

# Myth, National Identity and Iranians Attitude towards International Relations

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## Abstract

Iranian myths have left imprints on Iran's political and international vision throughout history. Using a constructivist approach, I try to demonstrate that these myths have had functional significance as meaning constructs to form and shape Iranian identity and Iranians' international attitude. These myths have been also relevant when the Iranian people presented definitions for themselves, others and the outer world. It is, however, evident that other meaning constructs like history, religion, traditions and language have had roles to play in formation of Iranian identity. All such meaning constructs are in a constant connection with each other and all together shape Iranian identity. That said, the primary question of the present research is, what is the role and function of Iranian myths in delineation of Iranians' identity and their attitudes towards the international system?. In response, I hypothesize that, Iranian myths, as important common meaning constructs in the Iranian mindset, have contributed to the formation of national identity and Iranian international attitude by drawing Iran's territorial boundaries, expression of Iranian collective particularities and defining of Iranian society's functions as a nation-state. To test this hypothesis the concepts related to Iranian myths and the mythic functions during different historical eras are studied.

**Keywords:** Iranian Myths, Iranian Identity, Constructivism, Iranians International Attitude, Meaning Constructs

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## **Introduction**

Myths are ever-lasting narratives that have lived to present from history of human life. They include statements that might not be available elsewhere. They are indicative of the infrastructures of culture and ways of life and thought of the people who have created them, lived with them and strived to preserve them in form of narratives, rituals, traditions and social habits, to be transferred to the next generations. There remained nothing of their glorious cities except ruins and new societies that have taken their place. Babylonian, Hellenistic and Maya myths are among them. There are also people who have built advanced civilizations around the world and are presently trying to attach their identity foundations on the remnants of the Roman and Greek myths to create linkages between themselves and those civilizations rooted in history.

In this article I intend to study the role of Iranian myths in formation of Iranian national identity and the Iranian outlook of the international system. To do so, first I define myth and locate its position in the society using the Functionalist Mythology theory that considers myths as having important functions. Then using the constructivist literature I seek to answer the question that: what is the role and function of Iranian myths in delineation of Iranians identity and their attitudes towards the international system? In response, I hypothesize that: Iranian myths as important common meaning constructs in the Iranian mindset have contributed to the formation of national identity and Iranian international attitude by drawing Iran's territorial boundaries, expression of Iranian collective

particularities and defining Iranian society as a nation-state.

### I. The Concept

The pioneers of the Functionalist Mythology School including the anthropologist, Bronislaw Malinowski, define myth as, “reviving an eternal reality to serve profound religious or ethical demands, social restrictions, statements or even practical needs. Myth is therefore vital to human civilization. It is not an ideal story but is an active force” (Esmailpoor, 2008: 45). Malinowski continues, “in an early society myth is not a story to be narrated but is a live and practical reality. It is a truth that people believe has emerged in the oldest history and has been impacting the world and human life ever since” (Karneie, 2000: 8 – 9). Therefore myths should not be mistaken for stories. Although they are narrated in the framework of stories but they hold some meanings that distinguishes them from mere stories, fictions or tales.

The French poet Jean Cocteau states, “I prefer myth over history as the historical realities turn into lies over time but a myth starts as a lie but turns into reality at last” (Ramires, 2000: 231). Ahmad Tafazzoli and Zhale Amoozegar define myth as, “mirrors that reflect images beyond millennia. They speak because history and archeology keep silent” (2012: 9). The British mythologist, John Russell Hinnells, who has conducted invaluable researches on Iranian myths, believes, “myths are not solely expression of human thoughts. They are basic concept of life and charts that regulate human life and provide a logical justification for the society” (2012: 25). Among Iranian mythologists, Jalal Sattari maintains that, “contrary to the fiction and tale, a myth is a sacred and truthful story. It is so because it is always expressive of realities and conveys meanings and theories in form of a sacrosanct story” (Sattari, 2009: 1).

