HOLISTIC CONSTRUCTIVISM: A THEORETICAL APPROACH TO UNDERSTAND IRAN’S FOREIGN POLICY

Mahdi MOHAMMAD NIA*

Abstract

The “Holistic Constructivist Approach” is a proper analytical framework for explaining Iranian foreign policy since the 1979 Islamic revolution. Contrary to Systemic and Domestic Constructivism, Holistic Constructivism examines the effects of both domestic and systemic normative environments on states’ foreign policy. The article argues that the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran is driven by revolutionary values and ideological perspectives at the domestic level and confrontational or non-confrontational normative environment at the systemic level. In order to understand Iranian foreign policy behavior, one should try to understand the basic characteristics of the country’s normative and discursive structures on the one hand, and the nature of international normative environment on the other hand. To this end, the article applies Holistic Constructivism as the most applicable theory for explaining the country’s foreign policy behavior. This approach helps us to understand why Iranian foreign policy towards the Western countries in general and the United States in particular, even when under systemic pressure, has remained relatively unchanged.

Key Words

Constructivism, holistic constructivism, identity, social discourses, foreign policy.

Introduction

Iran’s strategic position at the crossroads of the Middle East, the Persian Gulf and Central Asia has made the state an important actor in the regional equations. Hence, understanding Iranian foreign policy is so important to craft an appropriate policy towards the country.

It is important to mention that this article speaks about the “prevailing trend” in Iranian foreign policy and argues that since the 1979

*The author holds a PhD. In Defense and Strategic Studies from the University of Pune-India, soosoo1452@yahoo.com; mahdi.mnia@yahoo.com.
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Islamic Revolution, the prevailing trend in Iran’s foreign policy has been based more on revolutionary values and ideological perspectives than the logic of nation-states. Although in some rare cases which directly relate to Iran's territorial integrity, the foreign policy results may appear to be less ideological.¹

To this end, this article identifies the determinant factors affecting Iranian foreign policy since the 1979 Islamic revolution.

The country's foreign policy, because of its normative and ideological dimensions, is a complicated thing to understand. There are interesting debates among the political scholars about the application of constructivist and rationalist paradigms to explain Iranian foreign policy.

This article argues that the existing constructivist approaches to Iranian foreign policy are not able to properly explain the country’s foreign policy behavior, because such literature only has paid attention to the domestic normative structures and ignored the effect of the systemic normative environment on Iranian foreign policy. Also, the existing rationalist approaches relating to Iranian foreign policy fail to provide a complete explanation of the state’s foreign policy. Due to material nature of rationalist theories, they ignored the ideological/normative dynamics in the domestic sphere, and argue that Iranian foreign policy has been subject to

¹For example Iran’s reaction of its policy toward the Caucasus. Despite a large Shiite majority in Azerbaijan, Iran ignored its religious affinity and continued its close relations with Armenia. Iran has some anxieties about territorial integrity in its northwest corner and worries over rising ethnic-based conflict in its own Azerbaijani community. Hence, Iran fears that “support for Azerbaijan against Armenia would elicit a call for unification between the two ‘divided’ Azerbaijani that had been separated by the Persian and Ottoman Empires since the nineteenth century”. Abulfazl Elchibey, former President of Azerbaijan, openly declared his government’s ambition for unification with “Southern Azerbaijan” which resulted in Iran’s fears of rising secessionist movements and ethnic-based conflict in its northwest territory. Geoffrey Gresh, “Coddling the Caucasus: Iran’s Strategic Relationship with Azerbaijan and Armenia”, Caucasian Review of International Affairs, Vol.1, No. 1 (2006) p. 3.
structural pressure, the constraining impact of international anarchy and the systemic distribution of power.²

For two reasons, the Holistic Constructivist approach can explain Iranian foreign policy:

1. This approach links the two levels of analysis: domestic and systemic normative environment and considers them to be two determinant factors affecting states’ foreign policy.

2. This approach does not ignore the material and non-normative factors of states’ foreign policy, but argues that material structures are context-oriented and should be interpreted within the normative structures.

In fact, rationalist approaches are based on two key assumptions which prevent one from considering rationalism as a basis for Iranian foreign policy:

a) Emphasizing the impact of systemic pressures on the foreign policy of states,

b) Concentrating on self-oriented materialistic structures.

In the post-revolution era, two important political transformations occurred on the international scene:

a) The collapse of the Soviet Union in 1990 and the change in the structure of the international system from the bipolar to the multipolar system,

b) The 9/11 attacks and its effect on the systemic distribution of power (intensifying the U.S. hegemony in world politics).

Neither of these two important events had considerable effect on Iranian foreign policy objectives. In fact, despite such international transformations, we have witnessed a kind of relative stability in the Islamic Republic’s foreign policy objectives. Since the Islamic revolution, the ‘strategies’ of Iranian foreign policy have enjoyed relative stability. So that neither the Clinton administration policy- known as ‘dual containment’- nor the Bush administration policy- known as the ‘axis of evil’- were not useful to change or adjust previously held Iranian policy. This stability refers to the durability of domestic ideational structures as the substantial elements of Iran’s foreign policy. In fact, change in the ideational structures is very rare and takes too long to occur. Although the levels of ‘tactics’, Iran's foreign policy has undergone some considerable changes in proportion to environmental feedback. Under systemic pressure, the Islamic Republic of Iran was forced to reconsider and adjust its more radical policies, such as redefining the export of revolution, embracing the coalition or alliance policy instead of an already exclusion policy based upon neither East nor West. In this regard, since the collapse of the Soviet Union, Iran has been trying to create strategic partnerships with U.S. rivals, particularly Russia and China, in order to advance its confrontational foreign and security policy towards the West.³

Nevertheless, no considerable change at the levels of ‘strategy’ has occurred. The major strategies of foreign policy such as ‘Counter-Hegemonism’, ‘Residence’, ‘justice-seeking’, ‘Anti-Arrogance Campaign’, ‘Anti- American’ and ‘Anti- Israel’ remain, even though the systemic pressures have remained relatively unchanged. This means that changes at the levels of strategy are very few and happen with great and exact considerations.

From the rationalist point of view, revolutionary states do not pursue any different goals than that of ordinary countries and Iran is a revolutionary country. Revolutions have their own styles and methods that do not

necessarily follow conventional norms and expected behavior in international relations. In spite of the revolutionary features, the ideological and Islamic nature of the 1979 Iranian revolution distinguishes it from other revolutions and movements throughout the world.

Thus, one of the main impediments of the Islamic Republic of Iran’s foreign policy in the post-revolution era has been the continuing persistence of its revolutionary and ideological nature. Thus, the trends in the foreign policy of revolutionary Iran during the last three decades reflect the dominance of ideological interests to national ones.

Hence, rationalist approaches assume that states are security-maximizer (neorealism, defensive realism), power-maximizer (offensive realism), influence-maximizer (neoclassical realism) or absolute gain-seeker (neoliberalism) but, are not sufficient to properly explain Iranian foreign and security behavior.

Generally, rationalists view states as unitary rational actors which pursue a rational choice perspective in foreign policy. From the rationalist perspective, the foreign policies of states considered to be the result of cost-benefit and means-ends analysis aiming at maximizing security and power in international relations.

Rationalists make motivational assumptions that since states are power-seeking, security-seeking, or influence-seeking actors, they have been to egoistic and self-regarding actors (vs. other-regarding) which are trying to “maximize” (offensive realism) or “guarantee” (defensive realism) their situations in the international relations. As Kenneth Waltz- a leading neorealist scholar argues, in an anarchical world, self-help is the principle of action and the most significant way to attain security.  

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5 Ibid.
In the rationalist account, “the reason for states to have selfish identities and interests is a structural requirement and they are imposed on states by the structure and thus exogenous to state interaction”. From this perspective, in an anarchic system, units are functionally undifferentiated and exhibit similar behavior because anarchy imposes on actors particular rules, which force them to behave similarly. According to these rules, the foreign policy of states is subordinated to change in the international distribution of power. Hence, they ignore the effect of domestic variables in determining the foreign policy priorities of states.

