

INTERPRETING IRAN'S FOREIGN POLICY THROUGH CONTEMPORARY INTERNATIONAL RELATIONS THEORIES

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Abstract

This article examines the foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran through three contemporary approaches in international relations: constructivism, feminism and neo-Marxism. The analysis demonstrates that these theoretical perspectives make it possible to interpret Iran not only as a geopolitical actor, but also as a state whose external behavior is shaped by identity, ideology, gender relations, economic dependency and competing global narratives.

Keywords: Constructivism, Western capitalist construction, neo-Marxism, “Neither East nor West, only Islam”, secular feminism, religious feminism, exploitation.

Introduction

Constructivism in international relations is a social theory which argues that the most significant dimensions of international politics are formed under the influence of ideas, identities and shared meanings. People create certain ideas and then gather around the ideological frameworks produced by those ideas; in turn, these frameworks generate political practices that influence reality.

In 1989, the American scholar Nicholas Onuf argued that international relations are not merely an objective reality, but a world constructed by human beings. Later, such scholars as Alexander Wendt, Friedrich Kratochwil, Martha Finnemore and Ted Hopf further developed constructivist literature and

strengthened the theoretical foundations of this approach. In contrast to realism and liberalism, constructivists demonstrated the central importance of ideas, identity and discourse in the study of international relations. The school gained particular prominence in the 1990s, when transformations in world politics created conditions for the rapid development of constructivist interpretations.¹² Constructivists reject the strictly individualist ontology characteristic of realism and place emphasis on social ontology and intersubjective factors. This does not mean that they deny the role of the individual; rather, they analyze the individual and society as interconnected dimensions of political reality. The construction of any object, state, nation or political community emerges from the interaction of collective consciousness on the one hand, and historical, religious, social, cultural and intellectual components on the other.³

When this approach is applied to the Islamic Republic of Iran, three major constructions can be distinguished. The first is the global construction of Iran, largely produced within a Western capitalist discursive framework. The second is the Eastern or regional construction, which is based on historical proximity, cultural memory and civilizational interaction. The third is Iran's own self-construction, expressed through the political, religious and ideological narratives promoted by the Islamic Republic itself.

1) The Western capitalist construction seeks to consolidate in the minds of other states a predominantly negative image of Iran as a terrorist, destructive and authoritarian state. The United States has been one of the principal producers and transmitters of this image. It should be noted that Washington has been highly successful in spreading this construction among other societies. In many countries, Iran is commonly imagined as a state associated with permanent terrorist activity, radical fundamentalism and serious security risks. In this perception, Iran as a state and the Iranian people are often merged into a single undifferentiated image. Iran itself also contributed to this perception, particularly through the idea of "exporting the Islamic Revolution" during the period from 1979 to 1989, which generated fear and distrust in many societies. This negative construction became deeply embedded in public consciousness; consequently, later Iranian attempts to create a more positive image abroad did not always

1 Ulugbek Azizov. Constructivism in international relations

2 Nicholas Onuf. On the evolution of social constructivism, turns in IR, and a discipline of our making

3 Stanford Encyclopedia of Philosophy Archive. <https://plato.stanford.edu/archives/fall2024/entries/constructivism-political/>

produce the desired results. The subsequent controversy around Iran's nuclear program further strengthened its representation as a global security threat.

A deeper and more objective analysis of this phenomenon reveals a more complex picture. For example, the United States possesses more than three thousand nuclear warheads, while the United Kingdom possesses more than five hundred. Nevertheless, the construction that Iran's still-developing nuclear program represents a greater danger to the entire world has been firmly established. This shows that the image of an object can be transformed through psychological and discursive operations carried out by another actor. If Iran is constructed from another angle, through its language, literature, rich history, culture and contributions to science, a far more positive image can emerge. Iran seeks to use precisely these cultural and civilizational resources in order to disseminate its own construction among other states.

2) The Eastern method of constructing Iran differs fundamentally and includes both positive and negative elements. While Iran occupies an almost entirely negative position in many Western narratives, in Eastern societies this image is mixed and more ambivalent. First of all, Iran has historically interacted with the states of the Middle East and Central Asia, and the peoples of the East share many cultural features. However, cultural closeness does not automatically guarantee political trust or friendly relations.

It is well known that Arab and Central Asian political traditions absorbed many elements from the statecraft of ancient Iran. Iran influenced not only political administration, but also language and literature. Even a number of customs and holidays in Central Asian societies are linked to the heritage of ancient Iran; Navruz is the clearest example of such continuity. From a linguistic and literary perspective, many similarities can also be observed, since Persian served for a long historical period as a courtly and literary language. A person who chose the path of intellectual activity was often expected to know Persian. Therefore, Persian culture became deeply embedded in the customs and symbolic world of many Central Asian peoples and often manifests itself at an implicit cultural level. The construction of the Islamic Republic of Iran in Central Asia is therefore not uniform, but its basic components are similar. Central Asian societies often distinguish between the Iranian state and the Iranian people. Cultural closeness, language, historical memory and shared traditions are generally associated with the Iranian people in a positive sense. At the same time, the image of the Iranian

government is shaped by the legacy of its rigid post-revolutionary policies, especially between 1979 and 1990. Because of ideological concerns and the closed policy adopted by Central Asian states toward Iran, a certain barrier emerged between the peoples of Iran and Central Asia.