Karen Armstrong, the British theologian and researcher in mythology asserts that, “myth is a scientific form that refers to what is beyond history and timeless about human being. It helps us step beyond the turbulent stream of accidental events and have a look at

the core of reality” (2011: 5 – 6). So, myths are concerned about the beginning and the end of human life and try to explain events through a pattern that is understandable and believable for all. The Romanian mythologist, Mircea Eliade, states, “not only myths define the origins of creation of the world and the beginning of animals, plants and human but also narrate all those eternal events that has made human what it is today” (2012: 24). The French philosopher Roland Barthes expresses his opinion about the dynamics of myths as, When using myths we are usually reminded of simple and early-time cultures and the pre-logical forms of thought. In the closed and static cultures myths are better presented. The modern societies may seem more open and solid based on reason; but this is not the case. Even in the modern societies there is a constant creation of suspended myths with varying longevities (2010: 13 – 14).

About continuation of mythical functions in the contemporary world Mircea Eliade writes, “Myth is always functional in the society regardless of whether the society is aware of that or not” (Barrot, 2010: 20). In other words, myths have continued to live and still affect human mindset in both the East and the West, albeit with varying degrees. With regard to the nature and the function of myths, Bronislaw Malinowski maintains that, “myth is a fundamental element of human life and is, by no means, fiction and storytelling. To the contrary, it is a live reality and a permanent reference” (Eliade, 2007: 28). Georges Dumézil the prominent French mythologist describes function of a myth as a theatrical explanation a society’s beliefs to connect that society to its conscious, values and the ideals that are pursued by a generation after the other (Esmailpoor, 2008: 49).

According to Hinnells, “when we witness Iranian mythology we do not just see unreal historical narratives or beautiful poems but we rather face the main Iranian worldview and their understanding of human, society and God” (2012: 26). For instance when Iranian myths speak of creation of universe and then the sky and the earth,

they mention how Ahura Mazda created Iranian land in its best form and how the demon reciprocated by creating evil creatures, illnesses and sins. Jalaladdin Kazzazi, and Iranian writer on myth and epics, asserts that, “myth in its broadest sense is a kind of ancient worldview. What create myth are the findings and achievements of the ancient man” (2011: 6). In other words, since myths have shaped human thought about the quiddity of the world along generations and over centuries, they cannot cease to exist easily and they continue to influence the minds of society members and peoples in different lands. “The mythical worldview is alive inside us and is still effective in our subconscious” (Kazzazi, 2011: 8).

Henry Tudor the author of the book *Political Myth* believes that myth is the indicator for the collective property of members of a society and is not thought to be invention of a particular individual. It is what all people in the society feel it (2004: 82-83). Therefore myths contain important meanings and messages that are the result of the ancient peoples’ thought to delineate a perspective for the origin and destination of man. Myths were created in a time when human, deprived of scientific methods, was after finding answers to many questions.

Ernest Cassirer, the German mythologist, believes that myth is reliant on a world of representational figures (Tudor, 2004: 59). Elsewhere, Cassirer reasons that a myth is a worldview based on unscientific attitudes and cannot coexist with a system of thought that is based on experiment and the worldview of the modern man (Tudor, 2004: 63). Meanwhile as mentioned previously, Roland Barthes contends that today’s human is surprisingly capable of building myths and thinking in a mythical way. In this respect, Lucien Lévy-Bruhl, the French philosopher and anthropologist who has conducted many researches on the primitive mindset says,

Logical thinking dose not drive the pre-logical mindset obsolete. There are many reasons for survival of the pre-logical mindset. First, there are still non- abolishable mystical elements in many concepts.

Most concepts we are familiar with today have always hold signs that are representative of pre-logical mindset. Second, even if mythical and primitive elements are stripped of most concepts, there still remains a mythical and pre-logical mindset (2011: 509 – 510). It can be argued that, while myths are representative of the non-scientific worldview of the ancient man, many concepts of such worldviews have impacted the mind of the modern man in a way that he thinks and behaves, to a large extent, according to the mythical and pre-logical frames.

With respect to the variety of definitions posed here about myth, I conclude that in this article, myths are dealt with according to their sociological nature and their role-playing and meaning-giving in devising social concepts like national identity, territorial boundaries and etc. Accordingly, myth can be defined as expression of eternal narratives about the quality of world's creation, human life's continuity and the end of it. Its concepts are not disposable` and always carry awareness about the history of human life, from its beginning to the end. Such awareness is the essence of myths and are transmitted from person to person and generation to generation.

