



## ***Constructivism and US-Iran Relations***

Constructivism is probably the most difficult international relations theory to grasp. Even political science graduate students often grow frustrated trying to figure it out. This need not be the case, however. Constructivism offers some very relatable ideas that, if put into more accessible language, provide a compelling and useful complement and alternative to other international relations theories - especially for those attempting to understand the dynamics of US-Iran relations.

Constructivism derives its name from the fundamental proposition that political actors construct international political relationships out of their own ideas. Relations between certain countries - and international relations in general - are the way that they are because that is how states and people believe them to be. Ideas matter more than material considerations in the conduct of international relations. These ideas can be of oneself, of a particular "Other," or of the international state system in general. In the words of the famous Constructivist scholar Alexander Wendt, "anarchy is what states make of it."

Constructivism can work on two levels. First is the individual, internal state level. Most constructivism looks at the internal characteristics of individual states and societies to determine their interests and likely behavior. All constructivists agree that state interests are problematic - that is, they cannot be taken for granted as in Realism. Constructivism does not say that a state's interests cannot be the material interests emphasized by Realism - only that they do not have to be. A state's interests may be derived from some unique set of cultural or other values. There is some overlap between Constructivism and Liberal theories of democratic peace, but Constructivism is the main home for theories that emphasize cultural and other idea-based differences between countries. At this first level of Constructivism, ideas and interests are generated within each state and society.

### ***A Word on "Rationality"***

A brief discussion of rationality is important to any primer on Constructivism. Rationality is a relative phenomenon in Constructivism. What may seem irrational to Americans may be completely rational to Iranians and vice-versa. It all depends on how states and societies define their ends and apply means to achieve those ends. If culture is the basis of means and ends, then we can expect to see very different ideas of "rationality" around the world. Moreover, there are two kinds of rationality. The rationality to which people most often refer is instrumental rationality. Instrumental rationality emphasizes the logical

matching of means and ends and usually assumes material interests ranging from self-preservation to material profit. Such a conception of rationality underpins deterrence theory as well as many other mainstream views on international relations. But the famous German sociologist Max Weber argued for the existence of another kind of rational behavior called "value-rational" behavior. Value-rational behavior is based on values, norms, and ideas. Value-rational behavior may compromise personal material and physical well-being in pursuit of a higher purpose. For example, a protester might march to his own bloody injury or even death at the hands of riot police, yet this can be construed as value-rational insofar as it serves the actor's interest in dignity or freedom for his people. Viewing affairs from a strictly instrumentally-rational standpoint, such action would simply appear irrational. Value-rationality and instrumental rationality are not mutually exclusive. Value-rational action by an individual could prove instrumentally rational to a group, such as if bloody protests serve as a successful means to overthrow a repressive government. The distinction between the two types of rationality can get a little fuzzy under certain circumstances. In short, though, it is worth keeping in mind different conceptions of rationality when making judgments as to the "rationality" of states, societies, and world leaders.

### ***Interaction and the Creation of Shared Meaning and Understanding***

A second level on which Constructivism works is the structural or systemic level (like Neorealism). Alexander Wendt is the leading systemic Constructivist thinker. His seminal work *Social Theory of International Politics* is a challenge to Realist scholar Kenneth Waltz's structural Realist work similarly titled *Theory of International Politics*. Wendt applies Constructivism to the international state system. He argues that states are engaged in social relationships which derive meaning independently of the actual material environment. For example, the United States is involved in very different social relationships with Great Britain and France than with North Korea and Iran. These social relationships make British and French nuclear weapons far less worrisome than Iranian or North Korean nuclear weapons. Realists, of course, would say that the US should react the same way to all of these countries' nuclear weapons due to the uncertain nature of the international system. According to Wendt, whether states are contentious or cooperative depends on the construction of intersubjective meaning and understanding of the international state system and of each other as individual actors. At this level of Constructivism, ideas and interests are generated by interaction between states and societies.

