

## Space and Identity in the Iran-Western relations

**Ferdaous Hamdi**

English Department, ISLAIB, Tunisia.

**Abstract:** There is a high awareness among Iranians about their identity as defined by the Islamic religion and Persian culture. Being non-Arab Muslims in the Middle-East sets them apart from the rest of the region. Furthermore, a rich heritage engraved in the ancient Persian Empire, with Persepolis being at the heart of that Empire, added to the feeling of being a “special people” among Iranians. Academics like Samuel Huntington and Fareed Zakaria emphasized the notion of the decline of the West and the emergence of new countries trying to project their power. Iran has been among the newly emerging non-Western powers. All these factors contributed to creating a strong sense of identity and related pride among Iranians. That identity is a cultural construct that is strongly related to the notion of space. The Iranian space is not only Iran as a geography, but Iran with its culture, religion, traditions, Persian Empire and past. A land of dreams, of the prestigious, lavish lifestyle of ancient rulers became engraved in the Iranian mind as part of their identity. That space was invaded by an intrusive imperialism that perceives Iranians as ‘barbarians,’ as the “Other”, to use Edward Said’s terms. “Othering” the “Other”, to use Said’s theory of “Orientalism”, the British and American conceptions of Iran as just a land of plenty to be exploited to the end, was an intrusion upon the Iranian inner space, including the Iranian psyche and collective memory. The Western imperialist perception of the identity of Iranians is illustrated by the British depiction of the Iranian Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq during the Anglo-Iranian oil dispute. The latter was described as “effeminate”, “unmanly”, irresponsible, unreasonable, backward, very emotional, etc . . . The West intruded the Iranian space and called into question the Iranians’ own identity. Furthermore, the Iran-West relations are similarly illustrated through the 1979 Tehran hostage crisis.

**Key words:** *Space, Identity, Iran-Western Relations, Coup, Hostage Crisis.*

## Introduction

Iran has a longer history than most countries, and is bigger than several ones. “But there is more to Iranian history than that—there are religions, there are influences, intellectual movements and ideas that have changed things within Iran and around the world” (Axworthy xiii). Today Iran is in the spotlight of international geo-politics. Iran represents one of the world’s most ancient civilizations, and has been one of the world’s richest and most complex ones. Situated between Iraq and Afghanistan, Russia and the Persian Gulf, the Iranians speak an Indo-European language in the midst of the Arab-speaking Middle East. Iran is commonly believed to be a homogeneous country, with a strong national culture; however, minorities such as the Azeris, Kurds, Gilakis, Baluchis, Turkmen and others represent almost half of the population (Axworthy xiv). Iran has preserved some of the most impressive Islamic architecture in the world, along with traditions of artisan metalworking, rug-making, and bazaar trading; an intricate and sophisticated urban culture (Ibid.).

Iranians are proud of their rich literary heritage and above all of their poetry that are part and parcel of their identity. It is common for ordinary Iranians to recite from memory long passages from their favorite poems; furthermore, they quote phrases from the great poets as part of their everyday speech. Poetry usually depicts the pleasures of life: wine, beauty, flowers and sexual love.

Yet Iran has also an intense popular tradition of Shi‘ism which in the mourning month of Moharram emerges in religious processions dominated by a mood of gloom, and a powerful sense of betrayal and injustice (within which the oral delivery of religious poetry also plays an important part) (xiv-xv). It is a country with an ancient tradition of monarchical splendor, now an Islamic republic (xv).

Iran, or Persia, the image conjured up by Persia is a romantic one: “roses and nightingales in elegant gardens, fast horses, mysterious, flirtatious women, sharp sabres, carpets with colours glowing like jewels, poetry and melodious music (Ibid. xv). In the cliché of Western media presentation Iran (or the “Other”) has a rather different image: rigid-looking mullahs/clerics, black oil, women covered under gloomy black chadors; grim crowds burning flags and shouting “death to America” (xv).

In the Southern province of Fars (capital Shiraz), Iran has the most ancient and impressive archaeological sites: Persepolis and Pasargadae. In ancient times the province was called Pars, after the people who had settled there—the Persians. When those people created an empire that dominated the whole region, the Greeks called it the Persian Empire, and the word ‘Persia’ was applied by them, the Romans and other Europeans subsequently to all the dynastic states that followed that empire in the territory that is Iran today—Sassanid Persia in the centuries before the Islamic conquest, Safavid Persia in the sixteenth and seventeenth centuries, Qajar Persia in the nineteenth century (xv). The word derives from the very earliest times, apparently meaning ‘noble’. It is cognate both with a similar word in Sanskrit, and with the term ‘Aryan’ (xv). In 1935 Reza Shah, wanting to distance his state from the decadent, ineffectual

Qajar government he had displaced, instructed his embassies overseas to require foreign governments henceforth to call the country Iran in official communications (Axworthy, xv-xvi).

Since 1979, Iran has struggled against the global impact of Western values and especially the American ones (Axworthy, 287). This can be considered as a manifestation of the Iranians' sense of distinctiveness as well as cultural significance (Ibid.). The Islamic revolution and the accompanying Islamic resurgence revealed that previous ideas about the irrevocability of progress on Western terms in the non-Western world had been ill-advised (Ibid.). Here it should be emphasized that the revolution was more than merely a political chapter in the history of the country, but a rebirth of Shia Islam that Khomeini wanted to export worldwide. It was also an assertion of Iranian identity: independence, autonomy, Islamic values, self-rule, no foreign intervention, pride, cultural values and cultural assertiveness.

