

## The Role of Culture in the Transformation of International Relations: Case Studies of the Iranian and U.S. Governments

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### **Abstract:**

*Culture, as a vital element in the field of international relations – particularly in shaping interactions among states with divergent ideologies and historical experiences – is gaining increasing significance. This article explores the role of cultural factors in foreign policymaking and intergovernmental relations, with a particular focus on the bilateral relationship between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran. Drawing on the constructivist theory of international relations and the framework of cultural diplomacy, the study analyzes the historical evolution of cultural perceptions and misperceptions, ideological narratives, and the enduring impact of symbolic discourse on diplomatic practice. From the 1953 coup to the 1979 Islamic Revolution and the 2015 Iran Nuclear Deal (JCPOA), cultural narratives have either intensified hostility or provided cautious grounds for cooperation. The article concludes that a nuanced understanding of cultural identities, historical grievances, and ideological systems is essential for sustainable conflict resolution and the promotion of international cooperation.*

### **Keywords:**

*Culture, international relations, Iran, United States, Islamic Republic*

## **I. Introduction**

Traditional studies in international relations (IR) have largely emphasized concepts such as material power, strategic interests, and institutional mechanisms, typically analyzed within realist and institutionalist frameworks (Morgenthau, 1948; Keohane & Nye, 1977). In these paradigms, culture has often been regarded as a secondary or marginal variable with limited influence on state behavior. Realism, for instance, conceptualizes international politics as a struggle for power among self-interested states, leaving little room for ideational or cultural factors. Similarly, neoliberal institutionalism prioritizes the role of institutions in reducing anarchy and promoting cooperation but does not account for how identity and cultural context shape state preferences and interactions (Keohane, 1984).

However, since the late 20th century—especially after the Cold War and the disintegration of rigid bipolar ideologies—identity-based and interpretive approaches to international relations have gained traction. Scholars began to critique the materialist and rationalist assumptions of mainstream theories and emphasized the role of ideas, norms, and intersubjective meanings. This shift gave rise to constructivism, post-structuralism, and critical theory within IR scholarship, all of which assign central importance to the ideational dimensions of world politics (Adler, 1997; Lapid, 1989).

In this emerging paradigm, cultural dimensions—including national identity, value systems, historical narratives, and subjective perceptions—have been recognized as central to

analyzing the behavior of international actors. As Alexander Wendt famously asserted, "anarchy is what states make of it," emphasizing that international structures are socially constructed and mediated by shared understandings (Wendt, 1992). Culture, in this context, is no longer confined to historical heritage or national customs but is understood as a shared network of meanings that shapes how states perceive themselves, others, and the global order (Wendt, 1999). These shared meanings are historically and ideologically constructed and are continuously reproduced through social, educational, and media processes (Hall, 1997; Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

Consequently, culture plays a critical role in defining who is considered a friend or foe, what policies are deemed legitimate, and how states react to one another's actions. Norms about national honor, trauma, and sovereignty often override purely strategic calculations. For instance, identity-based insecurities can lead states to adopt aggressive or defensive postures that appear irrational from a materialist lens but are fully coherent within a cultural-ideational framework (Ringmar, 1996).

One of the most illustrative examples of culture's impact on diplomacy and foreign policy is the complex relationship between the United States and the Islamic Republic of Iran. Spanning tactical cooperation prior to the 1979 revolution to decades of intense hostility afterward, these relations have been deeply influenced by cultural perceptions, historical narratives, and ideological differences. Diplomatic language, modes of dialogue, and even media portrayals are filtered through cultural frameworks, highlighting the necessity of culturally informed analysis for any meaningful understanding of foreign policy and diplomacy (Mousavian, 2014; Takeyh, 2009; Abrahamian, 2008).

## **II. Review of Literatures**

### **2.1 Theoretical Framework: Constructivism and Cultural Narratives**

Constructivism is a prominent theoretical approach in International Relations (IR) that emphasizes the role of meanings, identities, norms, and social structures in shaping global politics. Unlike traditional paradigms such as realism and neorealism—which prioritize material capabilities, anarchy, and objective state interests—constructivism posits that international realities are not given but socially constructed through processes of interaction, interpretation, and discourse (Wendt, 1992; 1999; Adler, 1997). According to this view, states do not simply react to the material structure of the international system; rather, their behavior is mediated by shared ideas, historical experiences, and collective meanings that shape interests and identities.

