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# CONSTRUCTION OF NATIONAL IDENTITY AND SECURITY POLICIES OF IRAN IN THE 20TH CENTURY

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**Abstract**

Iran security policies went through accommodation and adjustment during the Shah regime to a reactive policy off late under the Islamic Republic. And the security of the state is closely linked to the perception of threat. But how an objective material condition is perceived as threat or non-threat is a function of identity. The phenomenal change in the security policies of Iran is correlated with the construction of national identity in Iran. But identity is a fluid concept which doesn't take a concrete shape for all eons but it is moulded and reshape from time to time. In course of time, at certain historical political junctures we find that either the ethno Persian identity or the Islamic identity gets legitimated as the state identity of Iran. And as the identity of the state changes, it had ramifications in the security policies. This paper attempts to engage with the linkages between identity construction and the perception of threat.

**Keywords:-** Shah regime, identity, ramifications, perception, phenomenal change.

**Introduction:**

Iran is a major player in the West Asian region. It has both the geostrategic location and oil reserves, though its power has decline over the last 3 decades it is still a power which can potentially tilt the balance of power in the region. The security of the state depends on how it perceives threat. And power define in material capability has less to do with the perception of threat than identity. Threat perception, though an undertheorized concept, is a function of identity and not power. (Rousseau and Der Veen 2005) Indeed there is a strong correlation between power and threat perception but power does not determine threat perception but rather determine the degree of intensity of threat perception.

So in studying identity as the explanatory variable for threat perception it is important to emphasize that identity is a social construction where the 'self' derive its meaning from the

significant 'other'. And interestingly the identity of Iran is a site of contestation of two major identities, namely, cultural Persian identity and Islamic identity. In course of time, at certain historical political junctures, one form of identity gets more legitimated than the other as an state identity. This consolidation of identity and its consequent external threat perception are factors impinging upon its security policies. The change in the national identity of Iran from a secular ethno Persian identity to an Islamic identity since 1979 revolution brought about a complete shift in the social, political, economic and military spheres. The perception of threat changes as it changes its state identity. For instance, during the initial years of the 20th century US was seen as a patron of freedom and integrity for Iran but by late 1960s and early 70s the image change and US became the greater threat in the region. Thus, the systemic orientation in terms of power distribution tends to view states as a "black box" (David Singer 1961) which discounts the differences amongst states giving a distorted picture of the reality. Therefore, it is important to analyse from the domestic level and identity as an independent variable and not just an ideational factor to fill in the gap in the realist literature. (English 2002)

**The contestation between Persian identity and Islamic identity:**
In the post-World War II Iran was divided into spheres of influence between the Soviets and the British with an independent neutral central zone according to the provision of the Anglo- Russian convention of 1907. (Rouhallah 1966) It was in this context that Reza Shah Pahavi requested US to use its good office to restrain the outside forces. The Pahlavi reign was secular and Reza Shah wanted to modernise Iran. But Reza Shah cannot be compared to his counterparts Mustafa Kemal Ataturk and Mussolini, who were also tasked in modernising their country, because unlike their country Iran was not a centralized state and the government was never felt outside Tehran. He wanted to make Iran a major power. This vision was fulfilled by his son Mohammad Reza Shah Pahlavi who made Iran one of the wealthiest nations in the world. Reza Shah invoked Iran's glorious past and civilization to mobilize its people under a proud Persian nation.

During the Pahlavi regime in Iran there were many reforms, modernization and secularization move. The Islamic identity was seen as an alien element to the social fabric of the Persian culture. The pre Islamic Persian culture was emphasized and nurtured by the Shah government. Islam as a religion was a private affair, the powers of the clergy were undermined and interestingly hijab was banned in the public space. The Shah adopted Pahlavi as the family name to mark the Persian national identity it tends to carry forward. The linguistic minorities were persianize and in 1934 Persia was changed to Iran, (Abrahamian 2008) which eulogizes the glories and the power of the Aryans. In order to project the glory of the Persian culture Persia was dislodge because it represented the humiliation of the Qajar dynasty. The cultural ethno Persian identity was emphasized to an extent that administrative terms, places, gardens, streets and parks bearing Islamic name were change. Persian became the national language and everyone irrespective of one's ethnic identities had to imbibe it. During this secular regime and where cultural identity triumph over the Islamic identity, Iran had many western allies especially US. In fact when Iran perceived Soviets as a threat because of its involvement with the Azeris and Kurds independence, Iran saw a need for securitization by balancing the threat where US played a major role.