Rationalist theories just consider the Islamic Republic of Iran to be objective-oriented and self-interested so as to solely pursue selfish and materialistic interests, whereas Iranian foreign behavior is more guided by ideational and normative structures than material ones. Although the importance of martial structures in the country's foreign policy is not denied, but- based on constructivist assumptions- material structures are given meaning only by the social and normative context in which they are interpreted. In fact, social facts are dependent on shared understandings and hence on meanings, discourse and language which in turn allow for an interpretation of material fact.

Hence, to understand Iranian foreign behavior, one should try to understand the ideological and normative characteristics of the country’s foreign policy on the one hand, and international normative structures on the other hand. On this basis, the most applicable approach is to keep one’s distance from the rationalist theories and apply holistic constructivism as a most applicable approach to analyze Iran's foreign policy behavior.

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Constructivism and State Identity: Toward the Norm-Driven Behavior

Constructivism provides productive intellectual space for researchers interested in describing the normative factors in a discipline heretofore dominated by materialist-oriented approaches.11

Emanuel Adler, a leading constructivist scholar, defines constructivism as “the view that the manner in which the material world shapes and is shaped by human action and interaction depends on dynamic normative and epistemic interpretations of the material world”.12

Constructivists consider identities to be the basis of interests and argue that the interests of states are motivated by their particular identities. Identities determine the preferences of states and prescribe the specific national role and appropriate behavior for them in relation to other actors.

In reality, the controversy between social constructivism and rationalism has become one of the most important recent debates in the field of international relations theory. This debate mostly concentrates on the distinctions between the “logic of consequentialism” represented by rational choice approaches and the “logic of appropriateness” theorized by social constructivism.13 The “logic of consequentialism” is the realm of rationalist approaches that treat the interests and priorities of actors as mainly pre-determined during the social interaction. Rationalist theories concentrate on strategic interactions in which the participation of actors is on the basis of their given identities and interests, attempting to attain their preferences via

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strategic behavior. It “is the realm of instrumental rationality whereby the goal of action is to maximize or optimize one’s own interests and preferences.”\textsuperscript{14} Elster Jon explains that “rational choice is instrumental: it is guided by the outcome of action. Actions are valued and chosen not for themselves, but as more or less efficient means to a further end”.\textsuperscript{15}

Therefore, constructivist explanation of state behavior is based on different assumptions: the “logic of appropriateness”. It means that “[h]uman actors are imagined to follow rules that associate particular identities to particular situations”.\textsuperscript{16} In fact, “the logic of appropriateness” implies rule-guided behavior in which states try to “do the right thing” rather than maximizing or optimizing their given preferences as the main basis of the “logic of consequentialism”. Hence, “normative rationality implies constitutive effects of social norms and institutions, since these rules not only regulate behavior, that is, they have causal effects, but also define social identities (‘good people do X’). This is where the ‘value added’ of constructivism comes in”.\textsuperscript{17}

One of the main contributions of constructivist literature is to problematize the question of state identity and interests. Constructivists do not treat state identity and interests as a pre-given and fixed variable; instead, they claim that the identity (self-perception) of a state is the major source of interest formation of that state. As Alexander Wendt, as a leading constructivist scholar, believes, “[i]dentities are the basis of interests”.\textsuperscript{18} According to constructivists, understanding how actors’ identities are conditioned by non-material structures is very important, because, identities first create interests then determines behaviors. To describe interest-making, they concentrate on the social identities of states.\textsuperscript{19}

\textsuperscript{14}Ibid, p.3.
\textsuperscript{17}Risse, \textit{Let’s Argue}, pp. 4-5.
\textsuperscript{18}Wendt, \textit{Social Theory of International Politics}, p. 398.
According to constructivist assumptions, interest is determined by state identity which depends on historical, cultural, political and social backgrounds. Contrary to realists, who argue that material structures like a balance of military power have a causal effect on states’ behavior, constructivists claim that “systems of shared idea, beliefs and values also have structural characteristics and that they exert a powerful influence on social and political action”.

From this perspective, “ideas” have structural features. Ideas are understood to be intersubjective meanings which are the medium and propellant of social behavior. Constructivists contend that “what actors do in international relations; the interests they hold, and the structures within which they operate are defined by social norms and ideas, rather than by objective or material conditions”. They consider how ideational structures determine the ways that actors redefine themselves.

According to Jeffrey W. Legro, norms are “collective understandings of the proper behavior of actors”. Finnemore and Sikkink specify that a norm is “a standard of appropriate behavior for actors with a given identity”. Norms guide general approaches to policymaking in certain areas, stipulate the goals and methods of regulatory approaches and suggest appropriate policy instruments to achieve goals. These norms (collective expectations about proper behavior for a given identity) tell actors who they are, what their goal is and what role they should play. As Nicholas Onuf

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20 Ibid.
21 Intersubjective meanings considered as collective knowledge “that is shared by all who are competent to engage in or recognize the appropriate performance of a social practice or range of practices.” Seeira Cohen, “Structuralism Theory and Social Practice” in Anthony Giddens and Jonathan Turner, Social Theory Today, Stanford, Stanford University Press, 1987, p. 287.
argues, ideational structures are both regulative (tell us what is cognitively permissible) and constitutive (tell us what is possible).27

From the constructivist perspective, material structures are context-oriented, which means that “material resources only acquire meaning for human action through the structure of shared knowledge in which they are embedded”.28 This principle claims that material forces are important only to the extent that they are constituted with a particular meaning.29

Of course, Alexander Wendt does not disagree with rationalist assumptions; rather, he argues that material capabilities should be understood within the context of ideational and social structures. By unpacking state identity and interests, constructivist approaches pose a powerful description of why different states behave differently under the same systemic constraint.

**Variants of Constructivism**

Constructivism is divided into three major branches: 1) Systemic Constructivism 2) Unit-level Constructivism and 3) Holistic Constructivism.

**I. Systemic Constructivism**

Systemic Constructivism accepts the neorealist penchant for systemic theory- a “third image” perspective- and believes that constructivism can describe a systemic analysis of transformations in international relations.30 Systemic constructivism focuses solely on the ideational and normative structure of the international environment and ignores changes at the domestic political realm. Wendt’s theory of constructivism introduced the best example of systemic constructivism.31 He draws a distinction between two kinds of identities: “social identities” and “corporate identities” of states.

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27For more information, see Onuf, *A World of our Making.*
28Wendt, *Social Theory of International Politics,* p. 73.
30Adler, “Seizing the Middle Ground: Constructivism in World Politics”, p. 342.
Social identity referring to “the meaning an actor attributes to itself while taking the perspective of others” and cooperate identity refers to the internal human, material, ideological, or cultural characteristics that make a state what it is.\(^{32}\) He emphasizes social identity which affects states' behavior in foreign policy during the social interactions between unitary actors.

II. Unit-level Constructivism

Unlike the systemic constructivism, unit-level constructivism focuses only on “the relationship between domestic social and legal norms”, the very factor bracketed by Wendt.\(^{33}\) Unit-level constructivism stresses the possibility of domestic changes in the ‘alter’ and ‘ego’ and the effect of these changes on cooperative or competitive relations with each other. According to this approach, the socialization process internal to a state can transform the identity and interests of actors independently of such interaction at the international level.\(^{34}\)

III. Holistic Constructivism

Holistic constructivism is a theory of identity at both the domestic and international levels. It leads to expectations about how dissimilar states will respond to international pressures. Holistic constructivism has challenged this dichotomy between the systemic and the domestic structures, by trying to bridge the two approaches to accommodate the entire range of elements conditioning the identities and interests of states.\(^{35}\) Koslowski and Kratochwil,\(^{36}\) as two leading scholars of Holistic Constructivism, consider

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\(^{33}\) Reus-Smit, “Constructivism”, p. 220.

\(^{34}\) Katzenstein, The Culture of National Security: Norms and Identity in World Politics.

