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Understanding Iran's Foreign Policy: An Application of Holistic Constructivism

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Abstract

This article seeks to explain why Iranian foreign policy toward the western countries in general and The United States in particular even under the systemic pressures has remained relatively unchanged. To this end, the present article identifies the determinant factors affect Iranian foreign policy. Since the 1979 Islamic revolution, Iranian foreign and security policy has been dominated by a new set of revolutionary values and discourses. The author believes that the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran mostly is driven by its revolutionary values and ideological perspectives than the logic of nation states. To understand Iranian foreign behavior, one should try to understand the basic characteristics of the country's normative and discursive structures. Hence, this article argues that due to the role of normative factors in constructing Iranian foreign policy, the Holistic constructivist approach is considered the most applicable theory for explaining the country's foreign policy.

Key words: constructivism, holistic constructivism, identity, social discourses, foreign policy.

Introduction

The Islamic Republic of Iran is a country with great strategic and geopolitical importance for international community. Iran is currently at the centre of a global

push-and-pull because of its geo-strategic location and its relationship with regional and international players.

Ideological and Islamic nature of 1979 Iranian revolution distinguishes it from other revolutions and movements throughout the world. The country's foreign policy because of its normative and ideological dimensions is a complicated thing to understand. The author believes that rationalist approaches whether assume states as security-maximizer (neorealism, defensive realism), power-maximizer (offensive realism), influence-maximizer (neoclassical realism) or absolute gain-seeker (neoliberalism), are not sufficient to properly explain Iranian foreign and security behavior.

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

Rationalists make a motivational assumption that since states are power – seeking, security-seeking , or influence seeking actors they have be to egoistic and self-regarding actors (vs. other-regarding) which 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 most significant way to reach security.¹

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.”² 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 them, the foreign policy of states is subordinated to change in international distribution of power. Hence, they ignore the effect of domestic variables in determining states' foreign policy priorities.³

Rationalist theories just consider Islamic Republic of Iran as objective-oriented and self-interest that solely pursue selfish and materialistic interests. Whereas the author argues that Iranian foreign behavior is more guided by ideational and normative structures than material ones. Although the writer doesn't deny the

importance of material structures in the country's foreign policy, but -based on constructivists assumption- material structures are given meaning only by social and normative context in which they are interpreted.⁴ 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 this basis, the writer kept its distance from the rationalist theories and applies holistic constructivism as a most applicable approach to analyze Iran's foreign policy behavior.

Constructivism and State Identity

Constructivism is one the most influential international theories of 1990 and early 2000 and its fortune shows no sign of declining.⁵ Constructivism provides productive intellectual space for researchers interested in describing the normative factors in a discipline heretofore dominated by materialist-oriented approaches.

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.”⁶

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.⁷ The “logic of consequentialism” is the realm of rationalist approaches that treat the interests and priorities of actors as mainly pre-given 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 and attempt to realize their preferences via 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.”⁸ 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.”⁹

Whereas, constructivist explanation of state behavior is based on different assumption: the “logic of appropriateness.” It means that “Human actors are imagined to follow rules that associate particular identities to particular situations.”¹⁰ 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.”¹¹

One of the main contributions of constructivist literature is to problematize the question of state identity and interests. Constructivists don’t treat state identity and interests as a pre-given and fixed variable; instead, 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, “Identities are the basis of interests.”¹² According to constructivists, understanding how actors’ identities conditioned by non-material structures are very important. Because, identities first make interests then make behaviors. To describe interest-making, they concentrate on social identities of states.¹³

According to constructivist assumption, interest is determined by state identity which is depending on historical, cultural, political, and social backgrounds. Contrary to realists that argue material structures like balance of military power have 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.”¹⁴

From this perspective, “ideas” have structural features. Ideas- understood as intersubjective meanings¹⁵ 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.”¹⁶ They consider that how

ideational structures determine the ways that actors redefine themselves. These norms (“collective expectations about proper behavior for a given identity”¹⁷) tell actors who they are, what is their goal, what role they should play.¹⁸ As Nicholas Onuf argues, ideational structures are both regulative (tell us what is cognitively permissible) and constitutive (tell us what is possible).¹⁹

From constructivist perspective, material structures are context-oriented. Means that “material resources only acquire meaning for human action through the structure of shared knowledge in which they are embedded.”²⁰ This principle claims that material forces are important only to the extent that they are constituted with particular meaning.²¹

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 3) Holistic Constructivism.