Myths has its own functions in the contemporary human life; in many cases human socialization has been done according to the myths and the human societies have lived in accordance with them. This social function of myths is reflected in socialization of society members as well as political processes. When it comes to Iranian myths, they have taken part in Iranian socialization with drawing geographical boundaries of Iran vis-à-vis other lands, expression of Iranian characteristics in comparison with non-Iranians and giving emancipatory pledges to people on the eve of every bad event, bitter failure or occupation of the country.

## II. Constructivism and Identity

As a philosophical school and a general theory of human sciences, constructivism is attempting to reveal that all human and social

phenomena are shaped in a meta-structure of meaning. It further maintains that all human knowledge is constructed in a general historical, social, cultural and lingual text. The beginning of constructivist studies in the field of politics and International Relations dates back to the 1980s and to the Nicholas Onuf's writings. The most prominent figures of the day are Alexander Wendt, Peter J. Katzenstein, Richard K. Ashley, John Ruggie and Friedrich Kratochwil. The theory was posed in reaction to the mainstream International Relations theories that attached too much significance to the material institutions and structures. It posed a number of non-material subjects in the International Relations including language, history and identity and by doing so, tried to provide a better understanding of states' behaviour in the international system. Today, many issues that cannot be included in the main International Relations theories are best described by using constructivist elements.

Constructivism that falls in the premises of hermeneutic tradition, distinguishes between the social and natural worlds. From an ontological perspective, the theory is about construction of the social reality. Along with plain realities, there are those that their existential reason is dependent on the functions and meanings we attach to them (Guzzini, 2011: 199). The focal point of constructivism is human awareness and the role it plays in the international relations (Moshirzadeh, 2001: 326). All sciences are reflective of how they have been created in a momentous historical moment and under certain material and cultural conditions. The correctness of one belief is not correspondent to an independent existential reality and rationality that is reliant on that does not imply its approval using logical evaluation technic. On this basis, each piece of knowledge is in fact a socially-dependent conception of knowledge (Boghossian, 2006: 6). This expression of knowledge allows us to consider many public mythical beliefs that are not consistent with the rational and logical methods of evaluation as socially-dependent conception of knowledge, as they are produced in a special material

and meaning context and are preserved and valued for years.

As a structural international system theory, constructivism argues that: 1- states are the primary units in political and international analyses; 2- the main structures in the system of states are those of intersubjective and not material; 3- states' identities and interests are, to large degrees, constructed by these social constructs and are less influenced by the out – of – system or human nature or factors related to internal politics (Zehfuss, 2004: 39). Constructivists argue that the normative structures are as relevant as material ones, as they give meaning to the material resources and structures (Dehghani, 2010: 44). Therefore, the core concepts in the constructivist studies are states, intersubjective constructs, identity and interests, all closely interrelated to one another. There are important intersubjective constructs within each society that influences states. States receive their identity from these intersubjective constructs and define their interests in accordance with their identity. The interests that are conceived through such a process form foreign policy behaviors of states. Therefore myths, as having fundamental meanings about the universe's creation and explanation of creatures, the origin of the world and its final demise are regarded as important intersubjective constructs that affect national identity and foreign behaviors of states.

According to constructivism, there are two unquestioned reality about social life: first, human agency is the sole driving force behind all actions, events and consequences of the social world; second, this human agency can be only understood in the real historical terms. This is reminiscent of what is quoted from Karl Marx as saying, "Men make their own history, but they do not make it as they please" (Dessler, 1989: 443). Social structures are defined by common understanding, joint expectation and awareness and they facilitate certain courses of action, cooperative or otherwise for states vis-à-vis others (Wendt, 1995: 73).

According to constructivist assumptions, normative structures,

ideas and intersubjective values have a lot to say in International Relations and foreign policy of countries. Mind structures have a constitutive role in formation of countries' interests and identity (Dehghani, 2009: 440). According to constructivism, in order to understand how a nation's identity is constructed, attention should be paid to the prevailing attitudes and ideas in its environment and the system of norms that constitutes them. In fact, these are the interlinked norms and ideas that build identity of a nation and society. From constructivist perspective, this system of ideas has to be sought not only within a society but at the international system level (Salimi, 2007: 40).

