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ROUND TABLE

Outside In? Iran's Mixed Responses to International Stigmatization

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Abstract

Iran is one of the most stigmatised countries of the twenty-first century: having been sanctioned by the US since 1979, the Islamic Republic was declared part of the 'axis of evil' by President George W. Bush in 2002, and from 2006 onwards, it has been subject to multilateral, comprehensive and wide-reaching economic sanctions. In June 2025, this discursive and economic attack on Iran transitioned to direct military bombardment. For the United States and its allies, Iran is a pariah state. This stigmatisation of Iran is an example of the kinds of practices that contribute to the social construction of the international order, whereby some countries are designated as 'inside' and others as 'outside' the community of established states. Needless to say, Iran has been placed firmly in the 'outside' category ever since 1979. At the same time as accepting and even at times embracing this 'outsider' status, however, Iran has also sought to raise its own international standing and to be accepted as an 'insider'.

Keywords: economic sanctions; global order; international relations; Iran; national identity; United States

Iran is one of the most stigmatized countries of the twenty-first century. Having been sanctioned by the United States since 1979, the Islamic Republic of Iran was declared part of the "axis of evil" by President George W. Bush in 2002, and from 2006 onward has been subject to multilateral, comprehensive, and wide-reaching economic sanctions. In June 2025, this discursive and economic attack on Iran transitioned to direct military bombardment. For the United States and its allies, Iran is a pariah state. This stigmatization of Iran is an example of the kinds of practices that contribute to the social construction of the international order, whereby some countries are designated as "inside" and others as "outside" the community of established states. Iran has been placed firmly in the outside category ever since 1979. At the same time as accepting and at times even embracing this outsider status, however, Iran also has sought to raise its own international standing and to be accepted as an insider.

In what follows, I explore these mixed responses to international stigmatization. In doing so, I engage with this roundtable's theme of Iran and the global order through the lens of international hierarchies, and with a view to unpacking how the Iranian state's responses to international stigmatization might be having an impact on some of these hierarchies. When we speak of hierarchies in the field of international relations, we are referring to the systems in which actors are ranked according to their relative status, material capacity, or

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authority.[1] Such relationships of dominance and subordination have always been present in international politics, and although they were more formal and tangible during the age of European colonialism they remain widespread. As a heavily stigmatized state, Iran is placed in a position of inferiority and exclusion within the contemporary hierarchical international order.

This examination of Iran as "outside in" the international system draws primarily on the work of Ayşe Zarakol. In *After Defeat: How the East Learned to Live with the West*, Zarakol spotlights the role of emotions and identity in international relations, and she shows how stigmatized states can experience a sense of national shame, inadequacy, and sensitivity about their perceived status in the world.[2] Through her detailed examination of the case studies of Turkey after World War I, Japan after World War II, and Russia after the Cold War, she explores how the foreign policy strategies of these countries were shaped by status concerns. After being defeated in war, Turkey, Japan, and Russia all sought assimilation and reintegration into the group of established states. Zarakol argues, however, that "gaining belonging through assimilation is a fool's errand"; she reflects in her book's conclusion on how the search for recognition ultimately serves to relegitimize the status hierarchies of the international system.[3]

In the case of Iran, it is interesting to note how varied its responses to stigmatization have been. The elites of the Islamic Republic of Iran have accepted the stigma and sought to eradicate it by proving their status on the international stage with reference to claims of modernization and liberalization, but they also have rejected the stigma and exhibited pride in their outsider status. At the same time, they have engaged in counter-stigmatization discourses in which they draw attention to the hypocrisies and double standards of American dominance over the world order.

These responses have had mixed effects on international hierarchies. Whether aimed at becoming more integrated into the established core of the international system, or at rejecting that core altogether, Iran is reinforcing the idea of a hierarchical world order with the United States at its center. As Zarakol argues, whatever the response of the stigmatized states, they end up "reaffirm[ing] the privileged position of the West, of modernity, as *the* center to react to and to order one's behavior around."[4] And yet, although this does seem to hold true, we also can see how Iran is exploiting its outsider status to define its place in the international order and to forge stronger connections among those in the East and the South who have long felt excluded and marginalized. This is bolstering its regional status and boosting its own sense of prestige. It contributes to the emergence of some changes in the specific nature and texture of international hierarchies, even though it does not override or eradicate the hierarchies altogether. Although Iran's actions alone are not capable of overturning the hierarchical organization of states, they can strengthen a delegitimization of US leadership and assist in the rise of rival powers such as China and Russia.