“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.²² Systemic constructivism focusing solely on ideational and normative structure of international environment and ignores changes at the domestic political realm. Wendt’s theory of constructivism introduce best example of systemic constructivism.²³ “He draws a distinction between two kinds of identities: “Social identities” and “corporate identities” of states. “Social identity referring to “the meaning an actor attributes to itself while taking the perspective of others,” and cooperate identity referring to the internal human, material, ideological, or cultural characteristics that make a state what it is.²⁴ He emphasizes social identity

which affects states' foreign policy behavior during the social interactions between unitary actors.

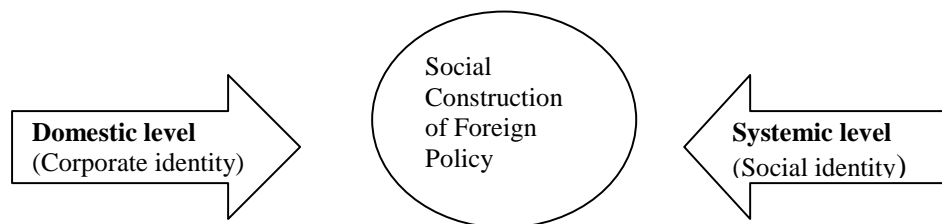
“Unit-level Constructivism”

Unlike the systemic constructivism, Unit-level constructivism focuses only on “the relationship between domestic social and legal norms, the very factor bracketed by Wendt.²⁵ Unit-Level constructivism stresses on 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 Socialization process internal to a state can transform the identity and interests of actors independently of such interaction at the international level.²⁶

“Holistic Constructivism”

Holistic constructivism is a theory of identity at both 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 and tries to bridge the two approaches to accommodate the entire range of elements conditioning the identities and interests of states.²⁷ Koslowski and Kratochwil²⁸ as two leading scholars of the Holistic constructivism, consider 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.”²⁹ Holistic constructivists “focus on how domestic and international social phenomena interact to shape the states' behavior in the international relations.³⁰ From the holistic constructivist perspective, foreign policy behaviors are consequence of interaction between both corporate identity (domestic level) and social identity (international level).

Figure 1: The Logic of Holistic Constructivism



From the Holistic constructivist perspective, identity formation at both internal and international levels is a continuous process in which both corporate and social identities interact with each other and hereby 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 the international level where states will try to reset their priorities in accordance with the new identity.³¹

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

Nevertheless, the author gives more importance to the domestic identity and constructive role of normative structures on the Iran's preferences in foreign policy. As Michael Smith considers, foreign policy is a phenomenon which derives from the identity theories.³² Iranian identical structures are mainly originating from the Islamic revolution, political Islam, Shiite religion, 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 construction of the state's foreign policy. It means that Iran's identity and interests are more exogenous to the international system than endogenous one. The history of the Islamic Revolution clearly shows that 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 Went, "material resources only acquire meaning for human action through the structure of shared knowledge in which they are embedded"³³. On this basis, Islamic Republic of Iran's foreign policy behavior should be understood in its discursive context. In the social science literature "a discourse is considered to be an institutionalized way of thinking"³⁴ or as Jim George defines, discourse considered 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”³⁵For example, two particularly separate discourses can be used about one guerrilla movements describing it either as “freedom movement” or “terrorist group”.

Generally, the following social constructed discourses have been guiding Iranian 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 Fixed Discourses of Iran’s Foreign Policy

The Logic of “Responsibility” (vs. the Logic of “Consequentiality”)

The transnational responsibility refers to the ideological objectives that a state pursues out of the nation-state borders as an ideological ‘duty’. This specification distinguishes between secular states and ideological ones, though the term is more general than being limited to ideological states.³⁶

Unlike the logic of consequentiality in the rationalist theories, the foreign behaviors of Iran are not adopted solely in terms of their consequences. In fact, on the basis of the ideological logic, responsibilities, duties and emancipatory missions shape the Iranian foreign policy behavior. Hence, the Islamic Republic of Iran counted as a mission-oriented state rather than interest-oriented ones.³⁷In 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.”³⁸ In reality, the Iranian anti Zionist policy and its support of Islamic resistance movements and Lebanese and the Palestinians people are interpreted within the logic of responsibility. Article 152 of the Constitution of the Islamic Republic of Iran (adopted on 24 October 1979) explains that “The foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran is based upon... the defence 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”.³⁹

In the Constitution, necessity of movement towards 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 supporter of all oppressed people”.⁴⁰ Also 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 Republic in order to stop this support.”⁴¹ Actually, after the revolution, the country along with the new definition of “self”, tried to develop its new identity to the regional and extra regional states by the strategies such as: “export of revolution”, “support of Islamic revolutionary movements”.