But after the Iranian revolution of 1979, their perception of threat change. Strengthened by the historical incidents of CIA backed coup against the democratically elected Mosaddeq

government (Rahnema 2012) and the dictatorial policies of the Shah who was an ally of the west especially the US, the Iranians change their perception towards the west and saw them as an illegitimate force determine to destroy the core of Islamic revolution. And this recognition of the state identity from a cultural Persian identity to an Islamic one is political as well as psychological, a psychological need to define yourself and carve out your own space which is manifested in attaining the helm of political affairs in Iran.

The Islamic revolution of 1979 was the brainchild of the clergies and the bazaaris who were traditional middle class merchants and traders. The communist and reformist who were secular joined the revolution but after the revolution the seculars were weeded out. There was a public execution of the Tudeh communist party members and fedaian who were against the Islamic reactionary regime regardless of the fact that they had a hand in the 1979 revolution. After the revolution, Iran became an Islamic Republic of Iran. There was a rampant use of Islamic connotations and revert back all the Islamic names and islamicized the administrative terms and the names of the places. Change of name of place seems quite common whenever there is a change of hand in the political affairs. For example the valiasr street was change to Pahlavi street then mosaddeq street and back to its Islamic name valiasr street by Ayatollah Khomeini. The Majles- e Melli (National Assembly) was also changed to Majles- e Islami (Islamic Assembly). The clash between the cultural identity of Persian and the Islamic identity is so apparent that after the revolution the Islamic government ban the national celebration of nowruz (Persian New Year) and chaharshanbe-suri as they were regarded as paganism and anti-islam.

The Iran-Iraq war played a major role in strengthening the Islamic identity by the clergies who were in the echelon of political powers. The counter revolutionaries against the Islamic regime were distracted by the war. It is observed that when there is a threat to the country then there is a stronger mobilization of people under the banner of a single identity. And that was the territorially based identity Iran. Being an Iranian aroused the nationalistic feelings among the people and was deeply engrossed in defending the country that political struggle for power was left alone to the clergies. This is manifested in the Iran-Iraq war 1980-1988, the Iranians irrespective of their differences with their ethnicities, religions and cultures all come together to defend their country. Iran as a territorial identity itself had implications on its security projections and policies as well.

**Threat perception and identity:**
The Islamic Republic of Iran donning the mantel of an Islamic identity brought about a change in a way the state observed the outside world and subsequently changing the course of its security policies. Threat perception is a psychological factor, a function of cognition whereby one observes and assesses the objective environment as to whether it is threatening or not. Its significance is emphasized in the analysis of war and conflict resolution wherein the perceptions of the actors involved is the active cause in analyzing the observed situation. What action or policies will be taken is predetermined by the perception of the leaders and the policy makers. The objective material capability is given its meaning and is animated by the policymakers. Perception is a sufficient condition for the intimidation of violence or any policies on the success of conflict resolution. It has serious consequential effects as an actor can either underestimate or overestimate, judge and misjudge the other actors' intentions. (Jervis 1988) This can lead to

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unnecessary counterproductive aggression or an unwarranted diplomatic optimism affecting the optimal outcome.

In the international system, the concept of threat perception is a useful analytical tool considering the fact that the underpinning of international relations is that it is a product of interactions among states and other non-state actors. The international system is a zone of conflict and cooperation. This process of socialization among the actors depends on the concern actors' understanding and interpretation of the social environment. And it is in this equation that perception translate the objective environment into states' policies by ascertaining as to whether the "out- group" pose as a threat or not to the "in" group. The reflectivist analysis play an important role in determining the response to the stimulus inflicted by the juxtaposition of the concern states. Hence, threat perception in view of its insightful assessment and importance in shaping security policies stands out to carve a niche for itself as an analytical concept in international relations. In fact, without the perception of threat the realist core assumptions of balance of power theory and the revised balance of threat theory won't have been operational. The realist focus on power but there is a problem in the objective assessment of power, so what matter most is the decision makers' perception. (Wohlforth, 1995) There is a strong case of correlation between perception of power and change. Perception leads to expectations of certain norms, rules and behavior and takes into account the intention of the other actors which shapes its strategic behavior.