At the start of the twentieth century, when Reza Shah challenged his country's inferior social status by canceling the D'Arcy Concession and defending his right to do so in the League of Nations, his defiance both reinforced British domination and helped give confidence to marginalized countries in their efforts to claim rights and recognition.[5] Almost a century later, the Islamic Republic's (much bolder) resistance efforts are having quite similar effects. They help embolden nonstate actors who are critical of US foreign policy in the Middle East, and they also contribute to the growth in confidence and assertiveness of those countries that are opposed to US global leadership. In the 2020s, just as in the 1920s, Iranian

[1] Mattern and Zarakol, "Hierarchies"; Hobson and Sharman, "Enduring Place of Hierarchy"; Lake, *Hierarchy in International Relations*; Zarakol, *Hierarchies in World Politics*.

[2] Zarakol, *After Defeat*.

[3] Ibid., 248.

[4] Ibid., 254.

[5] Pesaran, "Imperial Power."

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elites are finding common ground with other political actors who are similarly unhappy with the existing hierarchies, and together they present a powerful front of resistance.

This mirroring of historical events from the Pahlavi period is perhaps surprising. We do not generally associate the Pahlavi monarchy with challenges to a global order shaped by European imperialism. Indeed, when reflecting upon the history of modern Iran, we observe that the acceptance of international stigmatization and the concomitant desire to raise the country's status through modernization and Westernization projects was particularly prominent in the Pahlavi period.[6] Examples of a Pahlavi shah utilizing the language of economic independence and anti-imperialism on the international stage, as Reza Shah did in 1932, are not widespread. Equally, it seems counterintuitive to find elites of the Islamic Republic speaking of a desire to improve Iran's international standing through participation in purportedly Western practices as part of an effort to gain the recognition of the established states. The whole purpose of the 1979 revolution was to achieve political and economic independence for Iran by rejecting the norms of an international system that had contributed to the exploitation and mistreatment of the Iranian people under the shah. However, one of Iran's responses to international stigmatization has in fact been to accept the stigma and seek assimilation, although this has been accompanied throughout by responses of rejection and counter-stigmatization.

Acceptance, Rejection and Counter-Stigmatization

During the presidencies of Akbar Hashemi-Rafsanjani (1989–97) and Mohammad Khatami (1997–2005) in particular, there was a growing current of thought within the country that Iran should reintegrate itself into the international system. By developing closer relations with the outside world, including some countries that had been viewed with hostility during the first decade after the revolution, it was believed that the Islamic Republic would be better able to protect its independence and enhance its prestige. In the realm of foreign policy, rapprochement and dialogue among civilizations were explored as potential strategies by pragmatist and reformist elites, respectively.[7] And in the economic arena, steps were taken to liberalize Iran's domestic economy as well as to open up the economy to try to attract increased levels of foreign investment.[8] Although rival factions opposed these policies and favored instead a continued position of anti-imperialism and suspicion of foreign powers, these efforts to present a different image of the Islamic Republic of Iran should not be ignored. They show evidence of a desire to rid Iran of its outsider status in the international system while still protecting its commitment to revolutionary goals.

Such views persist across much of Iranian society: they can be found in social media posts and print media opinion pieces alike, as well as in art, literature, and music. The sentiment of at least some acceptance of Iran's stigma also exists among the more "moderate" political elites who are still able to participate in the formal political process within the country. However, when—from 2005 onward—reformist elites began to be excluded from electoral competition, and especially following the failed Green Movement of 2009, such views were increasingly sidelined from the official discourse of the Islamic Republic.

Therefore the position of rejecting the stigma, which remained present in various quarters throughout the post-1979 period, became more widespread again after 2009. When Iran was under military attack during the eight years of war with Iraq (1980–88), discourses of independence, resilience, and self-sufficiency were strong, and Western-imposed stigmas were vehemently rejected. After 2009, with the economic warfare of sanctions more widespread and punitive, 1980s wartime rhetoric and political positions became

[6] Abrahamian, *History of Modern Iran*; Ansari, *Modern Iran*; Keddie, *Modern Iran*.
[7] Wastnidge, *Diplomacy and Reform*.
[8] Pesaran, *Iran's Struggle*.