According to the logic of ‘responsibility’, 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 is originating from the 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 jurisprudent), or Islamic government to encourage their participation for Jihad or encouraging them to convert to Islam and defend it”.⁴² Many verses of the Holy Quran and traditions that have stressed on this heavy duty to be shouldered by all Muslims individuals and Islamic government.

The following assistances have been given in line with the policy of ‘*Proximity among Hearts*’: aid totaling \$250 million for Hamas as compensation for the Western boycott, and commitment to pay the salaries of 100,000 Palestinian Authority employees for six months On December 11, 2006,⁴³ approving delivery of one million tons gratis crude oil to Syria (December 10.1986) by the Islamic consultative assembly as well as approving a bill to extend the deadline for

and consider installments for repayment of North Korea's 170 million dollar debt to Iran (December 6, 1986) by the Iranian parliament as well as economic aid to Muslims in Bosnia and Herzegovina, Palestine and other Islamic countries.⁴⁴ On this basis, what distinguishes Iranian foreign policy from 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."⁴⁵

Discourses of "Counter-Hegemonism", "Anti-Arrogance Campaign" and "Residence"

These discourses are based on the Islamic rule of "Nafy-e Sabil" or domination over Muslims. 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."⁴⁶

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 complete elimination of all kinds of colonialism and despotism and absolutism and imperialism. In fact, Iran's anti- Western and anti-American policies can be understood in the context of these objectives and motivations.⁴⁷

For practical realization of the 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"⁴⁸

The Islamic Republic of Iran in line with its "anti-hegemonic" and "anti arrogance" discourses, pursues two major strategies: "Look-East Policy" and "South-South Alliances".

By "Look-East policy" Iran tries to build close relations with the Eastern powers especially china and Russia. Also the country attempts to realize its long-sought ambition as being a full member of the Shanghai Co-operation Organization (SCO). Iranian officials believe that an Anti U.S. Axis with nuclear powers such as Russia, China, India and Iran are capable of establishing a pole of major powers in

Asia, opposing the policies of America and would deter the U.S. military attack on Iran. At the present, Iran has sought to recruit a coalition that would oppose U.S. interests in the Middle East and Central Asia.

By pursuing the strategy of “South-South Alliances”, Iranian officials also try to neutralize the West’s threats of a military strike or economic sanctions against Iran. Based on this policy, Iran attempts to get support of Non-Aligned Movement at IAEA for its nuclear program. In August 2009, the Islamic Republic of Iran, in order to deter the possible Israeli military strikes, enlisted the support of more than 100 Non-Aligned nations which have welcomed Iran’s involvement to vote on a proposal, which bans attacks on nuclear installations.⁴⁹ In 29 Feb 2008, Ambassadors of Non-Aligned Movement (NAM) at IAEA unanimously voted in favor of a communique in which Iran’s peaceful nuclear activities are supported.⁵⁰

Iran also tries to develop the ‘South-South alliances’ to the Latin American countries such as Venezuela, Nicaragua, Bolivia, and the countries that pursue an ‘anti-imperialism’ agenda. The opposition to imperialism, neo-liberalism, and globalization from the position of third world “victimism” is the main element of political affinity between Iran and these countries.⁵¹ President Ahmadinejad pronounced “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”.⁵² Ahmadinejad regarding Iran’s relationship with Venezuela said that “Cooperation between Iran and Venezuela can be a model for anti-imperialist campaigns.”⁵³ In this regard Venezuelan Energy Minister Rafael Ramirez said “campaign against imperialism brings the two countries closer and in this way victory is with those not sitting idle.”⁵⁴