The concept of threat perception is largely unexamined and undertheorized by dominant mainstream IR scholars. It is observed that even though Realist texts has implicitly implied threat perception as a determining role in framing security policies and playing a vital role in theories of war; deterrence, alliances and conflict resolution they have taken the concept of threat perception as exogenously given and avoided its theorization. The realist literature shows threat perception as a function of power. And liberal theorists perceived lack of mutual interests and absence of shared values contributing to threat perception. Therefore, it is power and absence of shared beliefs that determine what is threatening to Iran and hence security policies being frame. However, in this process, the role of identity is either negligible or absent. But power and interests alone doesn't determine threat perception, identity- the social construction of 'self' and the 'other'- also play an equally independent role in shaping threat perception.

Threat perception is an intervening variable between action and reaction because even in the face of objective evidences there can be no countermove unless threat is perceived and it is also true that threat is perceived and the countermove taken in the absence of any malicious intent of the opponent. (Cohen 1978) Iran have conducted reactive policies during the Cold War under the Pahlavi regime, orienting it's security policies responding to the world systemic divide, adopting a balancing strategy and alliance formation in pursuit of national interests. Besides, the quest for a regional hegemon by major states like Iran, Saudi Arabia and Turkey have attracted many scholars to the study of conflicts and security in West Asia, making an excellent site for realist thinking (Paul Aarts 1999). However, realist prepositions stressed on material capabilities postulating that a state with a greater material capabilities will be seen as a threat hence resulting in balancing (Stephen Walt 1985). But there is a gap in the realist literature, the problem in the realist instrumental logic of the event-response phenomena, (example responding to a threat without engaging with the notion of threat as such) which gives a partial interpretation of reality. The structural implications on states security policies posited by the anarchic conditions

explained purely by material factors fails to account for the dynamism and change in the perception of threat and the construction of national security in Iran.

In explaining how threat is perceived, David Gilbert, a political psychologist estimated that cognitive activity is a product of human intentions when the moral sensibilities are violated and there is a vulnerability to a problem. And threat perception does not emerge from a quasi-objective international power structure. There is a correlation between the power capabilities and the identity. Power capabilities by themselves do not determine who is a friend or a foe. (Wendt 1989)There is at work another causal variable, identity, which better explain who is more threatening than the other. In fact, this ideational variable identity seems more relevant in assessing threat perception. Figurative functions, speech acts, cognition, language, culture comes to play an equally important role in ameliorating an identity of the state which then affect its behavior.

The social construction of identity affects one's security policies. The categorization of "self" and the "other" leads one to favor one's own in-group positively over the out-group. Hence based on the identity construction there is a prejudicial attitudes and discriminatory behavior towards material capabilities of the out-group. However, realism being grounded in the logic of rationality, always weighing the costs and benefits deriving mainly from the material capabilities, threat assessment is made. As David Rousseau and A. Maurits Van Der Veen points out against realism for arguing that power considerations should dominate perception of threat in international relations. Threat is seen as an objective measure to be calculated from material Balance of power logic. Threat perception is seen as a function of power asymmetries according to realism. But anarchy and material factors provide little leverage and are not linked to aggressive intentions which can be accounted for invoking a sense of threat. The reason why distribution of material capabilities among states don't invite some response and some states seen as threatening is because the judgment comes from identity of the concern states.

Threat perception is not the product of an outcome of power distribution but rather of the process of interactions based on inter-subjective knowledge. There is a historicity behind assessing the objective environment especially when it comes to judging states' behavior. States constructs an image of other states and attempts to create an identity of the 'self' vis a vis the 'other'. In the case of Iran and the United States, their constructed image served to demonize the other party. (Jose 2002) The mechanistic translation of power to an existence of threat is dubious because the material capabilities of the United States had nothing to do with Iran security policies per se but it was the state identity that had determined such security factors.