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dominant again. Israeli attacks on Iran in June 2025, which led to twelve days of armed conflict between the two countries as well as US attacks on three Iranian nuclear sites with "bunker-buster" bombs, have produced an even stronger entrenchment of this antistigma position. Concurrently, the experience of foreign military attack has enabled regime elites to vilify and criminalize those within the country whom they suspect to be in favor of rapprochement with Western powers.

Prior to the outbreak of military conflict with Israel, this rejection of international stigmatization manifested most obviously in relation to the imposition of economic sanctions. The Supreme Leader Ayatollah Ali Khamenei named the Iranian year 1390 (March 2011– March 2012) the "Year of Economic Jihad," calling for officials to focus on economic matters to achieve "accelerated progress" despite "the enemies' plot" to attack Iran.[9] In subsequent speeches, he expressed confidence in Iran's ability not only to survive but to thrive in the face of sanctions. In this, he disregarded the stigma of which sanctions are a concrete manifestation, claiming instead that "the Iranian nation" would "stand up against these enemies" and "preserve its dignity."[10] With the subsequent three years named by Khamenei the "Year of National Production and Supporting Iranian Work and Capital," the "Year of Political and Economic Valor," and the "Year of the Economy and Culture with National Determination and Jihadi Management," the desire for economic and political independence held center stage in official articulations of Iranian national identity and Iran's place in the world. In this worldview, the need for Iran to survive independently is prioritized, without accommodation of external expectations.[11]

Through the imposition of sanctions, Iran was classed as an enemy and an outsider state; US policymakers anticipated that Iran would respond to these sanctions and this pariah status by acceding to demands for change. Sanctions were a tool for encouraging the Islamic Republic to take steps toward acquiring insider status. However, under the extensive economic sanctions that by 2012 had frozen Central Bank of Iran assets, denied Iranian banks access to the SWIFT international payment messaging system, and barred the sale, supply, and transfer of precious metals to Iran, the Iranian response was shaped instead by Khamenei's discourse of "economic jihad": confirming the United States as an enemy rather than seeking any rapprochement. As well as working to "develop an economy of resistance" in which domestic producers could capitalize on the reduction of imports (welcoming lower levels of competition from abroad), the Islamic Republic pursued a strategy of de-dollarization and diversification.[12] To mitigate the risk and challenge of sanctions, the country moved away from seeking trade with Europe and instead developed closer ties with countries such as Turkey, India, China, Nigeria, and Russia, trading with them in their own currencies instead of the dollar.

In foreign trade and foreign policy, then, Iran's rejection of the stigma being imposed by the United States and its allies resulted in shifts eastward and southward. This highlights how Iran's lack of concern with its exclusion from the community of insider states has affected international hierarchies. Networks of outsider states have sought to build their own coalitions rather than remain in isolation, and the tightening of relations between Iran and Russia has had a particularly significant impact on the American-led global order. US support for Israel in the June 2025 conflict with Iran has served to further strengthen these ties. International actors opposed to the United States are working together to build up their economic, political, and military influence in the world. Geopolitical pecking orders are as a result in a state of flux, and the lessons learned from Iran's diversification and resilience strategies in the face of sanctions have been an important component

[9] Khamenei, "New Year Address."
[10] Khamenei, "Speech in Asalouyeh."
[11] Khamenei, "Norouz Message," 2012; "Norouz Message," 2013; "Norouz Message," 2014.
[12] Khamenei, "Meeting with Entrepreneurs."

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of these shifts. Iranian de-dollarization efforts as well as its diversification of trade with Africa and Asia have been an important part of a trend that could lead to more widespread recalibration of the postwar international order.[13]

At the same time as there has been this rejection of the US-imposed stigma on Iran, with discourses of national resilience and strategies of economic diversification central to the official Iranian response to sanctions, we should not forget that efforts to negotiate with sanctioning countries for a nuclear deal continued throughout the post-2009 period, collapsing only when Israel embarked on military strikes in June 2025. Responses of both rejection and acceptance of international stigma were to some degree occurring side by side. The Islamic Republic's signing of the Joint Comprehensive Plan of Action (JCPOA) in 2015 did not signal capitulation to American pressure; a desire for sanctions relief evidently played into the negotiations, but Iran did not enter into this deal with the United States because of any fear of additional sanctions, given that it by then had devised some very effective coping mechanisms.[14] Nevertheless, the JCPOA highlighted the continuing centrality of the privileged position of the United States in world politics, and the perceived benefits of being included in this community on at least some level. Existing international hierarchies were in this way largely reinforced through Iran's varied responses to stigmatization, even as new coalitions of outsiders were expanding their influence on the world stage and threatening to upset those hierarchies.