Myths as a structure and system of ideas have been created in the minds of people. Therefore, they can be seen as common intersubjective meaning structures that contribute in public understanding of self and other. Since they help in defining their identity, it can be concluded that they have impact on the states' foreign policy in different ways. This suggests that actors' identity is central in constructivism. Identity cannot be defined in separation from its social context. If a state identifies itself as friend, rival or enemy toward another state, it makes a significant difference in the way they interact each other (Moshirzadeh, 2001: 322). Therefore the concept of identity is one of the most important subjects of discussion in constructivism. Identity can be traced behind many behaviors of states as run by humans within territorial boundaries who all enjoy some common features. States identity is what a state construct for itself in the course of interaction with other states over time. It is equally influenced by the internal elements, as domestic values and norms are also constitutive in states identity formation. With respect to the Iranian identity, it should be taken into account that it is comprised of diverse factors and elements including territorial boundaries, religious ideas, Persian language, common history of the population living inside its boundaries, myths, epics, rituals and national celebrations like Nowruz. This identity is

constructed over three thousand years of history from conception of the first Iranian empire by the Medes to the contemporary time. This is a historical phenomenon and contrary to the identity of the newly formed countries, Iranian identity is not borne out of modern time developments.

The historical concept of Iranian identity that was devised during the Sassanid Empire was transformed during the Islamic era with some ebbs and flows. It was changed during the Safavid era, and in the modern time, as the “Iranian national identity” (Ahmadi, 2011: 305). The continuation is better justified when one considers the fact that the ancient empires were very similar to the modern states in almost all aspects, except for the accuracy of the geographical boundaries. They all used to have a geographical core in which power was quite centralized (Wendt, 2005: 308 – 309).

In constructivism, man is a social creature that behaves according to collective norms and therefore the identity plays an important role in formation of interests and foreign policy objectives (Azghadi, 2000: 108 – 109). We normally see states as continuant, despite changes in generations. This is partly because their characteristics seem to be enduring: boundaries, symbols, national interests, foreign policies and etc. This continuousness helps sequence of governments over time; for instance, we regard all national governments of the United States as the government of the United States since 200 years ago (Wendt, 2005: 316). In the case of Iran, “knowing the sort of social values and ideas as constitutive elements of collective identity is the basis for a constructivist study of the Iranian national identity (Salimi, 2007: 39 – 40). In this way, an Iranian identity can be traced throughout three thousand years of Iran’s history that has survived against changes in the populations, boundaries and historical frictions, in form people’s loyalty to Iran as a concept, their collective participation in defending the boundaries when invaded by foreign forces, commitment to its traditions,

national ceremonies and mourning and usage of a common language.

Manuel Castells, the Spanish sociologist, defines identity as the process of meaning construction based on common characteristic or a set of characteristics that are prevailing over other sources of meaning. National identity is a sense of attachment and dependence shown by a group of people towards a set of common life elements in a historical context (Emamjomeh zadeh and Hameganmorad, 2013: 32). Therefore creation of a sense of attachment to a territory among people occurs within a historical context. This makes clear why history and exploring historical facts are important. The thing that constructivism attaches great importance when studying the identity of states. With collective memories a group of people reach a common identity over time. As far as people remain committed to the group's collective memories they will be available as a source of collective action mobilization. Group beliefs are usually carved in myths, narratives and traditions that give meaning to quiddity of a group and its relations with other groups. These narratives are inherently historical phenomena that are kept alive across generations, through a constant process of socialization and practice of rituals (Wendt, 2005: 238).

Therefore constructivist analysis is informed of the impact history leaves on foreign policy-making. Constructivism believes that identity of a state is formed with reference to its past and also future (Mottaghi and Kazemi, 2007: 219). Representation of Iranian identity in Iranian, Islamic (Arabic) and classic western (Greek and Roman) works indicates how Iran has enjoyed a particular meaning environment as a historical and geographic entity with a political tradition from centuries before the emergence of Islam. Such a meaning environment can be found in the writings of writers who belong to the Iran before the Arab conquest. This particular meaning environment that reflects Iranian identity depicted Iran\_as an entity that has history, culture, civilization and politics in contrast to non-Iranians. Iranians, Westerners and Arabs were full aware of such

depiction and represented it in their history and literature (Ahmadi, 2003: 31).