\(^{35}\) Reus-Smit, “Constructivism,” p. 221.

the corporate and social identities as a unified analytical perspective that “treats the domestic and international structures and process as two faces of a single social and political order.”\(^\text{37}\) Holistic constructivists focus on how domestic and international social phenomena interact to shape the states' behavior in the international relations.\(^\text{38}\)

According to this theory, the behaviors of states are the product of mutual intellectual norms at the domestic and international levels. These mutual intellectual norms on the one hand construct the identities of the states but on the other hand establish limitations based on how states interpret their material environment and how they shape their behavior based on this interpretation.\(^\text{39}\)

From the holistic constructivist perspective, foreign policy behaviors are the consequence of interaction between both corporate identity (domestic level) and social identity (international level).

**Figure 1: The Logic of Holistic Constructivism**

![Diagram of Holistic Constructivism](image)

From the holistic constructivist perspective, identity formation at both the internal and international levels is a continuous process in which both corporate and social identities interact with each other and thereby states produce and reproduce new definitions of ‘self’ and ‘other’. According to this approach, any transformation in the corporate identity of a state- as a result of domestic conditions- will eventually affect the identity formation at

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\(^{37}\) Reus-Smit, “Constructivism,” p. 221.


\(^{39}\) Ibid, pp.264-65.
the international level where states will try to reset their priorities in accordance with the new identity.\textsuperscript{40}

Hence, the normative approach employed in this article is built upon holistic constructivism in order to highlight the causal importance of internal and international ideas and norms in shaping the foreign policy behavior of states. From this perspective, domestic identity as well as the shared norms of international society has causal effects on states' interest and behavior.

Nevertheless, more importance should be given to the domestic identity and constructive role of normative structures on the priorities in Iran's foreign policy. As Michael Smith opined, foreign policy is a phenomenon which derives from identity theories.\textsuperscript{41} Iranian identical structures mainly originate from the Islamic revolution, political Islam, Shiite religion, the political viewpoint of Imam Khomeini (the leader of the 1979 Iranian Revolution) and the constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran. Actually, systemic factors have a secondary effect on the construction of the state's foreign policy. It means that Iran's identity and interests are more exogenous to the international system than the endogenous one. The history of the Islamic Revolution clearly shows how domestic transformations have intensely constructed a new identity for Iran and its entailing interests (a fundamental transition from monarchical rule for 2,500 years to religious democracy).

Based on constructivist assumptions, material structures are context-oriented. According to Wendt, "material resources only acquire meaning for human action through the structure of shared knowledge in which they are embedded".\textsuperscript{42} On this basis, the Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy behavior should be understood in its discursive context. The social science literature “define discourse as being derived from and dependent on social

\textsuperscript{40}Yucel Bozdaglioğlu, “Constructivism and Identity Formation: An Interactive Approach”, p. 142.


\textsuperscript{42}Alexander Wendt, “Constructing International Politics”, p. 73. For example, the US relationships with Iran and British cannot be explained by just a simple balance of military power. Only material structure cannot describe the fact that Britain is a close American ally and Iran is a sworn adversary. Also it is same for Indian and Iran’s relationship with the United States or EU countries, so that for them the Indian nuclear weapons are less threatening than Iran’s missiles.
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practices- the complex mix of cultural norms, disciplines and rituals-which govern discursive formations”.\textsuperscript{43} Jim George defines discourse as the “broader matrix of social practices that gives meaning to the way that people understand themselves and their behavior...[it] generates the categories of meaning by which reality can be understood and explained”.\textsuperscript{44} For example, two particularly separate discourses can be used about one guerrilla movement describing it either as a “freedom movement” or a “terrorist group.”

In order to conduct the basic argument of the research, it is first necessary to understand the basic characteristics of Iranian foreign policy. Generally, the following socially-constructed discourses have been guiding the state’s foreign policy since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. These discursive resources give meaning to the country’s foreign policy behavior and distinguish it from the rest of the world.

The Basic Discourses of Iran’s Foreign Policy

1. The Logic of "Responsibility" (vs. the Logic of "Consequentiality")

Transnational responsibility refers to the ideological objectives that a state pursues outside of the nation-state borders as an ideological duty. This specification distinguishes between secular states and ideological ones, although the term is more general than being limited to ideological states.\textsuperscript{45}

Unlike the logic of consequentiality in the rationalist theories, the foreign behavior of Iran is not adopted solely in terms of the consequences. In fact, on the basis of ideological logic, the responsibilities, duties and emancipatory missions shape Iranian behavior in foreign policy. Hence, the Islamic Republic of Iran is counted as a mission-oriented state rather than an


\textsuperscript{44}Jim George, Discourses of Global Politics: A Critical (Re)Introduction to International Relations, Boulder:Lynne Rienner Publishers, 1994, pp. 29-30.

\textsuperscript{45}Sadegh Haghighat, Transnational Responsibilities and Human Rights, at http://shaghight.ir/index4.php?key=200&PHPSESSID=a025c407e687eda8e19d0da84e40d675 [last visited 12 February 2008].
interest-oriented one.\textsuperscript{46} In line with the logic of responsibility, the country "undertakes the fraternal commitment towards all Muslims, and unsparing support to the oppressed of the world. The practical reflection of this principle in Iranian foreign policy is manifested in rejection of domination, defending the rights of all Muslims."\textsuperscript{47} In reality, the Iranian anti-Zionist policy and its support of Islamic resistance movements as well as the Lebanese and the Palestinians people are interpreted within this logic of responsibility. Article 152 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran (adopted on 24 October\textsuperscript{1979}) explains that "[t]he foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran is based upon... the defense of the rights of all Muslims, non-alignment with respect to the hegemonist superpowers, and the maintenance of mutually peaceful relations with all non-belligerent States".\textsuperscript{48}

In the Iranian Constitution, the necessity of movement towards the establishment of a united single world community to rescue deprived and oppressed nations throughout the world has been emphasized. To this end, more attention has been paid to relations between nations than to relations with states.

Therefore, some of the foreign policy objectives are perhaps the most difficult for some to understand, unless we interpret them within the ideological context.

According to Imam Khomeini, the founder of the Islamic Republic of Iran, "we have to support all oppressed people around the world... because Islam...is the supporter of all oppressed people."\textsuperscript{49} Ayatollah Khamenei, the supreme leader of Iran, has emphasized that "we consider supporting the Palestinian and Lebanese people one of our major Islamic duties. This is why Washington is applying every pressure lever against the Islamic

\textsuperscript{46} S. J. Dehghani Firozabadi, "Emancipating Foreign Policy: Critical Theory and Islamic Republic of Iran's Foreign Policy", \textit{The Iranian Journal of International Affairs}, Vol. XX, No. 3, (Summer 2008), p. 7.
\textsuperscript{47} Ibid., p.15.
\textsuperscript{49} Sahife\textsuperscript{3} Noor (letters and lectures of Ayatollah Khomeini), Vol. 3, (Tehran, 1982), p. 31.
Republic in order to stop this support”.\textsuperscript{50} Actually, after the revolution, the country, along with the new definition of “self”, tried to develop its new identity in relation to the regional and extra-regional states by the use of strategies such as the “export of revolution” and “support of Islamic revolutionary movements”.

Thus, after the revolution, the foreign policy of Iran was constructed to be based on self-conceptualization and the view of what they really ought to do in line with this new identity.

According to the logic of ‘responsibility’, the Islamic Republic of Iran “enduring the costs and persistence against pressures which are not justifiable based on instrumental rationality and cost-benefit logic”, only could be explained within the logic of ‘responsibility’ which originates from political Islam.

The policy of ‘Proximity among Hearts’ is one of the main consequences of the logic of responsibility. The policy “means economic support for Muslims or even infidels by the prophet (PBUH), or imam or faqih (Muslim jurisprudence), or Islamic government to encourage their participation for jihad or encouraging them to convert to Islam and defend it.”\textsuperscript{51} Many verses of the Holy Quran and traditions have stressed this heavy duty to be shouldered by all Muslim individuals and Islamic governments.