However, when US President Donald Trump pulled out of the JCPOA in May 2018, resulting in the reimposition of sanctions on Iran, more fuel was given to the Islamic Republic's rejection of international stigmatization. Trump's abrogation of the nuclear deal went against the values that the liberal international order is supposed to stand for: it disregarded the rule of law as well as the principle of multilateralism.[15] Consequently, there was a view within Iran that questioned why the country would want to assimilate to an order that was so weakly adhered to by its own proponents. Alongside rejection of Iran's stigmatization, then, counter-stigmatization of the United States became more prominent around this time. Building on deep-rooted critiques of the hypocrisies and double standards of US foreign policy, which go back as far as the CIA and MI6–orchestrated coup to remove democratically elected Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddegh from power in 1953, Iranian voices calling the United States undemocratic and illiberal came to the fore after 2018. For example, President Ebrahim Raisi called boldly in 2021 for critics to respond to their own "violations of human rights" before accusing Iran of any wrongdoing.[16] US support for Israel has given greater credence to this moral opposition to US global leadership.

Not only had the United States shown itself to be unreliable and untrustworthy in its withdrawal from the JCPOA, and therefore worthy of counter-stigmatization on those grounds, but the damage done by sanctions and military strikes has been viewed as incompatible with the values that the United States claims to defend. The humanitarian impacts of sanctions have been considerable, with a particularly noticeable effect on the health and access to healthcare of ordinary Iranians.[17] On top of this, the US government's complicity in the humanitarian crisis in Gaza has been noted.[18] Given that the defense and protection of human rights is a purported goal of the postwar liberal international order, Iranian elites have increasingly critiqued the United States as hypocritical and undeserving of global leadership. The Islamic Republic of Iran has long referred to US dominance of the world as "global arrogance." In light of its experience of American sanctions and American withdrawal from the deal that was supposed to provide sanctions relief, followed by direct

[13] Bajoghli et al., *How Sanctions Work*, 146–49.
[14] Ibid., 115.
[15] Holliday, "Beyond Hegemony."
[16] Fassihi et al., "Iran's Incoming President."
[17] Moret, "Humanitarian Impacts."
[18] Khamenei, "US President."

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American military attack, Iranian elites have become even less willing to accept the stigma placed on them. They paint the United States as a force for bad, and turn instead to deepen their relationship with countries such as China and Russia.

Iran As Outside the International System

In this short piece, I have pointed to some of the ways in which Iranian elites have responded to stigmatization by the United States, with reference to the sanctions regime imposed from 2010 onward as well as the military conflict of June 2025. Iranian responses of acceptance, rejection, and counter-stigmatization have occurred concurrently, although certain responses have tended to be more prominent at different moments in time. I have shown how these responses have tended to reinforce existing international hierarchies, confirming the United States as the focus of Iran's responses. But I also have pointed to how such responses have simultaneously contributed to a shift in the nature of the hierarchies, and coalitions of countries outside this core.

Specifically, outsider states are gaining a sense of belonging with each other, and ties are being deepened in a way that allows stigmatized states to come together according to their own standard of resistance. Interestingly, not only are these outsiders building their own inside club, they also exist in the broader international system as outsiders—this is how their position on the global stage is defined by the core of established countries. Through simultaneously accepting stigma, rejecting stigma, and engaging in counter-stigmatization, the Islamic Republic is a country seeking to clarify its own status in a world defined by socially constructed hierarchies. As it travels on this journey, its actions and policy responses have repercussions. Iran's cooperation with other stigmatized states, for example, has the effect of building a sense of pride and prestige among a group of outsiders who had previously felt shame and inadequacy. Nevertheless, the continued preoccupation with status highlights how resilient the broader structures of hierarchy remain; the world is at root unchanged, and notions of center and periphery persist.

Paying attention to Iran's place in the global order through the lens of international hierarchies allows us to appreciate the role of emotions and identity in political decision-making. Feelings about past and present status are important in shaping actions that states take in their relations with other states, and these actions and their effects can in turn shape a state's future sense of self as well as its position in the hierarchy. By exploring Iranian responses to stigmatization and sanctions with reference to the literature on hierarchies and emotions in international relations, I hope to have provided an interesting perspective on this roundtable's theme of Iran and the global order.

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