Gherardo Gnoli, the prominent Italian Iranologist states, “Iran as an ethnic and religious concept has a long history”. Gnoli studied religious books like Avesta, other related texts and numerous historical writings and decoded the puzzle of Iranian identity in a historical process. As he contends,

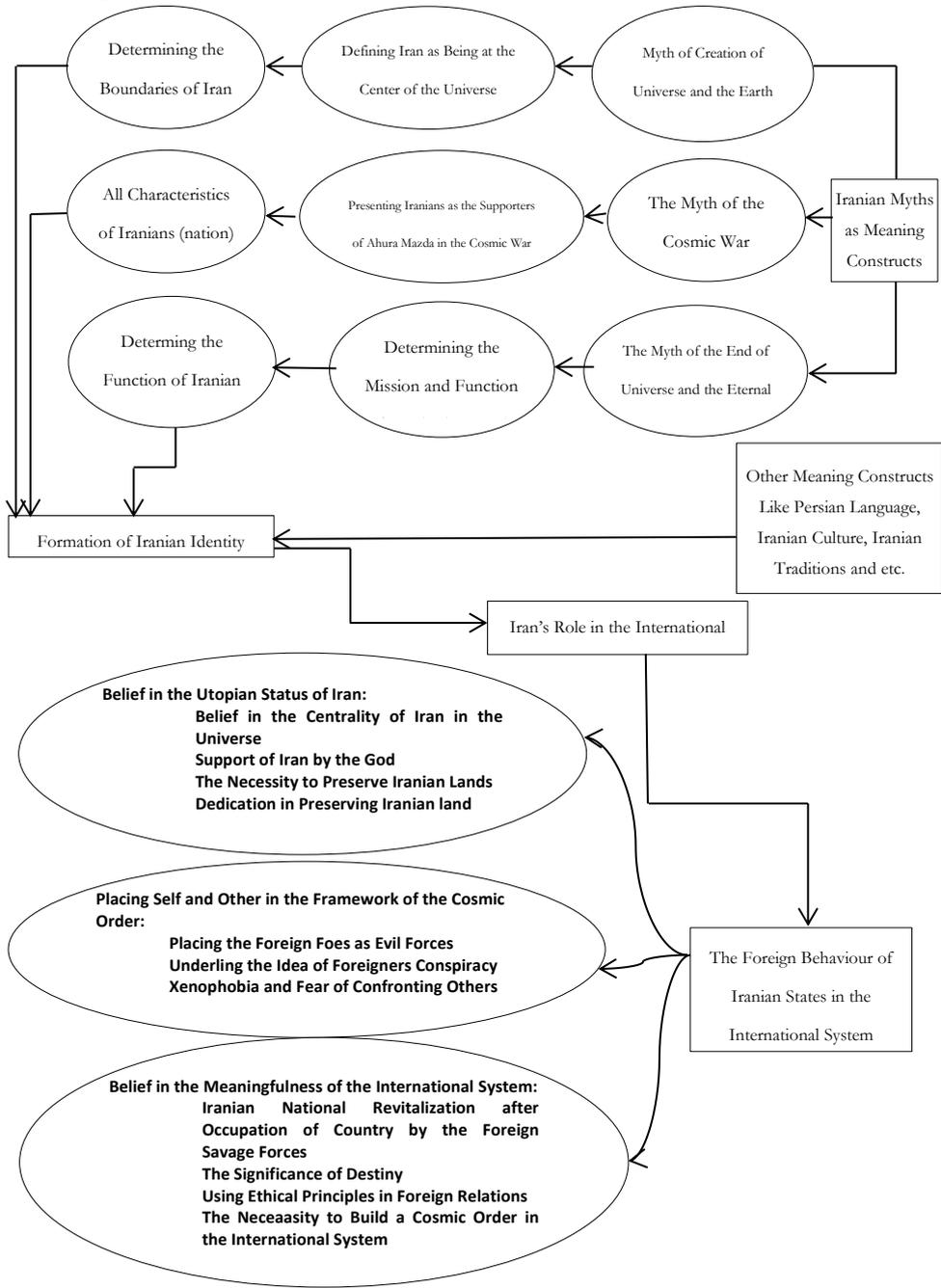
The idea of Iran as a religious, cultural and ethnical reality dates back to the end of the sixth century. In the second decade of the third century B.C. the word ‘Iran’ becomes the most frequent word the Sassanid Empire started to recall to identify itself’ (Ahmadi, 2011: 306).