Central to constructivism is the assertion that identity precedes interest: "Anarchy is what states make of it," Wendt (1992) famously argued, suggesting that the structure of international relations depends as much on intersubjective understandings as on objective conditions. In this context, culture plays a foundational role—not merely as a backdrop but as an active force that generates identity, frames perceptions, and enables or constrains state behavior (Hopf, 2002; Finnemore & Sikkink, 2001). Cultural factors help determine how states define "self" and "other," shape threat perceptions, and respond to diplomatic or military challenges.

Cultural narratives—defined as the historical, mythological, religious, or ideological stories that nations tell about themselves and others—are central mechanisms through which collective identity is forged and maintained (Somers, 1994; Weldes, 1999). These narratives influence both popular consciousness and elite decision-making by providing coherent, emotionally resonant frameworks through which political realities are interpreted. As Ricoeur

(1984) and Hall (1996) suggest, narratives function as symbolic systems that mediate memory, identity, and the meaning of political events.

These stories define key concepts such as “friend” and “enemy,” “hero” and “traitor,” or “threat” and “ally.” For example, national myths of victimhood or exceptionalism can legitimize foreign policy choices and constrain diplomatic flexibility. When cultural narratives are rigid, exclusivist, or infused with notions of moral superiority, they may foster antagonism and entrench mistrust. As Mutua (2001) argues, such narratives often construct the international stage as a moral drama, with one state cast as the virtuous actor and others as villains.

Conversely, the deconstruction and reconstruction of cultural narratives can play a pivotal role in conflict resolution and diplomatic transformation. If collective stories are reimagined to emphasize common humanity, shared history, or mutual vulnerability, they may open discursive spaces for reconciliation and cooperation (Subotic, 2016; Galtung, 1996). Changing narratives does not merely shift rhetoric—it transforms the underlying interpretive structures that guide perception and action.

The U.S.–Iran relationship offers a stark illustration of the power of cultural narratives. Terms such as “Great Satan” (used by Iranian leaders) and “Axis of Evil” (coined by U.S. President George W. Bush in 2002) exemplify the use of morally charged language to delegitimize the other and justify antagonistic policies. These labels are not neutral descriptors; they are embedded in deep historical grievances, ideological opposition, and identity politics. Over time, such narratives become institutionalized in media discourse, educational curricula, and public policy, shaping national attitudes and constraining diplomatic options (Boroujerdi & Rahimkhani, 2018; Katzman, 2020).

Thus, a constructivist analysis of U.S.–Iran relations necessitate a critical engagement with the cultural narratives and discursive structures that underpin foreign policy choices. It requires unpacking how identities are constructed, how histories are remembered or forgotten, and how symbolic representations affect strategic behavior. Rather than treating conflict as the result of clashing interests alone, this perspective highlights the interpretive and narrative dimensions of international antagonism.

## **2.2 The Cultural Foundations of U.S. Foreign Policy**

U.S. foreign policy cannot be comprehensively understood through strategic, economic, or geopolitical calculations alone; its ideological and cultural underpinnings are equally vital. The United States’ engagement with the world is deeply informed by a distinct national identity shaped by historical experiences, religious traditions, and Enlightenment philosophy. At the core of this identity is the enduring myth of American Exceptionalism—a culturally embedded belief that the United States is not merely one state among many, but a unique moral and civilizational exemplar tasked with guiding the world toward liberty and progress (Lipset, 1996; McCrisken, 2003).

This belief in exceptionalism emerges from several interlocking cultural foundations. First, Enlightenment rationalism and Protestant ethics—especially the Calvinist emphasis on chosenness, individual moral responsibility, and missionary zeal—have instilled in American political culture a conviction that its values are not only universal but divinely sanctioned (Hunt, 1987; Bellah, 1967). Second, liberal democratic ideals institutionalized in the American Revolution and Constitution reinforced the notion that the United States represents a break from Old World tyranny and is destined to lead by example (Smith, 2003). These cultural roots

contribute to a strong civil-religious framework, where foreign policy is often imbued with moral overtones and providential purpose.

This ideological orientation fosters a binary worldview—one that divides the global landscape into opposing moral camps: democracy versus despotism, freedom versus oppression, civilization versus barbarism (Nau, 2002; Doran, 2003). Such dichotomies are more than rhetorical devices; they function as epistemological tools that help American policymakers interpret complex international events through simplified, value-laden lenses. As Cox (2004) notes, these narratives do not merely reflect reality but actively shape it, legitimizing interventionist behavior under the guise of moral obligation.