In recent years, however, more integrative tendencies have appeared in Iran–Central Asia relations. The introduction of visa-free regimes for tourists and businesspeople from 2023 can be interpreted as one visible indicator of this process. If relations between Iran and Central Asian countries continue to develop in this direction, stronger economic growth may become possible. At the same time, the strengthening of Iranian influence may also produce ideological consequences. Along with economic cooperation, pro-Iranian ideas may penetrate the region, especially because certain latent ideas of Islamic statehood continue to exist among parts of the populations of Uzbekistan, Tajikistan, Kyrgyzstan and Turkmenistan.

One of the most important components in the construction of Iran among Islamic states is the religious factor. The main point at which many Muslim societies distance themselves from Iran is the confessional difference between Shiism and the Sunni majority. The fact that the Islamic Republic of Iran is based on Shia Islam may generate distrust among Sunni-majority societies. If Iran were not a Shia state, many Muslim countries might have supported the Islamic Republic much more actively. This produces a paradoxical situation from a constructivist point of view. The paradox becomes clearer when Iran's relations with Russia and China are compared with its relations with many Muslim states. Iran often maintains more effective external relations with non-Muslim powers than with a number of Muslim societies. The ideological credo defined by Ayatollah Ruhollah Khomeini — “Neither East nor West, only Islam” — gradually proved insufficient in practice. In this sense, the idea of “neither East, nor West, nor Islam — only survival” is increasingly visible in Iran's foreign policy behavior. This change of vector reflects the Iranian people's response to a rigid political position that, over the years, produced limited material benefits, economic stagnation and social frustration. For this reason, Iran attempts to use all available opportunities in its external relations.⁴⁵

⁴ Pavla Ripinskaya. Iran: Economy under Sanctions

⁵ Dina Esfandiary and Ariane Tabatabai. Triple Axis: Iran's Relations with Russia and China

3) Iran also possesses its own specific self-construction in foreign policy and international relations. The Islamic Republic covertly promotes ideas aimed at restoring its historical influence in the Middle East and Central Asia. In religious terms, it presents itself as a model for other Islamic or secular Muslim-majority countries. Iran seeks to portray itself as a powerful leading state and as a guardian of Islam.

Nationalist ideas occupy a significant place in the Islamic Republic of Iran. Iran promotes the idea that it has historically played a paternal cultural, scientific and intellectual role in relation to the Middle East and Central Asia. In its self-construction, Iran repeatedly refers to the legacy of the ancient Persian Empire. Concepts of civilizational superiority are also visible in Iranian political discourse. At the same time, Iran emphasizes its role as an indispensable geopolitical actor for Central Asia and often attempts to highlight its position in the region. It should also be noted that Iran does have certain grounds for constructing itself as a powerful state: it is one of the few countries that has openly rejected American pressure. Despite more than forty years of severe sanctions, Iran has preserved its economy and, in some respects, remains economically stronger than several Central Asian states that have operated without comparable sanctions.

This gives Iran additional political confidence. The ancient Zoroastrian philosophy of struggle against evil, once central to Iranian spiritual tradition, continues to echo in Iran's international self-construction. Iran presents the United States and Western countries as sources of evil and attempts to transmit this rhetoric to other societies. In general, by placing itself in a leading religious and cultural position, Iran argues that it has the right to possess nuclear weapons as a defender of other nations. If Iran were to acquire nuclear weapons, the balance of the international order would change substantially. Thus, Iran offers an idealized model of its own role; however, a deeper examination shows that Iran's actual political behavior does not always fully correspond to this idealized image.

Feminist Movements in the Islamic Republic of Iran

Feminist theory in international relations studies how global politics affects both men and women, and how key concepts within the discipline — such as war, security, diplomacy and power — are themselves gendered. Feminist IR is not

limited to the traditional agenda of states, war and diplomacy; it also emphasizes that the contemporary global political economy is shaped by gender relations. In this sense, there is no strict separation between feminist scholars working in IR and those studying international political economy.⁶

In contemporary Iran, the women's question is primarily discussed in political and legal terms. The main goals of Iranian women include achieving economic independence from men and gaining access to high-quality professional and higher education.