Even during the Islamic caliphate era and the Middle Ages, when all Iranian territories were occupied by the occupying tribes and there is no name of Iran as a political entity, there is a clear picture of Iran and Iranian lands. This can be seen in the literary and historical writings of the era under discussion. The Iranian identity elements like Persian language, common traditions like Nowruz celebrations and Mehregan are quite widespread in Iranian territories. Even the Persian language is the formal language of the court in many non-Iranian governments and the Iranian figures play the primary role in those governments administration. The millennia history has brought about a historical memory for the Iranians that is transferred across generations through the process of socialization and makes the world meaningful to them (Mottaghi and Kazemi, 2007: 229 – 230).

Myths as normative constructs constitute state’s identity with a system of intersubjective meanings and ideas. They, in turn, are strengthened and reproduced in response to states actions. This forms a constant relation of affecting and being affected between myths and foreign policy behaviour. For example, the myth of cosmic war between the heavenly and demon forces is the most outstanding Iranian myth and has been present in all aspects of Iranian life both

individual and social; it has played role in domestic and foreign policy. With respect to the foreign behaviour of Iranian governments, this particular myth has conducted the way Iran and its opponents are perceived: Iran as representative of the heavenly world and the adversaries of Iran as demon forces. Persistence of such a definition for Iran's enemies in the course of history has boosted the corresponding myth in the mind of Iranians.

When the collective memories are created, it is hard to eliminate their long-term effects; even when the majority of people have forgotten those memories in a certain time (Wendt, 2005: 239). These collective memories in the Iranians' minds have bound them together from the era of mythical history and have given rise to the concept of Iranian identity throughout Iranian lands. This collective memory has not been forgotten and has remained intact within its geographical boundaries of the day.



### III. Iranian Myths

The Iranian identity as an international reality is, by large, a product of Iranian culture. The Iranian myths have contributed to the formation of this identity by building subjective bridges among Iranians and creating a kind of Iranian worldview. The Iranian myths as important meaning constructs align with other constructs like common history, Persian language, common traditions, religion and religious teachings including those of Zoroastrianism and Islam. In line with Iranian identity, certain behavioral models have been created which has defined Iranian role in the international system and has given shape to Iranian foreign policy. Repetition of these behaviors in the international arena has itself helped strengthening the Iranian identity and tied its constituting elements together.

This article has classified the Iranian myths in three categories: myths about world's creation, myths of cosmic war and the myth of the end of the world and the eternal reemergence of human:

1- The Iranian myths of creation have placed Iran at the center of the dwelled quarter of the earth, a land in Xvaniratha that spreads from Transoxiana to the Mesopotamia. Iran's features and cities have been clearly described. By doing so, they have drawn the boundaries of Iran as an element of national identity. When it comes to foreign policy, these myths about creation of the world have pictured Iran as a utopia, a center of the universe under protection of God and the heavenly gods. They have also prescribed preservation of this land and its borders and the importance of dedication to defend it. There are several cases of such a defense and resistance throughout the Iran's history demonstrated by the people against the invaders. For instance: Ariobarzanes battles against the Alexander's forces, resistance of all Iranian cities against the Mongol, Genghis Khan, and the Timur, defending Iran against the Ottoman and Russian invasions, resistance of Captain Bayandar and Rais Ali Delvari against the British army and the contemporary example is the sacrifice

Iranians made during the eight-year war with Iraq.