As a result, the United States often casts itself as a global moral agent—a savior or liberator intervening not only to protect its national interests, but also to spread democracy, human rights, and capitalist prosperity. This moral universalism has underpinned a range of interventions, from the Cold War-era containment policy to post-9/11 regime change operations. In many cases, these actions have been justified as necessary sacrifices in the pursuit of global progress and security (Mead, 2001; Ikenberry, 2009).

However, this cultural-ideological posture frequently encounters friction in regions with different historical experiences and political cultures, particularly in the Middle East. For instance, the U.S.-orchestrated 1953 coup in Iran, which removed democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mossadegh and reinstated the Shah, was viewed in Washington as a defense of liberal capitalism and a strategic move against Soviet expansion during the Cold War. Yet in Iran, the same event is remembered as a neo-imperialist violation of sovereignty—a trauma that continues to inform public suspicion toward U.S. intentions (Kinzer, 2003; Gasiorowski & Byrne, 2004).

This divergence in historical interpretation underscores the role of conflicting cultural narratives in shaping mutual perceptions. While Americans may view their interventions as morally righteous and historically justified, other nations—such as Iran—interpret them through postcolonial and anti-imperialist frameworks. These contrasting cultural lenses fuel mistrust, resistance, and the persistence of grievance politics (Said, 1993; Halliday, 2005). As Weldes (1999) points out, national interests are not objectively given but are constructed through discourse—often embedded in narratives of self and other.

Reconciliation, therefore, requires more than diplomatic negotiation or policy adjustment; it demands a critical reexamination of foundational narratives. Without confronting the myths and moral assumptions embedded in U.S. foreign policy—particularly those that cast America as the inevitable “good”—lasting mutual understanding remains elusive. As Jackson and Nexon (2004) argue, cultural reflexivity is essential in a global order increasingly defined by contested meanings and symbolic politics.

### **2.3 The Cultural Dimensions of Iranian Foreign Policy**

The foreign policy of the Islamic Republic of Iran is deeply rooted in its post-1979 revolutionary ideology—a blend of Shi’a theology and anti-imperialist discourse. The Islamic Revolution was not merely political but also cultural and spiritual, redefining Iran’s role in the global order (Keddie, 2006). Rejecting the secular, Western-oriented model of the Shah, the new theocratic regime framed foreign policy in moral-religious terms.

Central to this discourse is the concept of resistance against Western cultural domination. Terms like “Great Satan” are more than rhetorical—they reflect a deeply embedded cultural and

spiritual struggle (Mousavian, 2014). This narrative legitimizes ideological alliances and support for resistance movements as moral imperatives.

### III. Results and Discussion

#### 3.1 Case Study: U.S.–Iran Relations Post-1979

Since the 1979 revolution, U.S.–Iran relations have been trapped in a cycle of hostility, heavily shaped by cultural and ideological worldviews. The U.S. often views Iran as a source of radicalism and a security threat, while Iran perceives the U.S. as an imperialist force undermining its sovereignty and Islamic values (Takeyh, 2009).

Mutual cultural misperceptions have contributed to repeated diplomatic failures. The 1979–1981 hostage crisis deepened mistrust. U.S. support for Saddam Hussein during the Iran–Iraq War reinforced Iranian narratives of Western betrayal. Meanwhile, Iran’s support for groups like Hezbollah is seen in the U.S. as evidence of malign ideological intent.

President George W. Bush’s 2002 “Axis of Evil” speech exemplified how cultural discourses escalate tensions. By grouping Iran with Iraq and North Korea, the U.S. confirmed Iranian suspicions of Western cultural and moral targeting.

#### 3.2 Cultural Diplomacy and the JCPOA

Despite decades of antagonism and entrenched ideological hostility, moments of cultural diplomacy have occasionally disrupted the dominant narratives that define U.S.–Iran relations. One of the most notable examples was the 2015 Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA), a multilateral agreement between Iran and the P5+1 (the U.S., UK, France, Russia, China, and Germany), which sought to limit Iran’s nuclear program in exchange for sanctions relief. While commonly understood as a technical accord focused on nonproliferation, the JCPOA also signaled a symbolic thaw in cultural and diplomatic relations—highlighting the underappreciated role of soft power and narrative reshaping (Maloney, 2015; Parsi, 2017).

From a constructivist perspective, such an agreement did not arise solely from a convergence of interests but also from a transformation in discourse, allowing both parties to reinterpret each other’s intentions (Rathbun, 2011). The diplomacy surrounding the JCPOA included not only formal negotiations in Vienna and Lausanne but also a parallel track of informal cultural exchange. These activities functioned as sites of discursive de-escalation, where rigid identities could be softened and “enemy images” temporarily suspended (Zaharna, 2009).