Iranian leaders constantly have called for countering hegemonism and confronting imperialism as essential principle of Iran’s foreign behavior.⁵⁵ The Iran’s supreme leader- as 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”.⁵⁶ From his viewpoint, the 1979 revolution was as much about eliminating foreign powers influence 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 Nafy-e Sabil Verse (Women: 141).⁵⁷ Based on the principle 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’.⁵⁸ In other words, based on the religious principle, “Islam is so that it gains supremacy and isn’t dominated by others”. Hence, the Islamic government in its foreign affairs should behave in such a way that it won’t be dominated by other powers.⁵⁹

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.”⁶⁰

In the early days of the Islamic revolution the concepts “Counter-Hegemonism”, “Anti-Arrogance Campaign” had been crystallized in the policy of the “Neither East nor West, [only] an Islamic Republic” that considered as the Iranian version of “Non-Alignment”. 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 revolution- was the main factor in shaping such a post-revolutionary foreign policy”.⁶¹

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”.⁶²

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

revolution is the rejection of arrogant and hegemonic discourses and establishment of a new fair international system. Iranian officials “repeatedly accused the UN of being a tool in hands of superpowers; they tried, instead, to activate institutions such as movement of non-committed countries to make changes in the existing global relations.”⁶³

Discourses of “Independence” and “Self-Sufficiency”: (toward indigenous technology)

Securing independence and maximizing its dimensions is one of the preliminary bases of the foreign policy of states. The Islamic Republic of Iran is seeking to internalize more advanced technologies and knowledge as an efficient response to the international boycotts.

Nowadays, Pursuing an indigenous capabilities, technology and knowledge especially regarding nuclear fuel cycle has become a matter of national pride. By 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 in purchasing nuclear fuel faces systematic discrimination. This discrimination is result of both direct US interventions to cancel contracts and sanction companies that do business with Iran and indirect intimidation of foreign firms by the threat of such measures. In fact, the United States sanctions against Iran have strengthened Iran’s argument that indigenous nuclear fuel production is necessary. On this basis, in the 1990’s Iran began pursuing an indigenous nuclear fuel cycle capability by developing a uranium mining infrastructure and experimenting with uranium conversion and enrichment.

Iranian independence seeking is based on three major resources: “Iran’s glorious past; historical victimization by invaders; and (semi)-colonial/imperial encounters.”⁶⁴

From the viewpoint of the 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 force Iran to become more self-reliant. His perspective of self-sufficiency is that “self-sufficient enough to be economically independent and economically independent enough to be politically independent”.⁶⁵

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”.⁶⁶ In this regard ayatollah Khamenei argued that United States is not opposed to Iran’s nuclear programme for the sake of the proliferation threat, but rather because of the potential independence and economic leverage that Iran would derive from it.⁶⁷

“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.⁶⁸ The Iranian n leader accepts the costs of Iran’s political choices, and believes the price of Iran’s perceived independence is worth paying.⁶⁹ In order to attain independence and achieve national sovereignty and honor, any nation will have to pay a certain price. But nations should incur such expenses and make every effort to achieve the above objectives. 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.⁷⁰

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.”⁷¹

Discourse of “Persian Nationalism”

Persian nationalism provides another aspect to understand Iranian behavior. 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 clerical government. In Iran as one of the world’s

oldest civilizations, there is a great sense of cultural and historical pride among Iranians, particularly the dominant Persians. According to Gregory F. Giles “The culmination of these historical, cultural, religious, and geographic influences is considered to constitute Iran’s ‘strategic personality’ or ‘culture.’”⁷² He believes that Iranian strategic culture is rooted in a nearly 3000-year history of Persian civilization.

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”.⁷³

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 regime can play as a deterrence force against any military threats. As Ayatollah Khamenei believes, “The government that arises from people and the ruling system that is supported and maintained by people cannot be frightened by treating.”

Also, Since the days of the Shah(Iran’s leader before 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 Shah’s policies were related to revive ancient Iranian Empire. Such a tendency for influence and status has been continued after the revolution to gain a meritorious role to play in general.

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

Based on nationalism, Iranian policy-makers try to activate the historical pride and seek to make a collective idea over the nuclear program. So that, 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 the some 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 US pressure on Iran to give up its uranium enrichment “is a conspiracy by the western powers to deny or prevent Iran from acquiring advanced technology and keep Iran backward and dependent on the West”.⁷⁴ 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’.

