegemony: "The final breakdown came with Khusro II's public disavowal of the old order in 615-616 and his decision to liquidate the Roman empire".[55]

All the old writers tell us that it was a "total" war that was waged from Armenia to Arabia, bringing in other kings – the Armenians, Ghassanids, Turks, Avars, Slavs, and Arabs. We can see this in the Siege of Constantinople in 626 and the last Byzantine attack on Mesopotamia in 627-8. Byzantines and Persians fought in Egypt, Palestine, and Asia Minor, lands that had not seen fighting until then. It was a "world war" for the 7th century and it lasted for 26 years. This was a hegemonic war that would either end with Persian or Byzantine hegemony, the last *strategy* of the Sassanids, but the only one that they could use. The *strategy* of Khosrow II was to win security and sway over the international setting in one war, as bloody as it might get. It was an all-or-nothing gamble. Lastly, we need to understand why the war started in 602 and not in 600. Gilpin writes that a hegemonic war will begin "as the perceived potential benefits begin to exceed the perceived costs of undertaking a change in the system".[56] Moreover, he says that "the intensification of conflicts among states is a consequence of the "closing in" of space and opportunities".[57] So, Khosrow II had to see himself as stronger than the Byzantines and worry that, if he did not go to war now, he would lose any "advantage" he had over the Byzantines.[58] The rise of Phocas was not smooth. Unrest gripped Constantinople, with rising clashes between the Greens, who broke with Phocas after helping him in the uprising against Maurice, and the Blues, who now "partially put themselves in the service of his regime of terror", almost leading to a civil war.[59] Moreover, as written by Warren Treadgold, "the Persians, the Slavs, and later the Avars harmed the empire's economy…

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[55] Howard-Johnston, *East Rome, Sasanian Persia,* 164.
[56] Gilpin, *War and Change*, 187.
[57] Gilpin, *War and Change*, 200.
[58] Gilpin, *War and Change*, 201.
[59] Georgije Ostrogorski, *Geschichte des byzantinischen Staates* (Munich: C.H. Beck' sche Verlagsbuchhandlung, 1952), 70, HathiTrust Digital Library. My own translation.

Though all three seemed well under control by 602, the economic damage they had occasioned was nonetheless real, and contributed to the political crisis that began in that year."[60]

It is only here that we can bring in the uprising of Narses and the death of Maurice and how they shaped Khosrow II's choice to go to war against the Byzantine Empire. As Khosrow II learned that Maurice was dead and that Narses had begun an uprising, he would have also gotten the news of the strife in Constantinople. He would also have been aware of the weakness of the Byzantine economy. Narses was not just asking for help. He gave Khosrow the keys to the border towns that he held since the last war. Not going to war against the Byzantines now would give Phocas time to rebuild his armies and smother Narses's uprising, thus making it harder for the Sassanids to use the last *strategy* that they could use to change the international setting and bring security to the heartlands of their empire. The more Phocas was able to deal with his foes inside the empire, the harder a later attack through the border would become. This was the best time for Khosrow II to attack Armenia and Syria and gain these lands and the security that hegemony would give to the Sassanid Empire. A hegemonic war would ensure a lasting change of the international setting and so lasting security for Khosrow II. As Skaperdas wrote, "both the intensity of conflict and the choice of overt conflict over negotiation becomes more common … as the future becomes more important".[61] This war would settle the "future" of the Middle East. But the changes that this war brought were not what Khosrow had expected. He was not wrong in his belief that the Byzantines were weak: "[T]he extent of the empire's collapse after 602 seems disproportionate, and shows Byzantium's weakness more than its enemies' strength".[62] The Jews of Palestine welcomed and

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[60] Treadgold, *A history of the Byzantine State*, 275.
[61] Skaperdas, "Anarchy," 10-11.
[62] Treadgold, *A History of the Byzantine State*, 275.

helped the Sassanids, angry at the Constantinople-led conversions.[63] In 608, Heraclius the Elder rose up against Phocas in Carthage. By 610, his son, Heraclius, had become emperor. In 626, Constantinople nearly fell to a united attack by Avars, Slavs, and Persians. But the walls held and 2 years later, after Heraclius's stunning attack on Mesopotamia, Khosrow II was killed, bringing the war to an end. But, as Gilpin warned, "[s]tates directly engaged in hegemonic conflict, by weakening themselves, frequently actually eliminate obstacles to conquest by a peripheral power".[64] The war crippled both empires. 8 years later, in 636, the Arab Rashidun Caliphate won against both the Byzantines at Yarmouk and the Sassanids at al-Qadisiyyah. Soon, the Sassanian Empire came to an end under the blows of the Arabs. The Romans barely held on to Constantinople and the Balkans, stopping the Arabs at the gates of Constantinople in 717. But the bipolar world of Sassanian Iran and the Byzantine Empire, which had lasted for 4 centuries, was gone forever.

In the end, the Sassanids had tried to fulfill their goal of security for 4 centuries by many means, including settlements and warfare. When these means fell short of the goal, Khosrow II made the choice to begin a hegemonic war, which was last on their order of *preferences*, as it was the only *strategy* in the historical *setting* that could bring about the fulfillment of the Sassanid goal of security. This hegemonic war began in 602, when the death of Maurice, the weakness of the Byzantine economy, the clashes between the Greens and Blues in Constantinople, and the uprising of Narses led Khosrow II to believe that he would hold the upper hand in an all-out war against Byzantium, that this was the best time for Khosrow to begin such a war, and that he would easily win against Phocas, achieving the security his empire had sought through a lasting change in the international setting.

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[63] Bakalov, *Vizantiya*, 210.
[64] Gilpin, *War and Change*, 203.

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