The following assistance has been given in line with the policy of ‘Proximity among Hearts’: aid totaling $250 million for Hamas as compensation for the Western boycott and a commitment to pay the salaries of 100,000 Palestinian Authority employees for six months. On December 11, 2006,\textsuperscript{52} the Islamic consultative assembly approved the delivery of one million tons crude oil gratis to Syria, as well as approved a bill to extend the deadline for and to consider installments for repayment of North Korea’s


170 million dollar debt to Iran (December 6, 1986). The Iranian parliament also approved economic aid to Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Palestine and other Islamic countries. On this basis, what distinguishes Iranian foreign policy from that of other countries, is assuming “the ‘other-regarding’ interest as inseparable part of ‘self-regarding’ interest. Such interests are defined and pursued within the context of ideological interests”.

2. Discourses of “Counter-Hegemonism”, “Anti-Arrogance Campaign” and “Residence”

These types of discourses are mainly motivated by the Islamic rule of “Nafy-e Sabit” or domination over Muslims. Iranian foreign policy, especially during the Ahmadinejad presidency, can be understood within the framework of dividing the world into two camps: domination and anti-domination. On this basis, it is an important religious duty for Iran to adopt a more confrontational strategy toward the Western states as the “oppressors” and an accommodationist-active foreign policy towards the non-Western world, mainly the Third World as the “oppressed” states.

It could be argued that the most important behavioral feature of Iran's foreign policy in the past three decades has been counter-hegemonism or anti–imperialism which “has led to the formation of a particular role identity in Iran’s foreign policy: Iran as an independent state”.

Iran, in its foreign policy, is strongly counter-hegemonic and tries to challenge the monopolizing cores of oppressive power in the international system and looks for the complete elimination of all kinds of colonialism and despotism as well as absolutism and imperialism. In fact, Iran’s anti-Western

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53 Sariolghalam, The Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran, p. 70.
54 Firozabadi, “Emancipating Foreign Policy”, p. 17.
56 Amir M. Haji-Yousefi, “Iran's Foreign Policy during Ahmadinejad: From Confrontation to Accommodation”, Alternatives – Turkish Journal of International Relations, Vol. 9, No.2 (Summer 2010), pp. 6-7.
and anti-American policies can be understood in the context of these objectives and motivation.\textsuperscript{58}

For practical attainment of its counter-hegemonic aspiration, the country is seeking for “purposeful cooperation, coalitions and alliances among anti-hegemonic forces at individual, state and nongovernmental levels. To this end, Iran has extended its efforts to forge counter imperialism fronts in third world, Islamic world and Asian continent”.\textsuperscript{59}

The Islamic Republic of Iran, in line with its “anti-hegemonic” and “anti arrogance” discourses, pursues two major strategies: the “Look-East Policy” and “South-South Alliances.” These strategies necessarily cannot be explained in line with Iran’s national interests. From the viewpoint of Iranian leaders, every strategy that opposes the West and the United States can be considered to be the main priority of Iranian foreign policy or every organization that can challenge US hegemony in the world has the best chance for Iran to be a member of the organization. In fact, the pursuit anti-Western and anti-US strategies are motivated by the Iranian ideological perspective toward the West, not necessarily by the country’s national interests.

On this basis, “the main principle of Iran’s foreign policy regarding regional security organizations and treaties which include the great powers has been the principle of rejection”.\textsuperscript{60} Hence the membership of two regional-global great powers, namely Russia and China in the the Shanghai Cooperation Organization (SCO) which opposes the emergence of a unipolar international order dominated by the USA, was too attractive for the Islamic Republic of Iran to reject.\textsuperscript{61} On this basis, Iran wants to attain its ambition as being a full member of the Shanghai Cooperation Organization.

Thus, with its “Look-East policy”, Iran tries to build close relationships with the Eastern powers, especially with China and Russia. Iranian officials believe that an anti-U.S. axis, with nuclear powers such as Russia, China, India and Iran, is capable of establishing a pole of major

\textsuperscript{58}Firozabadi, Emancipating Foreign Policy, p. 12.
\textsuperscript{59}Ibid, p.19.
\textsuperscript{60}Amir M. Haji-Yousefi, “Iran's Foreign Policy during Ahmadinejad: From Confrontation to Accommodation”, p.13.
\textsuperscript{61}Ibid.
powers in Asia, opposing the policies of America to deter any U.S. military attack on Iran. At present, Iran has sought to recruit a coalition to oppose U.S. interests in the Middle East and Central Asia.

Nowadays, many Iranian scholars criticize Iran’s policy towards the United States and argue that instead of wasting its resources to confront the United States, the country should try to normalize its relationship with the US in line with its national interests and spend its resources instead on its economic and industrial development.

The Islamic Republic of Iran, in order to pursue an ‘anti-imperialism’ and anti-hegemonism agenda, tries to develop the “South-South alliances” with the “like-minded” countries of Latin America such as Venezuela, Nicaragua, Bolivia and Cuba, which can be characterized by their revolutionary and anti-American nature. Hence, by strengthening its bilateral ties with these countries, Iran hopes to change the existing international order and challenge the U.S. hegemony in the world.⁶²

The opposition to imperialism, neo-liberalism and globalization from the position of third world “victimism” is the main element of political and ideological affinity between Iran and theses countries.⁶³ President Ahmadinejad announced that “an anti-hegemonic and anti-imperialistic front is currently forming, and all free nations and justice seeking peoples are little by little giving their hands together to create an expanded front against domineering system and thought”.⁶⁴ Ahmadinejad, regarding Iran’s relationship with Venezuela, said that “cooperation between Iran and Venezuela can be a model for anti-imperialist campaigns”.⁶⁵ In this regard, Venezuelan Energy Minister Rafael Ramirez said the “campaign against

⁶⁴Statement by President Ahmadinejad in a meeting with Iran's ambassadors and head of missions, Iran, Newspaper 8 August 2007,pp.1-2.
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imperialism brings the two countries closer and in this way victory is with those not sitting idle”.  

Of course, Iran’s foreign policy toward Latin America has faced domestic criticism. Some political scholars have voiced concerns about the undue horizontal increase in the Iranian foreign policy, especially in relation to countries of minimal importance. They believe that a “much expanded Iran-Latin American relations are not based on Iran’s national interest and do not serve its grand strategies”.  

Iranian leaders constantly have called for countering hegemonism and confronting imperialism as essential principles of Iran's foreign behavior. The Iranian supreme leader- as a vital element in the country’s decision-making process- argued that “we’d never tolerate hegemonic behavior... and countering global hegemonic system and to overrule the oppressed-oppressors equation is an inseparable indicative of our diplomacy”. From his viewpoint, the 1979 revolution was as much about eliminating the influence of foreign powers in Iran.  

According to Islamic principles, “there is no law to allow domination of infidels over Muslims and ways are closed to foreign hegemony over Muslims”. This argument is a famous verse from the Holy Quran, which is known as the Nafy-e Sabil Verse (Women: 141). Based on the principle that if a contract is signed between Muslims and infidels, as soon as it becomes clear that the contract is against the interests of the Islamic society, it will be automatically cancelled according to the principle of 'no domination over Muslims.” In other words, based on the religious principle, “Islam is so that it gains supremacy and isn’t dominated by

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68 Firozabadi, “Emancipating Foreign Policy”, p. 18.
69 Statement by Islamic Revolution Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khamenei in a meeting with foreign policy authorities and ambassadors, Iran Newspaper, 20 August 2007.
70 Mahmood Sariolghalam, “The Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran”, p. 68.
71 Ibid, p.69.
others”. Hence, the Islamic government in its foreign affairs should behave in such a way so that it will not be dominated by other powers.\textsuperscript{72}

With respect to this, Ayatollah Khomeini, in confronting the bipolar system of international relations, asserts: “We don’t get along with any of the powers. We will be under the domination of neither America nor the Soviet Union”.\textsuperscript{73}

In the early days of the Islamic revolution, the concepts of “Counter-Hegemonism” and an “Anti-Arrogance Campaign” had crystallized into the policy of the “Neither East nor West,[only] an Islamic Republic” that was considered to be the Iranian version of “Non-Alignment”. In that time, Iranian revolutionary officials had four essential policy goals in declaring non-alignment: “(1) to achieve autonomy in foreign policymaking, (2) to avoid a costly involvement in the American-Soviet rivalry, (3) to end Iran’s dependence on one ideological camp and (4) to improve ties with all states (except Israel and the former South African regime). Most of these goals were rooted in Iranian history, geopolitics and economy. In fact, the status and condition of Iran under the Shah- before the revolution- was the main factor in shaping such a post-revolutionary foreign policy”.\textsuperscript{74}