After coming to power, Ayatollah Khomeini declared that Fatima, the daughter of the Prophet Muhammad, should be viewed as the ideal woman because of her spiritual virtues: piety, modesty, self-sacrifice and loyalty to her husband. At the same time, it is important not to forget a historical fact: Fatima herself participated actively in a number of political processes.

The full Islamization of society presupposed strict gender segregation and introduced numerous prohibitions and restrictions, violations of which were punished by law. For some particularly serious offences, capital punishment was envisaged. In particular, the practice of stoning for adultery was reintroduced. This development drew the attention of the United Nations Commission on Human Rights, and the issue of women's rights violations in Iran became a subject of international discussion.⁷

The Iran–Iraq War of 1980–1988 became a new trial for the Iranian people and had severe economic consequences for the country. At the same time, Iranian women used this period of crisis as an opportunity to advance their political ambitions. As a result, women were permitted to receive military training within the elite military-political structure of the Islamic Revolutionary Guard Corps. A women's society was established under the Islamic Republican Party, and four women became deputies in the Islamic Consultative Assembly.⁸

The Iranian authorities, relying on the spiritual legacy of Imam Khomeini, have attempted to resolve the women's question through a renewed interpretation of Islamic law. After more than forty years of the Islamic Republic, cautious statements are being made about the emergence of a new Islamic culture, the consolidation of women's identity and status within religious norms, and the

6 Vakhterkina Maria Yurievna. The significance of feminism in the theory of international relations

7 Sofya Malashonok. Feminism as a philosophical and sociological direction. <https://www.geopolitika.ru/article/feminizm-v-mezhdunarodnyh-otnosheniyah>

8 Esmaili Samira. Increasing the role of women in the Iranian parliament after the Islamic Revolution of 1979

development of collective responsibility toward women. These steps indicate a gradual, although still limited, transformation of official discourse.⁹

Insufficiently developed legal norms concerning the social and political rights of women continue to generate debate and protest. In Iran, disputes persist over the broader participation of women in public administration, their admission to the state apparatus and certain official positions, as well as the continued requirement to observe the hijab as a dress code.

Two major forms of feminism exist in contemporary Iran: secular feminism and religious feminism. They differ significantly in their intellectual foundations and political demands. Most supporters of secular feminism were forced to leave the country permanently because of their political positions. They advocate the abolition of compulsory Islamic dress codes, equal access for women and men to public office at all levels, and the granting to Iranian women of the rights and freedoms defended by moderate Western feminists, while preserving their cultural identity. As a rule, supporters of these views are women from the middle and upper classes who received high-quality education in Europe or the United States and had direct experience of other cultural and intellectual environments. Islamic or Muslim feminism is based on Islamic principles. It is sometimes considered more radical than secular feminism because its followers argue that early Islam expressed stronger ideals of equality and undermined conservative gender assumptions later presented as divinely fixed. According to activists, the essence of women's exploitation lies in the incorrect interpretation of the meanings of the Qur'an. They call for the reconsideration of inheritance rights, compensation payments, court testimony, child custody, divorce rights and social rights, including the right to occupy leadership positions in state bodies. The strategy of Islamic feminists is also called "gender ijtihad", meaning women's participation in making legal judgments in matters not directly regulated by the Qur'an and Hadith. It should be remembered that Qur'anic interpretation was traditionally carried out within a predominantly male paradigm.

At present, the tendency to involve women in politics is becoming more visible. An important step toward women's entry into the political sphere has been their recruitment into the judicial system and even their appointment to judicial

⁹ Andrew Hanna. Part 2: Profiles of Women Politicians, Activists

positions — developments that were previously viewed as contradicting Islamic tradition. Today, more than 460 women work in Iran's justice system.¹⁰

Religious conservatives consider many demands of Muslim feminists to be contrary to Islamic principles and often describe the concept of "Islamic feminism" as an oxymoron. They identify a number of principles of this women's movement as incompatible with the ideological foundations of Islam, including humanism, secularism, moral relativism, individualism, anthropocentrism and an irrational understanding of freedom. M. Zibayinejad argues that Islamic feminism is merely an attempt to reinterpret Islamic principles on the basis of Western ideology and modernist literature, and that its essence relies on an ideological trend alien to the Western mentality.

Iranian religious feminism has a less radical character. Its representatives seek to improve the status of Muslim women through a more favorable interpretation of the Qur'an and Hadith, as well as through the development of fatwas corresponding to new realities. These decisions are based on Islamic principles, precedents and Muslim legal practice. The term "dynamic fiqh" has even entered Persian usage. This movement is sometimes called "local feminism" in Persian. Like other ideological approaches in contemporary Iran, religious intellectualism is expected to contribute to the modernization of society: religion requires interpretation compatible with the culture of a new generation. This perspective has been reflected in the publications "Women" and "Sage".¹¹

Secular feminists criticize Islamic feminism and argue that, because numerous subjective interpretations of the Qur'an are possible, Islam cannot serve as a sufficiently coherent ideological basis for a meaningful women's movement. Supporters of Islamic feminism, in turn, accuse Western feminists of neglecting the interests of the family and society in favor of extreme individualism. Secular feminists are also accused of rejecting the political regime of the Islamic Republic, showing indifference toward spiritual values and seeking to weaken the institution of the family.