Discourse of “Enemy”

The discourse of enemy has been one of the main Iranian post revolutionary discourses which after the Islamic revolution entered into the Iranian political language. In fact the discourse of enemy mostly “is fueled by the history of intervention, manipulation, and exploitation of the country by foreign powers.”⁷⁵

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 of enemy shows that Iran has deep mistrust of the outside world.

The discourse of enemy has theological and historical roots which stem from Iran’s deep historical sense of insecurity. Such insecurity is originating from a series of 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 inter-personal and, by extrapolation behavior.⁷⁶ Religious and historical bases of enemy 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 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.⁷⁷

Actually, by the discourse of enemy the Iranian policy-makers try to create a binary opposition between “us” {Khodi} and “others” {Ghere Khodi} within the society. It is difficult to find a speech of Iran’s officials without emphasizing the role

of enemy to destruct the Islamic Republic of Iran. Just in a speech in the Kurdistan Province (on May 12,2009), Ayatollah Khamenei, the Iranian supreme leader, 16 times applied the term “enemy”.⁷⁸

Ayatollah Khamenei on February 16, 2009, said that the scientific progress in the country and the enthusiastic presence of youths in different arenas are among other indications of the failure of enemy in defeating the Islamic Republic. He warned that a cultural invasion by the enemy was among its efforts to spoil the Islamic System, adding that all individuals, including him, have duty to defend the Islamic and revolutionary values.⁷⁹ He also attributed questioning the fairness of Iranian presidential election to enemies. And said “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”⁸⁰

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.”⁸¹

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.”⁸² Since the Islamic revolution, such an image of 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 an efficient deterrence against 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 member of parliament’s National Security and Foreign Policy Commission told that “The 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 wares.” He added the lawmaker reminded 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 different grounds, including accomplishment of defense infrastructures and defense technology as well as

optimization and updating of equipment.⁸³ 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."⁸⁴

Discourses of "Islamic Unity" and "Islamic Solidarity"

The "Islamic Solidarity" is recognized as Iran's top foreign policy priorities. This discourse was begun by the policy of "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 and enabling them to play an important role for establishment of a fair system in world politics. The concept of 'Islamic solidarity' is 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."⁸⁵

Imam Khomeini, the founder of revolution, considered the unity of the Islamic countries as a practical necessity which the foreign policy is required to accomplish. From his viewpoint, "Our Islamic scheme which is 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."⁸⁶ Ayatollah Khamenei at a two-day 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."⁸⁷

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 target of this policy is these Islamic countries which are based on Islamic principles like Lebanon, Syria, Al Jazayer. The Islamic Republic of Iran was looking for further convergence and brotherly relations with such countries.⁸⁸

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 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).”⁸⁹

Discourses of “Martyrdom”, “Jihad” and “Fearlessness”

Martyrdom” is a religious term in Islam”. It “is used as a title for Muslims who have died fulfilling a religious commandment, or waging war for Islam.”⁹⁰ 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 promised strongly.

Shia culture introduces some concepts and drives Iranian behavior in ways that are not readily understood by the West. Actually, The Martyrdom shows the Shi’a 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 be endured as a sign of commitment to the true faith”. In this context, “Defeat 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.”⁹¹

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

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 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.”⁹² This culture is completely opposite to cult of martyrdom. Interestingly, Zionist 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?!”⁹³

Discourse of “Justice”: toward a Revisionist Policy

The Justice- based discourse consists one the major principles of Iran’s foreign policy since the 1979 Islamic revolution. The Islamic Republic of Iran sees the international system as 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 invites 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 (Shaytân-e Bozorg) on the other side. Compromise between the two is impossible. The struggle is constant until the first eliminates the second.”⁹⁴

In the international relations terminology, Iran considered as 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.

From viewpoint of the Iran’s Supreme Leader, Ayatollah Ali Khamenei, Islamic Republic of tries to realize the “justice-driven policies” such as hostility 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.”⁹⁵

The justice-seeking policy was pursued with more enthusiasm in the Ahmadinejad’s administration. President Ahmadinejad in his letter to President Barack Obama on Nov. 4, 2008, advised him to make “fundamental change” in the US. foreign policy. He told President Obama 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 suggests Obama to keep his interventions within U.S. borders and called him to end "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 Iran as a "great civilization-building and justice-seeking nation," and said that Iran would welcome "fair and real changes" in the Middle East.⁹⁶ 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".⁹⁷

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 an international recognition of its right to nuclear technology."⁹⁸