**Correlation between identity and security policies in Iran:**
For the purpose of my study I divided the $20^{th}$ century Iran state identity into Persian nationalism during the Shah regime, Islamic ideology post 1979 revolution and the counter revolutionary in the $21^{st}$ century which reemphasized the Persian culturalism. Based on these identities it has myriad trajectories in the security policies of Iran.

*Persian nationalism during the Shah period*

The historical root is a deciding factor at how security policies are projected. As during the Pahlavi regime Iran was apprehensive of the Soviets. This can be attributed to the Soviet's occupation of northern Iran and the monopoly of the oil reserves of the area coming under its influence. Just as Britain was slowing pulling away the Soviets were asserting itself and the

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"Molotov-Ribbentrop Pact" was seen as Soviet's scheme to make Iran its sphere of influence. (Golan 1990) Iranians saw Soviets as interfering in their internal matters through its sponsored Tudeh party in the Majles. In fact, Soviets concern over the security in its southern border wanted a pro- Soviet regime in the northern part of Iran. Hence, it sponsored the Azeris and the Kurds independence struggle against Iran which by 1945 created the autonomous Republic of Azerbaijan and the Kurdish Republic. Tensions between the two countries grew and border clashes frequented, finally there was a virtual break in the relations between Soviets and Iran.

This images, memories and experiences constructed Soviet as a threat. And Iran as a rational actor saw a need for securitization by balancing the threat. (Walt 1985, Pp 3-43) The United States played a major role in balancing the threat and it was seen by Iran as a patron of freedom and integrity. President Eisenhower period marked the beginning of direct US activism. The nationalization of the Anglo-Iranian Oil Company by Mosaddeq was seen by the US as a Soviet instigation therefore the 1953 covert CIA-MI6 coup which brought back Mohammad Reza Shah to the throne. (Bill 1988) Iran was a major beneficiaries of the Truman doctrine and during the Shah regime as islamic identity was suppressed, there was a commitment to support Israel. To strengthen this alignment Baghdad pact was formed in 1955. Iraq withdrew in 1958 and the alliance became CENTO which continues till the Iranian revolution in 1979. In 1969, the Nixon doctrine was in place where there was a massive arms transfer to Iran and Saudi Arabia. Iran was dubbed "Policeman of the Persian Gulf" which was a part of the twin pillar strategy of the United States. (Stivers 1986)

Such security policies were correlated with the Shah ambitions to make Iran a regional power. On October 1971, Iran celebrated the 2500th of anniversary of the founding of Persian Empire by Cyrus the Great. It demonstrates the pride of Iran in their rich glorious history. Persian nationalist feelings were asserted and encouraged. The Shah claimed the strategic islands of Abu Musa and the two Tunbs, the Shah also help in the suppression of the Dhofar rebellion. Iran expressed an outright exercise of its power and strives to achieve hegemonic power in the West Asian region.

*Islamic ideology in the post revolution of 1979:*

The Islamic Republic of Iran saw the outside world with suspicious eye. The United States was now seen as an enemy and a threat to their sovereignty. And such political rhetoric was raise under the Islamic ideology. Analysing the Shah relationship with the United States, it was understood that Iran was more of a clientele state than an ally. Iran was rather used by the US as a stabilizing force in West Asia to protect its interests. The twin pillar policy recognized Iran as the guardian of US West Asia interests and Iran's foreign policies during the Shah represented close identification with the US interests. Besides, the overthrow of mosaddeq who was democratically elected created apprehensiveness among the Iranians of the dual standards of the United States.

Following the 1969 MoU between US and Iran there was increase in oil revenues which then led to the purchase of military equipment from the US. As a following 40000 US military personnel were given immunity this outrage Iranians sensitivity as they believed that Iran was paying for an agreement which compromise the independence and sovereignty of the nation. And the person who led the voices was none other than Ayatollah Khomeini. The dictatorial policies of the Shah help in fomenting anti west attitude among the people which had an impact in its security policies. Iran under the Supreme Leader Ayatollah Khomeini was emphasising on

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exporting revolution and support Islamic movement abroad. And Iran did support the Hezbollah of Lebanon and Hamas in Palestine.