R.K. Ramazani- an Iranian professor- believes that “for Iran, the past is always present. A paradoxical combination of pride in Iranian culture and a sense of victimization have created a fierce sense of independence and a culture of resistance to dictation and domination by any foreign power among the Iranian people. Iranian foreign policy is rooted in these widely-held sentiments”.\textsuperscript{75}

As stated in the Iranian constitution, as well as the public declarations and the actions of Khomeini, Khamenei, Ahmadinejad and other influential personalities (including Rafsanjani and Khatami), the ultimate aim of the

\textsuperscript{72}Asghar Eftekhari, “The Fixed Principles of the Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran”, \textit{The Iranian Journal Of International Affairs}, Vol. XIX, No. 2, (Spring 2007), p. 34.
Islamic revolution is the rejection of arrogant and hegemonic discourses and the establishment of a new fair international system. Iranian officials “repeatedly accused the UN of being a tool in the hands of superpowers; they tried, instead, to activate institutions such as a movement of non-committed countries to make changes in the existing global relations”\(^{76}\).

3. Discourses of “Independence” and “Self-Sufficiency”: Towards Indigenous Technology

Securing independence and maximizing its dimensions is one of the preliminary bases of the foreign policy of states. Many Iranian scholars believe that due to historical victimization, the issues of independence have greatly affected Iran’s foreign policy.\(^{77}\)

Based on the discourse of "Self-Sufficiency", the Islamic Republic of Iran is seeking to internalize more advanced technologies and knowledge as an efficient response to the international boycotts.

Nowadays, pursuing indigenous capabilities, technology and knowledge, especially regarding a nuclear fuel cycle, has become a matter of national pride. In doing so, Iran tries to eliminate its reliance on foreign powers. From Iranian administration, the development of indigenous technology to achieve technological self-reliance will reduce the dependence on foreign inputs, especially in critical and vulnerable areas and in high value-added items in which the domestic base is strong. Iran argues that it faces systematic discrimination in purchasing nuclear fuel. This discrimination is the result of both direct U.S. interventions to cancel contracts and sanction companies that do business with Iran as well as indirect intimidation of foreign firms by the threat of such measures. In fact, the American sanctions against Iran have strengthened Iran's argument that indigenous nuclear fuel production is necessary. On this basis, in the 1990s Iran began pursuing an indigenous nuclear fuel cycle capability by developing a uranium mining infrastructure and experimenting with uranium conversion and enrichment.

\(^{76}\)Abdolamir Nabavi1, The Range in Iran’s Idealistic Foreign Policy: Ebbs and Tides, at http://www.int-politics.com/Articles/No3/8802.pdf [last visited 11 November 2009].

The Iranian quest for independence is based on three major resources: “Iran’s glorious past; historical victimization by invaders; and (semi-)colonial/imperial encounters”.

As Suzanne Maloney believes, “Iran’s sense of its own victimization and humiliation by others is both genuine and an essential prerequisite to understanding Iranian foreign policy”.

From the viewpoint of Iran’s supreme leader, there is a causal relationship linking scientific advancement, self-sufficiency and independence. Ayatollah Khamenei contends that American and European sanctions against Iran are not only ineffective in changing Iranian foreign policy, but they are actually constructive in that they forced Iran to become more self-reliant. His perspective of self-sufficiency is “self-sufficient enough to be economically independent and economically independent enough to be politically independent”.

The discourse of independence helps us to understand “the Iranian overemphasis on self-sufficiency and Iran’s rejection of proposals that imply dependence on foreign sources in the nuclear field”. In this regard, Ayatollah Khamenei has argued that United States is not opposed to Iran’s nuclear program for the sake of the proliferation threat, but rather because of the potential independence and economic leverage that Iran would derive from it.

“The fact of the matter is that Western powers would like the nations in the Middle East region, including the Iranian nation, to be always dependent on them. This is why they say that it does not matter if we have nuclear power plants, but they insist that we should buy nuclear fuel for our power plants from them”, Ayatollah Khamenei said. The Iranian leader

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81 Ibid, p. 529.
accepts the costs of Iran’s political choices and believes that the price of Iran’s perceived independence is worth paying. In order to attain independence and to achieve national sovereignty and honor, any nation will have to pay a certain price. However nations should incur such expenses and make every effort to achieve the objectives listed above. They should be hopeful of the valuable results of their endeavors, despite all the attempts that are being made by the enemies to undermine their hopes and aspirations.\(^{85}\)

In reality, the Islamic revolution for the first time created the political system of Islamic Republic as a response to long-term crisis within the country. Therefore, what is taking place and the decisions that have been made in Iran need to be understood within this context. “Iran’s sensitivity to its independence and rejection of hegemony maybe fathomed by the examination of this background of revolutionary tendency”.\(^{86}\)

4. Discourse of “Persian Nationalism”

The Iranian discourse on nationalism should be studied in its historical context in order to be understood.\(^{87}\)

The Islamic Republic of Iran did not necessarily begin with a clean slate in 1979. Various historical and cultural influences continue to shape Iranian perceptions and behaviors apart from the relative existence of clerical government. In Iran, as one of the world's oldest civilization, there is a great sense of cultural and historical pride among Iranian people. According to Gregory F. Giles, “[t]he culmination of these historical, cultural, religious, and geographic influences is considered to constitute Iran’s ‘strategic personality’ or ‘culture’”.\(^{88}\) He believes that Iranian strategic culture is rooted in the nearly 3000-year history of Persian civilization.

\(^{84}\)Sadjadpour, Reading Khamenei: The World View of Iran’s Most Powerful Leader, p. 11.


\(^{87}\)See Hunter, Iran and the World: Continuity in a Revolutionary Decade.

According to R.K. Ramazani, Iranians “take pride in 30 centuries of arts and artifacts, in the continuity of their cultural identity over millennia, in having established the first world state more than 2,500 years ago, in having organized the first international society that respected the religions and cultures of the people under their rule, in having liberated the Jews from Babylonian captivity, and in having influenced Greek, Arab, Mongol and Turkish civilizations”.

Since the Iranian revolution, the Islamic Republic of Iran has been resorting to nationalism to use popular support as leverage against foreign powers. They believe that the popular support of the regime can act as a deterrence force against any military threats. As Ayatollah Khamenei believes, “[t]he government that arises from people and the ruling system that is supported and maintained by people cannot be frightened by threatening”.

Also, since the days of the Shah (Iran’s leader before the revolution), Iranian officials have argued that Iran’s size, historical significance, and self-professed cultural superiority merit a basic role for the state in the region. Many of the Shah’s policies were related to reviving the ancient Iranian Empire. Such a tendency for influence and status was continued after the revolution to gain a meritorious role to play in general.

The officials of the Islamic Republic trumpeted Iranian nationalism to increase public support in its war with Iraq and nowadays for nuclear activities, so that many musical songs have been made on the nuclear program to garner public support more broadly.

Based on nationalism, Iranian policymakers try to activate that historical pride and seek to create a collective mindset about the nuclear program, so that the nuclear program has now become Iran's key national issue. Many Iranians who oppose the Islamic regime believe that Iran should continue its nuclear program despite disagreement and pressure from some of the great powers. Accordingly, many Iranians contend that the United States is simply trying to punish Iran for its defiance of American policies. They believe that U.S. pressure on Iran to give up its uranium enrichment “is a conspiracy by the western powers to deny or prevent Iran from acquiring

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advanced technology and keep Iran backward and dependent on the West”. Nowadays, Iranian leaders treat nuclear policy as a “national issue” and have been able to turn the nuclear issue into the proclaimed position of the ‘Iranian nation’.

5. Discourse regarding the “Enemy”

The discourse regarding the concept of the enemy has been one of the main Iranian post-revolutionary discourses which entered into the Iranian political language after the Islamic revolution. In fact the discourse regarding the enemy mostly “is fueled by the history of intervention, manipulation and exploitation of the country by foreign powers”.