Based on this discourse, Iran doesn't want to compromise its rights to have nuclear power and not accept the demand to suspend its uranium enrichment, which the US 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 West countries for double standard over the nuclear energy. The country's officials believe that the West ignored Israeli nuclear arsenal, while putting pressure on Iran to prevent it from using technology for peaceful purposes.⁹⁹ According to Ahmadinejad, "It is no longer possible to humiliate nations and impose double standards on the world community."¹⁰⁰

Iranian officials see proof of double standards in the U.S. approach to nuclear proliferation in the region especially about the nuclear technology of Pakistan, Israel and India.¹⁰¹ 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.¹⁰²

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, Mojtabeh Zadeh analyze justice-seeking as one of the important part of Iranian national identity. Seeking the realization of justice considered one of the pillars of the Shiite religion.

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 (Pasdaran), as well as other Iranian authorities."¹⁰³

A Holistic Constructivist approach to Iran's Foreign Policy

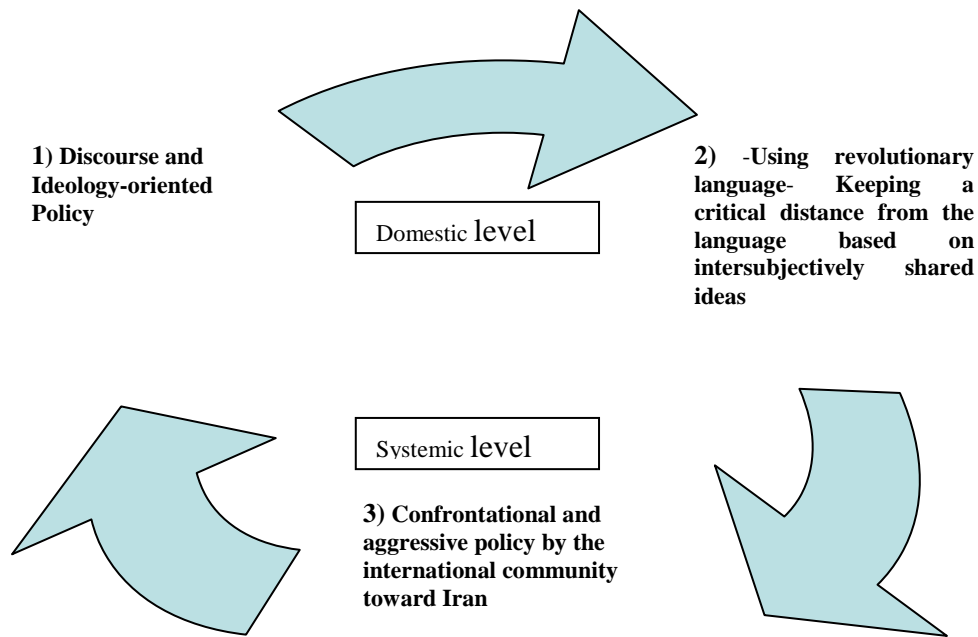
During the last thirty years from the revolution, the Iran's foreign policy has been subject to the mentioned discourses as main resources for Iranian definitions of its identity and hence interests. The mentioned discourses construct the identity and consequently interests of the Islamic Republic of Iran. In fact, Iran's identity and interests are constructed endogenously and stem from social domestic discourses. 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 writer argues that 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 "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 initially affected by domestic discourses (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 international community, Islamic Republic of Iran constructs its identity based on its

corporate identity (domestic level) which determines who is ‘friend’ and who is ‘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 toward Iran).

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



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 discourses on the construction of Iranian foreign policy. The second segment of the model concentrates on international political consequences caused by confrontational normative environment and examines its effect on “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 strengthening of the ideational policy.

The “Norm- driven behaviour” is not outcome-oriented and self-interested. But, “norm- driven behaviour” can be defined as behaviour conducted for its own sake as a consequence of dominant norms.

According to this model, 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 West confrontational policy. 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 defined in the context of internally held discourses. These discourses impose a particular revolutionary language on Iran’s political leaders rather than a common language based on intersubjectively shared meanings. This revolutionary language-which is seen 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 viewpoint¹⁰⁴ 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 U.N. resolution against Iran on 26 January 2007.¹⁰⁵ Nevertheless, in some areas, Iranian foreign policy has been welcomed by the international community whenever the country tried to keep distance from the revolutionary language and adopted a common language based on collective ideas. During the Khatami’s presidency, Iran introduced a peaceful identity of the self by the idea of “dialogue among civilization”. This idea was welcomed by international society and became an intersubjectively shared idea in world politics, so that the year 2001 was called by the Union Nations the “Year of Dialogue among Civilizations.”