Intersubjective meaning is a key constructivist concept used by Wendt to explain interaction between states, but its application is far from limited to esoteric discussions of international relations theory. Though intersubjective meaning appears to be an intimidating academic term, its meaning is actually quite simple and intuitive. Intersubjective meaning refers to shared understanding of and belief about meaning, significance, and the nature of things. It can be shared among several actors, but for our purposes is most significant between two actors in - or two sides to - a political

relationship. Intersubjective meaning between two actors stems from (or in academic terms, is endogenous to) their interaction and relationship. These actors can be states, groups (such as ethnic and national groups), or even individual people. Ideas, identities, and expectations emerge from and are sustained or changed by the construction and reconstruction of intersubjective meaning.

People experience intersubjective meaning in their daily lives. A romantic relationship between a boyfriend and a girlfriend is an example. The relationship between these two people is imbued with romantic ideas and meaning. Moreover, it takes two to tango - romance could not serve as the basis of intersubjective meaning without both members of the relationship; the romance is a shared understanding of the nature and meaning of their relationship. Moreover, the boyfriend is not seen in a romantic light by his male friends since his social relationship to them is obviously different. Intersubjective meaning is continually updated and reconstructed such that identities can change. The romantic, attentive boyfriend can evolve (or one might say, devolve) into the husband who forgets to plan date night and thinks more about using his new power tools to fix the backyard fence. The intersubjective meaning of the relationship changes from that of a romantic courtship to one of loving but practical cooperation in maintaining a household. The wife's expectations and the husband's identity change; after expecting and being able to predict candle-lit dinners, she comes to expect and predict other things of her husband, whose identity and behavior in relation to his wife is now more akin to "Mr. Fix-It" than to "Don Juan."

Intersubjective meaning and understanding can be stagnant and self-reinforcing rather than evolutionary, however. Myths and narratives of victimization can emerge, especially if an early and/or critical interaction is negative and if additional interactions reinforce a negative impression. At a certain point, objectivity and empathy can be lost in the relationship, and the parties to it may come to define themselves in opposition to each other. Constructivists use this dynamic to explain many ethnic conflicts. Practical circumstances that favor one ethnic group over another, especially circumstances which persist, can lead ethnic groups to develop ideas and narratives of superiority and subordination. Over time, differences that are based on practical questions of politics and economics turn into discourses of "ancient hatreds" rooted in bloodlines, myths, narratives, and traditions. The political science literature on ethnic conflict is rich and diverse, and would constitute too great and complicated an aside to explain intersubjective meaning. Instead, let another, more light-hearted non-political example drive the point home. Sports fans are well aware of the narrative of nearly a century of suffering by the Boston Red Sox and their fans at the hands of the New York Yankees. The Yankees crushed the hopes of the Red Sox time and again after Boston sold Babe Ruth to New York. In time, the idea of the "Curse of the Bambino" emerged. According to this myth, the Red Sox lost not because the Yankees were consistently and objectively better, but because the Red Sox were cursed. Losing to the Yankees became part of the very identity of Red Sox fans; they came to expect it and even find comfortable familiarity in it. Hating the Yankees became part of a Red Sox fan's identity. Similarly, hatred of

the Red Sox became part of being a Yankees fan - as did the belief that certain natural laws ensured the Yankees' ultimate victory. This was the intersubjective meaning, or understanding, shared between two baseball teams and their fans. This shared narrative was, of course, disrupted by Boston's dramatic victory over New York and World Series triumph in 2004. Yet a clearly large amount of negative intersubjective meaning remains between the two, including emotional accusations that the Yankees constitute an "evil empire" - language taken directly from the far more significant rivalry between the US and Soviet Union during the Cold War.

Discussions of romance and baseball may seem silly and off-topic, but these imperfect examples should nonetheless clearly demonstrate some important points. Actors - be they individuals, groups, or even states - form ideas, identities, and interests through interaction with each other. Repeated interactions can lead to certain beliefs and expectations. These expectations may evolve in innocuous or even positive fashion, or they can get stuck in feedback loops of profoundly negative nature that breed hostility and unfair generalization and strip the participants of their ability to trust and to view the relationship objectively and positively.