This discourse is evident in the many speeches given by Iranian officials. Without an imaginary enemy, something like 80% to 90% of the political speeches of the leaders of the country would lose their meaning and political leaders would be unable to finish their sermons. A savage and “satanic” enemy is an inevitable and indispensable part of the political identity of the Islamic Republic and over the past three decades this characteristic has grown more visible in political debates. The discourse on the enemy shows that Iran has a deep mistrust of the outside world.

The discourse on the enemy has theological and historical roots which stem from Iran’s deep historical sense of insecurity. Such insecurity originates from the long-term oppression and domination suffered by Persia over the centuries, which have left Iranian people more suspicious of foreigners. Actually, these eras of foreign domination appear to have basically formed Iranian interpersonal relationships and, by extrapolation, behavior. The religious and historical bases for defining the enemy have shaped the chronic enmity mentality of Iranian officials toward unjust powers. According to William Liddle, a leading Indonesian scholar, such mentality consists of three mindsets: a ‘narrow’ one that makes a binary

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91Daniel L. Byman, Shahram Chubin, Anoushiravan Ehteshami and Jerrold Green, Iran’s Security Policy in the Post-Revolutionary Era, RAND, 2001, pp. 9-10.
opposition between “us” and “them”, a ‘defensive’ one that considers the outside world as the enemy and a ‘conspiratorial’ one that views the outside world as a group efficiently organized to fight Islam and Muslims. 

Actually, through this discourse on the enemy, the Iranian policymakers try to create a binary opposition between “us” [Khodi] and others [Ghere Khodi] within the society. It is difficult to find a speech by an Iranian official that does not emphasize the role of the enemy in destroying the Islamic Republic of Iran. In just one speech in the Kurdistan Province on May 12, 2009, Ayatollah Khamenei, the Iranian supreme leader, used the term “enemy” 16 times.

On February 16, 2009, Ayatollah Khamenei said that the scientific progress in the country and the enthusiastic presence of youth in different areas are among the indications of the failure of the enemy in defeating the Islamic Republic. He warned that a cultural invasion by the enemy was among efforts to spoil the Islamic system, adding that all individuals, including him, have a duty to defend the Islamic and revolutionary values. He also attributed questions about the fairness of the Iranian presidential election as the work of enemies, saying “but unfortunately some unjust friends and those who are a part of the nation and expect people to pay attention to them are unthankful and speak against the nation and with repeating the lies of enemies”.

Iranian President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad, in his meeting with President of Djibouti Ismail Omar Guelleh, called on Islamic countries across the world to build a united barrier against the ‘enemy plots’. “Unity and cooperation between Muslim states will thwart the enemy plot to sow discord between Muslims and spread hegemony over them”.

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Akbar Hashemi Rafsanjani, Chairman of Iran's Expediency Council, reiterated one of the revolution’s main premises that “the United States is the main enemy of the Islamic Republic of Iran” and “Washington is making great efforts to disturb it”.  

Since the Islamic revolution, such an image of the enemy has played an effective role in shaping domestic and foreign policy priorities. It led Iran to increase its military power in order to make efficiently deter the supposed threats. On January 11, 2008, when Iranian parliament's National Security and Foreign Policy Commission decided to increase the country's defense budget, Heshmatollah Falahat-Pisheh, a commission member, said that “[t]he National Security and Foreign Policy Commission believes that it is bound to increase the country’s defense credits both in areas of hard and soft wars.” He reminded the parliament that enemies and threats posed to the Islamic Republic are plentiful and that according to the country's 20-year vision plan, Iran should be the number one power in the region in all the diverse areas, including defense infrastructure and defense technology as well as the optimization and modernization of equipment. As Mohsen Rezaie, the secretary of Iran's Expediency Council said “after the Islamic Revolution, Iran has turned into the first power in the region, so today, the country is the most influential one in terms of military, security and defensive issues in the region”.

6. Discourses of “Islamic Unity” and “Islamic Solidarity”

The ‘Islamic Solidarity’ is recognized as one of Iran's top foreign policy priorities. This discourse begun with the policy of the ‘Islamic Umma’ (including all Muslim communities) in the early days of the Iranian revolution. On this basis, the Islamic Republic of Iran is trying to build a unity among the Islamic states, enabling them to play an important role in

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the establishment of a fair system in world politics. The concept of ‘Islamic solidarity’ principally refers to “the expansion of economic and technical ties among Islamic countries. The economic and technical relations of Islamic countries spill over to political and security areas and finally, cultural and Islamic contiguity further facilitate the interactions of Islamic countries, bringing about mechanisms for conflict settlement”.

Imam Khomeini, the founder of the revolution, considered the unity of Islamic countries as a practical necessity which foreign policy is required to accomplish. From his viewpoint, “[o]ur Islamic scheme which is [an] Islamic one is to create a kind of unanimity of view among Moslems of the world, to unite the Islamic countries, to establish fraternity among different Moslems of the world, to make a pledge with all Islamic governments of the world.” Ayatollah Khamenei at a conference over Gaza crisis on March 3, 2009, said that “the key to the solution of many of the problems of the Muslim countries lies in the resoluteness and solidarity of this wonderful galaxy.”

Actually, the policy of export of revolution (the previous policy in the early years of the revolution) has been replaced by the policy of Islamic solidarity which is more consistent with political conditions of the contemporary era. The first targets of this policy are countries based on Islamic principles like Lebanon, Syria, and Algeria. The Islamic Republic of Iran was looking for further convergence and brotherly relations with such countries.

Contrary to the previous policy of export of revolution, the policy of Islamic solidarity offers a new method for promoting the revolution. “[T]his strategy is looking to present the Islamic Republic of Iran as a proper model and is principally taking efforts domestically. Having accomplished the first

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stage and making Iran as an efficient pattern for other Islamic countries, it
can take the pivotal place contemplated in Iran's twenty years Prospect Plan
[2024]”

7. Discourses of ‘Martyrdom’, ‘Jihad’ and ‘Fearlessness’

‘Martyrdom’ is a religious term in Islam. It is used as a title for Muslims who sacrifice their life for the sake of God and religious belief. The concept can only be understood in terms of the Islamic concept of Holy Struggle (jihad). According to the Holy Quran, the shahid is considered one whose place in Paradise is strongly promised.

Shia culture introduces some concepts and drives Iranian behavior in ways that are not readily understood by the West. Actually, martyrdom shows the Shi’ite attitudes toward war, which is less goal-oriented than Western concepts. “As evidenced by Khomeini’s conduct of the 8-year war with Iraq, struggle and adversity are to been dured as a sign of commitment to the true faith”. In this context,

[d]efeat is not necessarily equated with failure. This emphasis on continuing the struggle against oppression and injustice [as an Islamic duty] rather than on achieving ‘victory’ is seen as producing a high tolerance of pain in Iran. The cult of martyrdom inherent in Shi’ism, specifically, the honor accorded those who give their life to defend the faith, may give Iran certain practical military advantages.

In this regard, the Islamic Republic of Iran benefited highly from martyrdom-seekers in the 8-year war with Iraq. Iran, by converting the war into a ‘holy war’ (religion-based) could revive the cult of martyrdom which materialists were unable to understand.

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105 This plan refers to a mid-term development strategy, approved by the supreme leader of the I.R. Iran, and pursues higher status of economic, scientific, and technological development for Iran, upon which Iran takes the first place among Middle Eastern countries in 2024. See Davood Gharayagh Zandi, “Conceptualization of Islamic Solidarity in Foreign Policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran”, p. 80.