Based on the principle of Muslim brotherhood fraternity Iran politicized Islam and made Islamic ideology as the legitimate political framework for governance as well as maintenance of foreign relations. Iran's commitment to retain the supremacy of Islam of the Shiite type, the Islamic government in its foreign affairs behave in a way that their government is not dominated by other power. In fact, they are counter-hegemonic and challenged the oppressive forces both in the Muslim world and outside to root out colonialism, despotism and absolutism. It is in this context that the Islamic government is anti-western especially the United States. It was to this end that the Islamic government seek out alliances with Russia and China and other NAM countries. The regime tried to do what

during his Presidency was reverted back by Ahmadinejad. He completely shifted the orientation of Iran security policies and Iran they think was steering an independent foreign policies.

*Counter revolutionaries of the 21st century*

Analysing the post 1979 revolution, it is observed that it had reached a "thermidor" stage where the radicals were ousting out the reformists and the communist parties and strive to attain political prominence. (Brinton 1965) And it is the radical Shiites which left no stone unturned in demonizing the US. President Rafsanjani though manoeuvring within the Islamic institution steer the security policies of Iran in a pragmatic line. Iran under his presidency tried to conduct policies based on national interests' not Islamic ideology, through cooperation with Gulf States and liberal economic policy.

His next successor Khatami carried on the ambition to make Iran a major power again in the Gulf region. Subsequently, Iran and the GCC countries also attempted on a regional security arrangement to stabilize relations with the regional powers. Khatami was able to maintain good relations with the outside world and brought about economic reintegration to the global market. However, whatever little was achieved economy was sunk to its lowest ebb. Ever since the hostage crisis of 1979, sanctions on Iran has not been lifted and the common masses are suffering because of the inflation. The masses are dissatisfied and disgruntled and are rebelling against the government. And since it is an Islamic government where there is a clergy oligarchy the majority of the masses began to reassert their pride in the Persian cultural identity and saw Islam as an alien force destroying their cultured way of life. In fact, Iran has been quoted as becoming increasingly anti clergical country.

**Conclusion:**

Conflicts and war is the order of the day in international relations. In explaining this phenomenon, threat perception is central to the understanding of intergroup conflicts and war. The concept of threat is a topic of security studies hence, it is important to explore how threat are perceived and conceptualized by Iran. This social construction of threat is the product of the identity of the state. Construction of threat often becomes the rationale for war or justification for coercive measures, e.g., in the context of war on Iraq, war on terror, and recently the Iranian nuclear program. And typically what's more important is not the material conditions but the identity of the states or non-states actors that determine threat. Hence, the research project has relevance to contemporary study.

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Here, the independent variable is the domestic political identity of Iran, which encompassed the attitudes, social behaviour and knowledge of the system, public opinions, etc, and the dependent variable is the perception of threat which has ramifications in the security policies of Iran. States are not to be treated as black box because inside the box there are important variables which can explain the phenomena outside the box. Inside it, there is a whole mechanism of public opinion and decision making process going on that transcends to the systemic structures. For instance, the change of regime or the identity of cultural Persian one to an Islamic national identity after 1979 revolution impacted not only its security policies but also the impact was felt outside in the systemic level as well

However, the material factor is not dismissed in this paper but it rather makes two attempts: first, identity is causally linked to perception of threat and second, existence of strong interaction between power and identity. As power capabilities, albeit not determining the perception of threat, play a major role in determining the intensity of the threat assessment. The change in the national identity of Iran from a secular ethno Persian identity to a radical Islamic identity since 1979 revolution brought about a complete shift in the social political, economic and military spheres. The perception of threat changes as it changes its stae identity. For instance, during the initial years of the $20^{th}$ century US was seen as a patron of freedom and integrity for Iran but by late 1960s and 70s the image change and US became the greater threat in the region. Thus the systemic orientation tends to view states as a "black box" (David Singer, 1961) which discounts the differences amongst states giving a distorted predicament.

Contextualization of the internal development will enable us to understand the security policies of Iran. The systemic conditions are important but it is only a necessary conditions but the domestic identity politics of Iran is rather the basis of change hence there is a need to link the macro and micro analysis. (Rosenau 1969) Internal identity politics is the sufficient conditions determining how Iran will respond to the outside forces. The notion of perception of the outside forces comes to play a vital role. It determines how Iran responds and makes decisions based on the knowledge or the ideas and image they carry about the outside forces. And identity plays an important role in constructing this image of a country.

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