2- The myth of the everlasting cosmic war is the most prominent Iranian myth. Comparable to the Prometheus myth in the West, it explains the way in which the universe and creatures function from dawn of history to the end and the emergence of Ahura Mazda and the demon. The conflict between the good and bad forces has made it clear for the human being how to function and to choose good over evil in its individual, social and political life. Man has to confront the evil and promote the cosmic war that is backed by the heavenly forces by 'good thoughts', 'good words' and 'good actions'. This myth delineates a duty for the pious Iranians saying that Iran supports divine forces. By institutionalizing this mythical function in the lives of the Iranians, it makes them distinguishable from the non-Iranians. This is all helping consolidation of the other element of national identity that is the population. The foreign reflection of the cosmic war in the Iranian states' foreign relations can be seen in form of defining 'self' vis-à-vis 'other' in the cosmic order. The foreign foes are seen as evil forces and their conspiracies give life to a kind of xenophobia. The expression 'cosmic order' is in complete tune with the incidents of the creation of the world, because after invasion of the evil, the order was confined to the cosmic world. The sequence of days and nights is a model for man to understand the complete order of the nature, and generalize what it sees in the human world to the whole universe (Rezaee Rad, 2010: 101 – 102). In this myth the demon pursues an evil way against the magnanimous and heroic character of the Iranian kings and armies. There are many examples of the differences between Iranian and non-Iranian ways of acting in the myths, supported by history. Starting wars and enmity, breaching agreements, betraying and killing Iranian detained princes, using magic and, assaulting and fleeing from the war zone are all among the characters of non-Iranians. In contrast, initiating the defense, not chasing the enemy's runaways, forgiving the enemy when upon

victory and remaining committed to the deals are all among the Iranian characteristics.

3- The Iranian myth of end of the world is also another myth about the triumph of good forces over evil and elimination of bad forces from the universe forever. These myths have promised the emergence of three saviors of Hushedar, Hishedarmah and Soashyant, one after another, in a thousand years interval. They have also vowed the return of the most outstanding Iranian heroes in the end of the world and the resurgence of the Iranian kings rule over the world. By doing so, they have enabled Iranian national revival in the aftermath of each territorial occupation by the savage tribes and its integration into the Islamic Caliphate or the Turkish-Mongol empires. The myths ensured the Iranian nation that there is freedom and independence after each occupation. This has assisted continuation of other element of Iranian national identity that is sovereignty of the state. The feeling of eventual triumph of good over evil and existence of the Day of Judgment is another aspect of Iran's relations with non-Iranians by drawing ethical frameworks for the Iranians when confronting with the foreigners. Perhaps observing these moral and human codes of behaviour vis-à-vis the uncivilized, savage and brutal behavior of the invaders has led ironically to some defeats and occupations of Iranian territories. Iranians have not acted egocentrically in the case of victory over an enemy; they have not put aside moral standards and have acted according to moral criteria during and after wars. This is something far beyond the necessities of their time. Contrary to what they endured in cases of occupation, they never initiated wars or gave order for looting, killing the prisoners or selling them as slaves. The war prisoners were cured and then either freed or paid in return for their services in military or constructive affairs. In facing others, the Iranian culture brought peace and commitment to agreements, respecting human dignity, commitment to moral standards and preserving friendships. These features have kept Iran alive and helped its survival throughout history and over

passage of centuries. Iran's encounter with foreigners from the Achaemenids, were formed away from hostility or violence, as Cyrus and Darius did with the defeated nations. Another instance is Shah Esmail's abstinence to use artillery against the warring armies during the Safavid – Ottoman war of Chaldoran, as using such instruments were perceived as unfair. The same applies to Iranian self-restraint to use chemical weapons against Iraq despite frequent use of such weapons by Saddam's regime during the Iran-Iraq war.

### Conclusion

In this article I tried to present an explanation for the attitude of Iranians towards the international system during the history of international relations in its broad sense i.e. from the ancient kingdoms till the present time. To do so, the theories of Functionalist Mythology School and constructivism were used. Based on them, the Iranian myths as common intersubjective norms among Iranians and important meaning constructs that have social and political utility are used. The Iranian myths are studied within three categories: myths of world's creation, myths of cosmic war and myths of the end of the world and the eternal return of man. The meanings and contents of these myths have been significant to form Iranian national identity. They have introduced Iran as a utopia placed in the center of the universe and granted roles for it accordingly. The Iranian foreign policy behaviour has been formed in line with such roles throughout history. They have made continuation of Iran as a historical notion and Iranian identity feasible. The following figure presents a simple model of Iranian attitude towards the world according to the myths and their place in determination of Iranian identity.

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