The concept of ‘fearlessness’ can be inferred from the discourse of ‘martyrdom’; it means that martyrdom-seekers and jihadists are not afraid of death at all in a battle or at the front. “The fear factor is a serious dilemma in mundane and materialistic societies in which the life is defined solely within the boundaries of the physical existence. They regard the happiness and well-being within the short span of life on the earth”.\(^{108}\) This culture is completely opposite to the cult of martyrdom. Interestingly, the Israeli regime’s prime minister acknowledged the reality of the source of power (martyrdom and fearlessness) in Hezbollah: “when they (Hezbollah young combatants) are not afraid of death, then what can we scare them of?\(^{109}\)

8. Discourse of “Justice”: Towards a Revisionist Policy

The justice-based discourse constitutes one the major principles of Iran's foreign policy since the 1979 Islamic Revolution. The Islamic Republic of Iran sees the international system as an unjust and unfair system which must be replaced by a just, fair and virtuous order. Hence, the state is pursuing a revisionist policy based on justice and fair international relations, and inviting arrogant countries to behave fairly. The structure of the current international system is perceived to be unjust and repressive. From a revolutionary viewpoint, “until the realization of the 'sublime universe', the world remains structurally divided into two antagonist areas: the world of good and the world of evil- light and darkness. There is the Party of God (Hibzollah) on the one side and the Great Satan (Shaytán-e Bozorg) on the other side. Compromise between the two is impossible. The struggle is constant until the first eliminates the second”\(^{110}\).

In the terminology of international relations, Iran is considered to be a revisionist state because its foreign policy in different periods of time was critical to the international status quo, uninterested in preserving it and uses justice-based discourses to criticize the existing international relations system.

\(^{109}\) Ibid, p.11.
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From the viewpoint of the Iranian Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, the Islamic Republic of Iran tries to achieve the “justice-driven policies” such as hostility towards Israel, despite enormous political and economic costs (economic sanctions and political isolation). Khamenei believes that he “prefers defeat to the victory that could be achieved through injustice or oppression”.\(^{111}\)

The justice-seeking policy was pursued with more enthusiasm in the Ahmadinejad administration. President Ahmadinejad in his letter to President Barack Obama on November 4, 2008, advised him to make a “fundamental change” in U.S. foreign policy. He told President Obama that the world expects him to end policies “based on warmongering, invasion, bullying, trickery and the humiliation of other countries by the imposition of biased and unfair requirements and a diplomatic approach that has bred hatred for America’s leaders and undermined respect for its people”. He suggested that Obama should keep his interventions within U.S. borders and called on him to end the “unjust actions of the past 60 years” in the Middle East. Such injustice should “give way to a policy encouraging full rights for all nations, especially the oppressed nations of Palestine, Iraq and Afghanistan”. Ahmadinejad explained that Iran is a “great civilization-building and justice-seeking nation” and said that Iran would welcome “fair and real changes” in the Middle East.\(^{112}\) Ahmadinejad, in response to a question regarding Iran’s relationship with Latin America, said that “we are determined to maximize relations with countries of that region and our cooperation is aimed at increasing peace and equal justice throughout the world”.\(^{113}\)

In fact, the justice-based-discourse “allows us to understand Iran’s continuous reference to double standards in the international system and its demand for international recognition of its right to nuclear technology”.\(^{114}\)

\(^{111}\) Karim Sadjadpour, *Reading Khamenei: The World View of Iran's Most Powerful Leader*, p.11.


\(^{114}\) Moshirzadeh, “Discursive Foundations of Iran’s Nuclear Policy”, p. 538.
Based on this discourse, Iran doesn't want to compromise its rights to have nuclear power and will not accept the demand to suspend its uranium enrichment activities, which the U.S. and other Western countries see as a cover to produce nuclear weapons. Iran believes that every country has the inherent right to obtain and use technology to develop its own natural resources to power its own economy; this includes nuclear technology. On this basis, the Islamic Republic of Iran criticizes Western countries for this double standard over nuclear energy. Iranian officials believe that the West has ignored the Israeli nuclear arsenal, while putting pressure on Iran to prevent it from using technology for peaceful purposes.\footnote{115} According to Ahmadinejad, “[i]t is no longer possible to humiliate nations and impose double standards on the world community”.\footnote{116}

Iranian officials see proof of double standards in the U.S. approach to nuclear proliferation in the region, especially regarding the nuclear technology of Pakistan, Israel and India.\footnote{117} Iranians feel humiliated that a country like Pakistan is permitted by the international community to become a nuclear power but the “sledgehammer” approach is employed against Iran.\footnote{118}

From Iran's perspective, the U.S. nonproliferation policy and its double standards in the face of Iranian nuclear policy, terrorism and disarmament are considered as the most apparent cases of unjust behaviors.

Some Iranian scholars like Ramazani and Mojtahed Zadeh believe justice-seeking to be one of the important parts of Iranian national identity. Seeking the realization of justice is considered one of the pillars of the Shiite religion.


\footnote{116}{“Ahmadinejad Assails West for Despicable Forms of Intimidation”, Fox News, 23 September 2009, at http://www.foxnews.com/story/0,2933,554704,00.html [last visited 4 October 2009].}


The above-mentioned discourses have been constituted in the course of Iran’s modern history and “has been expressed and emphasized since 1979 in numerous and often repetitive ways, either via various declarations issued by the founding father of the current regime- Ayatollah Khomeini- or in the speeches and declarations made by his successor, Ayatollah Khamenei and other prominent figures in the Iranian government (Rafsanjani, Khatami, Ahmadinejad), who have served as president. In parallel with these personalities, the ideological discourse is emphasized almost daily by imams in the mosques and in Friday prayer, the commanders of the Revolutionary Guards (Pasdarán), as well as other Iranian authorities”.

**Application of Holistic Constructivism to Iran’s Foreign Policy**

Since the Iranian revolution, the Islamic Republic of Iran’s foreign policy has been subject to these discourses as the main resources for Iranian definitions of its identity and hence interests. These discourses construct the identity and consequently interests of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In fact, Iran’s identity and interests are constructed endogenously and stem from social domestic discourse. In other words, Iran, to a great extent, makes its priorities based on its corporate identity (the domestic social discourses) rather than social ones. Then this already-held identity may be affected by social interaction at the systemic level. The Islamic Republic of Iran comes into international interaction with it previously constructed identity, then this identity determines that who is ‘friend’ and who is ‘enemy’.

Based on holistic constructivism, the research introduces the model of a “self-reinforcing cycle of norm-driven behavior” which helps us to understand Iran's interaction with the international community (See Figure 2).

This article argues that Iranian foreign policy was initially affected by domestic discourse (corporate identity) and then affected by social interaction at the systemic level (social identity). In other words, at the first step, before starting interaction with the international community, the Islamic Republic of Iran constructed its identity based on its corporate identity (domestic level) which determined who is a ‘friend’ and who is an

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‘enemy’. At the second step, this previously-held identity can be radicalized and strengthened due to the confrontational normative environment (particularly because of the West conflictual policy towards Iran).

**Figure 2: “A Self-Reinforcing Cycle of Norm-Driven Behavior” (Based on Holistic Constructivism):**

![Diagram showing the cycle of norm-driven behavior]

- 1) Discourse and Ideology-oriented Policy
- 2) Using revolutionary language
  - Keeping a critical distance from the language based on intersubjectively shared ideas
- 3) Confrontational and aggressive Policy by the international community towards Iran

Actually, the “norm-driven behavior” consists of two segments, together creating a self-reinforcing cycle: The first segment takes place at the domestic level and focuses on the nature of the internal normative structures and examines the effect of such domestic social discourse on the construction of Iranian foreign policy. The second segment of the model concentrates on international political consequences caused by the confrontational normative environment and examines its effect on the ‘radicalization’ of Iran's already-made identity.
In fact, Iran’s ideational and discursive policy causes the West’s aggressive and confrontational policy toward Iran which itself causes the strengthening of the ideational policy.

The ‘norm-driven behavior’ is not outcome-oriented and self-interested. However, ‘norm-driven behavior’ can be defined as behavior conducted for its own sake as a consequence of dominant norms.

According to this model, the Islamic Republic of Iran comes into systemic interaction with an already-constructed identity (corporate identity) which can be radicalized in the face of the aggressive environment, especially the confrontational policy of the West. Thus, it is necessary to consider both corporate (domestic) and social identities (systemic) thoroughly in analyzing Iranian foreign policy.