At the “*systemic level*”, it can be said that confrontational norms lead states to adopt more aggressive approach toward each other, and benign global norms in contrast lead states to adopt more cooperative policy. For example regarding the North Korea’s nuclear activities, when William Perry tasked to comprehensively investigate the Clinton administration’s policy toward North Korea in the late 1990, he argued that the “primary reason [for North Korea’s nuclear activities]...is deterrence....They would be deterring the United States.”¹⁰⁶ due to this

acknowledgement, the Clinton administration moved to normalize diplomatic relationships 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 perceive as deterrence as “bad behavior” and failed to recognize the interactive nature of the strategic relationships. With regard to this, the Bush administration’s priority for taking unilateral measures such as possibility of targeting North Korea for a preemptive nuclear attack quickly put the two states back on the cycle of malign multiplication. But, the non-aggressive norms during the Clinton administration drove the North Korea to the negotiating table at which the agreed framework –based on the expectation of reciprocal benefit or tit for tat strategy- was signed. But with promotion of aggressive and confrontational norms during the Bush administration which began after the 9/11 attacks- that highlighted the dangers posed by nuclear weapons and what so called axis of evil states - the agreement ultimately failed.¹⁰⁷

The Iranian case also shows that how dominant international norms, on occasions, can stimulate states to reconsider their previously held interest and identity to be consistent with internationally held norms at given time. For example, the relative development of liberal values during the Clinton’s administration prompts Iran to behave more cooperatively than former government. 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 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 participated in openly diplomatic talks with the United States over its nuclear program in Geneva in the framework of the 5+1.

Whereas, confrontational and aggressive reactions by the international community toward Iranian foreign policy intensified the country’s social discourses over uranium enrichment program and strengthened its anti-Jewish/anti-American

stances which have been 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 a voluntary suspension.¹⁰⁸ 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 by the possibility of an assault on Iran's nuclear facilities), Iran's foreign policy especially when Ahmadinejad came to power was transformed into even more radical than that supported by Ayatollah Khamenei since 1989. The U.S. aggressive policy--which were seeking to cut off Iran from the world economic and trading system, and supporting a regime change in this country--just increased Iran's tendency toward radicalization in its previous position. Hence, the fluctuation of U.S. policy toward Iran matches the changing perceptions of Iranian policy toward the United States in the dominant domestic player in the government.

Generally whenever Iran faced a confrontational normative environment, the state responded more aggressively toward international community. The more recent example is Iran's decision to built 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 comes 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.¹⁰⁹ Iranian, head of Iran's Atomic Energy Organization, said that until then Iran did not have any intention of building 10 new Uranium enrichment facilities.¹¹⁰

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 begins 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 threat and the U.S. threat 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 acknowledging each other's interests and core security concerns. The social steps can contribute to a transformation of the social reality between the states. Although Such steps "will not

eliminate the enemy identity that each holds of the other, but will go a great length toward creating an environment that dampens the truncated understanding and identity blaming, which would be conducive to diplomatic negotiations”.

This trend shows that how international aggressive and confrontational norms can serve as one of the elements that strengthen position of ruling parties. In contrast, the peaceful international environment can moderate the radical position of governments.¹¹¹

Conclusion

This research tried to apply Holistic constructivism in order to highlight the causal importance of internal and international normative environment in construction of Iran’ foreign policy. Since the Islamic revolution of 1979 Iran’ foreign policy has been affected by two important variants at both domestic and systemic levels:

On the one hand, the Iran’s domestic social discourses encouraged the country to adopt 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 intended to be more ideological than interest-based.

On the other hand, such discourse-oriented policy radicalized due to the West’s confrontational policy toward Iran. Continuation of the trends that began three decades ago, created a social context in which the two countries are locked in the antagonistic identities.

Actually, Iran’s ideological policy, on the one hand, and the west hostile policy toward Iran, on the other hand, created a tragic and never-ending cycle of misunderstandings which missed too many opportunities.

NOTES

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