### ***Intersubjective Meaning: the Key to the US-Iran Conflict?***

In Wendt's theoretical view, states begin their interactions with a blank slate. Nothing predisposes them to conflict or to cooperation. The early interactions are critical; they can set the relationship and intersubjective meaning construction between two countries on a largely positive or negative course. In the case of US-Iran relations, I argue that the following is a plausible explanation of the countries' persistent conflict: Intersubjective meaning construction was placed on a profoundly negative trajectory when the current Iranian state known as the Islamic Republic of Iran emerged from the tumult of revolution in 1979. An Iranian narrative of American and Western imperialism and interference - backed by the historical realities of America's role in the 1953 coup and support for the Shah - helped motivate the creation of a new state whose identity was to be largely based on opposition to America and the West. Meanwhile, a critical moment for the US in its early intersubjective meaning construction with post-revolutionary Iran was the appalling seizure of the American embassy in Tehran and subsequent 444-day hostage crisis. If there was indeed a momentary blank slate between the US and post-revolutionary Iran, this event helped to establish the Islamic Republic of Iran as a radically hostile enemy in American eyes. Relations between the two countries have thus arguably been handicapped over the last three decades by the intersubjective meaning constructed with the bricks and mortar of hostility, trauma, and distrust. In such a Constructivist view, the state of US-Iran relations cannot be blamed on conflicting geopolitical, military, or economic interests. Instead, it is the result of ideas and narratives of grievance and threat developed in each country about the other. These ideas and narratives are in some cases rooted in real historical events that occurred at critical times, but often assume a power and a scale beyond what many outside observers would consider "rational" or objective.

### ***Criticisms of Constructivism***

Constructivism has clear strengths. It provides a theoretical home for cultural explanations of world politics. It explains why, independent of the hardcore material realities of the world, a state may be "friends" with one state but the implacable enemy of another. It offers a way to explain the obvious variation in attitudes and behavior across different states and societies, including behavior that may seem "irrational." Yet it is not without flaws. Realists argue that it does not give sufficient credence to the material realities of the world. Systemic Constructivism is particularly ill-equipped to address uncertainty. Realism would suggest that a state that takes a Constructivist view of the world is naïve; a state may "befriend" another state only as a means to take advantage of it at an opportune time. The fundamental question remains: can states overcome anarchy, uncertainty, and the security dilemma and base relations on non-material considerations - for better or for worse?

### ***Applying Constructivism to US-Iran Relations***

Though I have already indicated one way that Constructivism can be applied to US-Iran relations, I offer here a set of Constructivist questions and propositions for consideration by those seeking to give more sophisticated structure to their thinking and analysis of US-Iran relations. As with Realism and Liberalism, some of the propositions may seem to contradict one another. This again is testament to the diversity and limitations of theory.

#### *Questions:*

- What do Iranians and Americans each value?
- Do Iranian and American interests and values stem from their respective cultures?
- Are their values and interests the same or different? Is there any overlap?
- Might some Iranian values and interests conflict with one another?
- Might some American values and interests conflict with one another?
- What exactly does it mean to say that either Iran or the US is "rational" or "irrational?"
- What is the nature of intersubjective meaning between the US and Iran?
- How many of the points of dispute between the two countries are rooted in fact and objectivity? How many are rooted in myths and subjective understandings?
- Is there any way to spark a positive evolution in the intersubjective meaning shared by the US and Iran?

#### *Propositions:*

- The US and Iran have a shared understanding of each other as an enemy.

- This shared understanding of the relationship as one of enemies is self-reinforcing; actions taken by each are viewed as hostile and with great suspicion.
- Because of negative intersubjective meaning, the US and Iran are unable to view each other's actions dispassionately and objectively.
- Nothing - even their respective cultures - makes the US and Iran natural enemies. Instead, hostility is sustained by real events and myths associated with path-dependent intersubjective meaning construction.
- The security concerns of each country with respect to the other are rooted in negative intersubjective meaning.
- Negative events and gestures are amplified in an environment characterized by negative intersubjective meaning. The US and Iran therefore often over-react to one another.
- Provided ample common ground can be found and positive steps taken, the negative intersubjective meaning between the US and Iran can be deconstructed and rebuilt in a more positive way.
- The US-Iran rift is rooted in cultural differences.
- The US and Iran have fundamentally different ideas of values and interests - and therefore of rational behavior.
- Iranians and Americans independently construct notions of values, interests, and rational behavior such that they could probably never see eye-to-eye.
- Both Iran and the US are capable of acting according to instrumental or value-rationality.