Initially, at the ‘domestic level’, Iran's interest and identity were defined in the context of internally-held discourse. This discourse imposed a particular revolutionary language on Iran's political leaders rather than a common language based on intersubjectively-shared meanings. This revolutionary language- which was seen as unreasonable for the Western states- is one of the main reasons for the mutual misunderstandings between the two sides. For example, Iranian rejection of the legitimacy of Israel’s existence and President Ahmadinejad's revolutionary viewpoint on denying the Holocaust as one of the major discursive battles between Iran and the West, sparked many negative reactions in the West and resulted in a U.N. resolution against Iran on 26 January 2007. Nevertheless, in some areas, Iranian foreign policy has been welcomed by the international community whenever the country tried to keep some distance from the revolutionary language and adopted a common language based on collective ideas. During the Khatami presidency, Iran introduced a peaceful identity of itself with the idea of “dialogue among civilizations”. This idea was welcomed by the international society and became an intersubjectively

120 Ahmadinejad said “Following World War II, they resorted to military aggression to make an entire nation homeless on the pretext of Jewish sufferings and the ambiguous and dubious question of Holocaust”, *Press TV*, 20 April 2009, at http://w ww.p res t v.ir/det a l laspx?id=92046 [last visited 18 April 2010].
121 Against the Ahmadinejad's speech on the Holocaust, 27 January was called by the U.N. theDay of Commemoration to honor the victims of the Holocaust.
shared idea in world politics, so that the year 2001 was called the “Year of Dialogue among Civilizations” by the United Nations.

At the systemic level, it can be said that confrontational norms lead states to adopt a more aggressive approach towards each other while benign global norms in contrast lead states to adopt more cooperative policies. For example, regarding North Korea’s nuclear activities, when William Perry was tasked to comprehensively investigate the Clinton administration’s policy toward North Korea in the late 1990s, he argued that the “primary reason [for North Korea’s nuclear activities]…is deterrence….They would be deterring the United States”. Due to this acknowledgement, the Clinton administration moved to normalize diplomatic relations with North Korea and provided the assurance that the United States would not plan a nuclear strike on North Korea; the Kim Jong Il administration responded by freezing its nuclear and missile activities. But this process was stopped in the Bush administration due to his emphasis on “not rewarding bad behavior”. Bush was seeing what William Perry perceived as deterrence to be “bad behavior” and failed to recognize the interactive nature of the strategic relationship. With regard to this, the Bush administration’s proclivity to take unilateral measures, such as the possibility of targeting North Korea for a preemptive nuclear attack, quickly put the two states back on the cycle of malignant multiplication. However, the non-aggressive norms during the Clinton administration led North Korea to the negotiating table at which the agreed framework- based on the expectation of reciprocal benefit or a ‘tit for tat’ strategy- was signed. On the contrary, the promotion of aggressive and confrontational norms during the Bush administration after the 9/11 attacks highlighted the dangers posed by nuclear weapons and what the so-called axis of evil states could do so that the agreement ultimately failed.

The Iranian case also shows how dominant international norms, on occasions, can stimulate states to reconsider their previously-held interests and identity so as to be consistent with internationally-held norms at a given time. For example, the relative development of liberal values during the

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Clinton administration prompted Iran to behave more cooperatively than with the former U.S. administration. President Khatami tried to increase Iran’s peaceful and cooperative relations with the European countries. In this period, Iran accepted voluntary suspension of the uranium enrichment process based on a political deal with Europe aimed at building confidence on the peaceful nature of Iran’s nuclear program.

Also, in the first year of Barack Obama’s presidency, due to his emphasis on the diplomatic and peaceful solution for Iran’s nuclear activities, Iran openly participated in diplomatic talks with the United States over its nuclear program in Geneva in the framework of the P5+1 discussions.

However, the confrontational and aggressive reactions by the international community towards Iranian foreign policy intensified the country’s social discourses over the uranium enrichment program and strengthened its anti-Jewish/ anti-American stances which have continued until today. Promotion of the confrontational norm during Bush’s presidency stimulated Iran to resume its uranium enrichment program, after two years of voluntary suspension, by partially reopening its fully safeguarded facilities and ending the voluntary suspension.\textsuperscript{124} With the weakening of the liberal and democratic values expressed by the Bush administration (such as his ‘Axis of Evil’ remark, attacks on Afghanistan and Iraq, and threatening Iran with the possibility of an assault on Iran’s nuclear facilities), Iran’s foreign policy, especially when Ahmadinejad came to power, was transformed into even a more radical one than that which had been supported by Ayatollah Khamenei since 1989. The U.S. aggressive policy, which sought to cut off Iran from the world economic and trading system and supported a regime change in this country, just increased Iran’s tendency toward radicalization from its previous position. Hence, the fluctuation of U.S. policy toward Iran matched the changing perceptions of Iranian policy toward the United States by the dominant domestic player in the Iranian government.

Generally whenever Iran faced a confrontational normative environment, the state responded more aggressively towards the

international community. The most recent example is Iran's decision to build 10 industrial scale uranium enrichment facilities, a dramatic expansion of the program in defiance of U.N. demands it halt all enrichment activities. The move came two days after the International Atomic Energy Agency, the U.N. nuclear watchdog, passed a resolution demanding that Iran stop construction on a previously-secret nuclear facility at Qom.\textsuperscript{125} The head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organization said that until then Iran had not had any intention of building 10 new uranium enrichment facilities.\textsuperscript{126}

Another example of radicalization of Iranian foreign policy in response to an aggressive policy of the West was Iran’s decision to postpone nuclear talks with the West as ‘punishment’ for the imposition of the fourth set of sanctions by the U.N. Security Council that were designed to stop Iran’s uranium enrichment.\textsuperscript{127}

Mahmoud Ahmadinejad said that “it’s a punishment to teach them a lesson to know how to have a dialogue with nations”. Tehran declared that it set conditions for negotiations and threatened ‘retaliation’ if its ships are inspected under Resolution 1929 adopted by the U.N. Security Council.\textsuperscript{128}

In fact, the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran had no collectively-shared identity that would facilitate the process of rapprochement. Neither of them began a new measure based on mutual understanding of security concerns that would expand the scope of exchanges beyond that of national security. In the present political process, Iranian threats and the U.S. threats are mutually constitutive. They can overcome the stalemate by highlighting the social aspects of the security dilemma such as mutual understanding of the mutual identity and

\textsuperscript{127}“Iran Postpones Nuclear Talks as 'Punishment' for UN sanctions”, guardian.co.uk, 28 June 2010, at http://www.guardian.co.uk/world/2010/jun/28/iran-postpones-nuclear-talks [last visited 20 December 2010].
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acknowledging each other's interests and core security concerns. The social steps can contribute to a transformation of the social reality between the states and to creating an appropriate environment for beneficial negotiations.

This trend shows that how international aggressive and confrontational norms can serve as one of the elements that strengthen the position of ruling parties. In contrast, the peaceful international environment can moderate the radical position of governments.129

Conclusion

In this article, Iranian foreign policy in terms of the normative environment has been discussed, with the goal of applying holistic constructivism in order to highlight the causal importance of internal and international normative environment in construction of Iranian foreign policy. Since the Islamic revolution of 1979, Iranian foreign policy has been affected by two important variants at both the domestic and systemic levels.

On the one hand, Iran's domestic social discourse has encouraged the country to adopt a more ideological policy towards the Western countries, particularly the United States. Hence, to the extent that Iran's foreign policy challenges increase, its response to these challenges has tended to be more ideological than interest-based. On the other hand, such discourse-oriented policy has been radicalized due to the West's confrontational policy towards Iran. Continuation of the trends that began three decades ago has created a social context in which the two countries are locked in these antagonistic identities.

Actually, Iran's ideological policy, on the one hand, and the hostile policy of the West towards Iran on the other hand, has created a tragic and never-ending cycle of misunderstandings in which too many opportunities have been missed.

To end this cycle, Iranian political leaders should redefine their ideological policy in line with Iran’s national interests. Iran, by moderating its ideological position towards the West, can create a non-confrontational normative environment at the international level in which the country can get support from the international community for resolving its foreign policy problems.