During this period, both Iran and the U.S. engaged in public diplomacy efforts aimed at reshaping domestic and international perceptions. Iranian films gained greater visibility in international festivals—such as Asghar Farhadi’s *A Separation* winning the Academy Award in 2012—which helped humanize Iranian society to Western audiences and disrupt monolithic representations of Iran as a radical theocracy (Naficy, 2012). Similarly, academic dialogues, cultural delegations, and exhibitions—like the *Persia: The Art of the Great Kings* exhibit at the British Museum—provided platforms for re-engagement through civilizational appreciation and historical commonality (Cull, 2008).

In Iran, the JCPOA period witnessed more favorable portrayals of the West in reformist media outlets, signaling a discursive shift away from absolute enmity (Sadjadpour, 2016). U.S. Secretary of State John Kerry’s direct engagement with Iranian Foreign Minister Javad Zarif was not only unprecedented in its transparency but also symbolically powerful, offering images of

mutual respect and pragmatic cooperation that countered decades of vitriolic rhetoric (Slavin, 2015). These shifts, while modest, illustrate how cultural narrative adjustments can create openings for diplomacy.

Nevertheless, the U.S. unilateral withdrawal from the JCPOA in 2018 under the Trump administration disrupted this fragile cultural rapprochement. Iran's leadership interpreted the withdrawal as a betrayal of trust and a reinforcement of historical patterns of Western unreliability and duplicity, thus reviving older revolutionary narratives (Leverett & Leverett, 2019). This reversal demonstrates the fragility of narrative transformation, especially when it is not institutionalized or supported by consistent policy behavior.

Yet the JCPOA episode remains a valuable case study in the potential of cultural diplomacy to complement strategic dialogue. It confirms that reducing tensions between adversaries requires more than material incentives—it also demands shifts in collective memory, national identity constructions, and symbolic gestures of recognition (Watanabe, 2016). When diplomacy is embedded in a broader ecosystem of cultural exchange, it can disrupt zero-sum logics and open space for trust-building and mutual accommodation.

In this light, future engagement strategies should not ignore the soft dimensions of diplomacy. Art, cinema, education, and media can play transformative roles in disarming hostility and reimagining possibilities for coexistence. The JCPOA, though politically weakened, stands as evidence that cultural diplomacy is not ancillary—but essential—to sustainable international engagement.

### **3.3 The Role of Soft Power**

Joseph Nye's concept of soft power emphasizes the ability to persuade through cultural appeal, values, and moral legitimacy rather than coercion (Nye, 2004). Both the U.S. and Iran have employed soft power strategies, though with differing tools and audiences.

The U.S. leverages its cultural industries (e.g., film, education, global brands, technology) to construct an attractive image worldwide. Iran, constrained by sanctions and diplomatic isolation, utilizes alternative instruments—religious media, cultural institutions, and resistance narratives—to influence regional and global audiences.

However, soft power's effectiveness depends on perceived authenticity. When cultural products are seen as propaganda, they lose credibility. Genuine cultural interaction—grounded in dialogue and empathy—can foster understanding, dispel stereotypes, and enable conflict management through shared human experiences.

### **3.4 Implications for Foreign Policy and IR Theory**

A deeper appreciation of cultural foundations in foreign policy has significant implications for both theory and practice. Theoretically, constructivist and cultural analyses offer a more comprehensive understanding of state behavior, moving beyond material interests to account for identity, narrative, and perception. Practically, these insights call for reforms in diplomatic training and policy design, emphasizing cultural literacy—the ability to understand symbolic systems, collective histories, and value sensitivities of other societies.

For U.S.–Iran relations, this is particularly relevant. The tension is not merely geopolitical but stems from misperceptions, historical grievances, and mutual cultural blindness. Building pathways for dialogue and reducing hostility requires empathy, historical awareness, and

recognition of cultural identity—not in opposition to strategic interests, but as a necessary framework for pursuing them constructively.

#### IV. Conclusion

Culture is not a peripheral element but a foundational force shaping national identities and international relationships. The complex, tension-ridden dynamic between the United States and Iran demonstrates how cultural misperceptions—particularly when failing to distinguish between government and society—can deepen crises and foster distrust. Conversely, constructive cultural engagement can build mutual understanding, reduce tensions, and pave the way for sustainable peace and cooperation. In an increasingly interconnected world marked by cultural complexity and identity pluralism, the role of culture in foreign policy and diplomacy is not merely important—it is indispensable.

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