The Place of Neo-Marxism in Iran's Foreign Policy

Neo-Marxism is a theoretical approach that develops the ideas of classical Marxism in the context of the modern world and contemporary international

¹⁰ <https://news.un.org/ru/story/2019/11/1367001>

¹¹ I.V. Kulagin. Shiite Islam and the Imamate in Contemporary Iran

relations. It is based on the view that economic relations and class struggle are the main driving forces of world politics. Neo-Marxists argue that international relations are shaped by economic interests and by the logic of exploitation. They maintain that developed states, especially through transnational corporations, use their economic and military power to exploit and control developing countries.¹² Iranian foreign policy can also be interpreted through the prism of neo-Marxism. As noted above, Iran is a state rich in natural resources; nevertheless, it has not always been able to use these resources independently and on fair terms. To understand this more clearly, it is necessary to refer to a historical episode. If we consider the economy of pre-revolutionary Iran under the monarchy of Mohammad Reza Pahlavi, we can see that Iran's natural resources, including the oil industry, were exploited by Western countries, especially the United States. In the field of oil extraction, the United States offered Iran terms that it could hardly refuse, and as a result American interests obtained a fifty-percent share in Iranian oil.¹³

The monarchical regime, which depended on the import of technologically advanced and highly organized capital, operated within a system of concentrated production and trade. On the one hand, this enriched Western monopolies; on the other hand, it rapidly undermined Iran's traditional socio-economic base. The released labor force was not properly integrated into new capitalist structures. Considerable resources were spent on maintaining and servicing foreign specialists, most of whom were Americans. By 1977, before the outbreak of the anti-Shah revolution, the number of such specialists in Iran exceeded fifty thousand. Receiving substantial income from their services — on average up to ten thousand dollars a month — they simultaneously enjoyed extraterritorial privileges in the Iranian state. Thus, Iran was exploited by the United States, and the negative consequences of this exploitation were felt by the Iranian people.¹⁴ From a neo-Marxist point of view, even after the change of power in Iran, the country did not achieve full independence. Economically, Iran has continued to face forms of exploitation, but the role previously played by the United States has to some extent been replaced by China and Russia. Because of severe sanctions imposed on the Islamic Republic, Iran has become economically and militarily

¹² A.T. Israilova. Marxism (Neo-Marxism) in the Context of International Relations

¹³ <https://topwar.ru/223887-persidskij-neftjanoy-perevorot-uroki-avgusta-53-go.html>

¹⁴ https://studbooks.net/538872/istoriya/neft_obschestvenno_politicheskoe_razvitie_irana

dependent on Russia and China. Official media may describe the relations among these three states as mutually beneficial economic cooperation; however, a deeper analysis reveals that the benefits are distributed unequally and that there is no real balance between the parties.

China uses Iran's sanctioned status to impose its own rules in export and import relations. Iran is compelled to accept these rules because it does not possess a broad list of alternative markets for its products. For this reason, Iran becomes a direct object of exploitation in bilateral economic relations. Iran exports approximately forty-eight percent of its raw and finished products to China and, in return, is often forced to import low-quality equipment from China, while also tolerating Chinese currency practices.¹⁵

Western sanctions force Iran to sell its gas and oil products at reduced prices. This resembles the Marxist logic in which the bourgeoisie increases surplus profit by appropriating the unpaid labor time of the proletariat. The consequences are negative for Iranian society: a significant part of the population is becoming poorer, while the wealthy class continues to grow richer. This situation reflects the concentration of capital in the hands of a narrow bourgeois stratum. In Iran, the principal capital-holding groups are often linked to the clerical establishment. Instead of circulating capital productively, they frequently retain control over it. After Iran became an Islamic state, many economic assets passed into the hands of clerical networks, and factories that had operated for years began to decline. The bankruptcy of "Kafshe Melli", once a major footwear producer in the Middle East, can be cited as an example of this process.

Another reason for the deterioration of Iran's economy is the high level of speculative operations. This explains both the increase in the number of dollar millionaires in Iran and the growing impoverishment of the working class. For comparison, Saudi Arabia has approximately 210 thousand dollar millionaires, while Iran has around 250 thousand. However, this does not mean that the living standards of the Iranian people are improving; on the contrary, poverty is increasing. From a neo-Marxist perspective, Iran's dependency and exploitation in foreign relations generate an analogous class situation within the country's domestic economy.

¹⁵ Pavla Ripinskaya. Iran: Economy under Sanctions

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