As far as art and culture are concerned, Iranian cinema is one of the most outstanding fields since the revolution. It was dominated by distinctive poetic artistry and universal appeal; furthermore, Iranian movies won many international prizes (Axworthy, 297). This cinema shows the continuing importance of Iranian thought and expression (Ibid.). "Iranian culture still holds together an ethnically, linguistically diverse nation" (Ibid.).

Since 1979 Iran has defied the West, and above all, the Western conceptions of civilization (Axworthy, 298). The Western views of "civilization" as "Christian, Western and modern" were challenged by Iran by presenting cultural and civilizational options (Ibid.).

Despite the importance of the topic related to space and identity in the Iran-Western dichotomy, few studies have scrutinized it. This paper aims at filling up this gap, at least partially, by shedding light on the role of space and identity in the Iran-Western relations. This paper tries to answer the following research questions:

- 1) How are space and identity illustrated in the Iran-West dichotomy?
- 2) How did both the 1953 CIA coup against Iranian Premier Mosaddeq impact the Iran – West relations?
- 3) How was the 1979 hostage crisis a turning point in the Iran-West relations?

This paper aims at studying space and identity in the Iran-Western relations. It stresses two seminal historical events that illustrate that relation, namely the 1950s' Anglo-Iranian oil dispute and the 1979 Tehran hostage crisis. The paper is composed of three main sections. The first section will flesh out the theoretical framework. The second section will shed light on the Anglo-Iranian oil dispute and its implications on the East-West relations. The third section will deal with the Tehran hostage crisis in 1979.

## **I. Theoretical Framework**

This section will flesh out Samuel Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations" and Edward Said's Orientalism. These two theories constitute the theoretical framework within which the study is conducted.

### **A. Samuel Huntington's "Clash of Civilizations"**

This research is mainly conducted within the theoretical framework of Samuel P. Huntington's theory of "Clash of Civilizations," a theory suggesting that people's cultural and religious identities tend to be the major sources of conflict in the post-Cold War era. Huntington expanded his thesis in his book *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order* (1996).

Arguably, the theory is timely in an era wherein East-west relations have taken a new turn. Indeed, the U.S. seems to be "Remaking" the "World Order", to use Huntington's terms. Countries like Iraq and more recently Syria, have been subject to Western imperialism in the name of "liberation of the oppressed" from dictators, whatever that means. Saddam Hussein (the former Iraqi President) and Bashar Al Aassad (the current Syrian President) were the targets of Western attacks. Iran, another "Name" on the list of the countries that need to be "polished" by the U.S., have been in the spotlight in the Western political scene, and especially the American one. Apart from its controversial uranium enrichment program, Iran has a clear position on the Palestinian question, supporting the Palestinian struggle for independence from the Israeli occupation. Indeed, former President Mahmoud Ahmadinejad (2005-2013) overtly and defiantly attacked Israel, triggering the wrath of the West, particularly the U.S.

Huntington points out that "culture" and cultural identities, as civilization identities," are shaping "the post-Cold War world"(Huntington 20). Westerners, especially British and Americans, based their criticism of Iranians on "national character" explanations, thus misinterpreting the Iranian cultural identity. Indeed, construing Iranian culture was dominated by bias, prejudice and stereotypes. For instance, one British ambassador, concerned with Soviet influence following the battle of Stalingrad, described Iranians as a "volatile race" without "principles" (Qtd. in Abrahamian 1993, 114).

He added that Iranians, young and old alike, were solely concerned with illegal wealth(Ibid.). He also described Iranians as dishonest, "backbiters," unruly, "incapable of unity" and lastly, with no sense of organization<sup>1</sup>. To further illustrate the West's conception of the Iranian identity, another British ambassador declared that these flaws were not transitory periods but the perpetual faults of the "Oriental character" (Ibid.).

These imperial, even racist, attitudes are encapsulated in a 1951 Foreign Office memorandum drafted to explain why Iranians were so "emotional" as to reject the "reasonable" argument that their oil industry should continue to remain under British control for an indefinite period of time(Ibid. 114-15). Entitled "Paper on the Persian Social and Political Scene," the memorandum explained the following:

Most Persians are introverts. . . . Their emotions are strong and easily aroused. But they continually fail to subordinate their emotions to reason. They lack commonsense and the ability to examine reason from facts. . . . Often after finding the world does not answer their dreams, they relapse into indolence and do not persevere in any attempt to bring their ideas into focus with reality. This tendency is exaggerated by the fatalism of their religion. . . . They lack social conscience. . . .(Ibid. 115)

This aforementioned quotation translates the Western deep disdain of the Iranian identity. The conflicts between the two cultures or “civilizations” went beyond the boundaries of political discord, to delve deeply into the Iranian identity. The latter is composed of Iranian heritage, psyche and collective memory. Western prejudice strikes at the heart of the Iranian identity; indeed, referring to the “fatalism” of Iranians’ religion, namely Islam, further deepens the divide between the two cultures and give credence to Huntington’s “clash of civilizations” theory. The U.S. and Britain, as imperial entities, perceive Iran as their own space; therefore, that space can be exploited, manipulated and usurped as they wish. This was made possible by Western hegemony that imposed a relation of domineering and dominated. In this regard, the Iranian identity was construed on purely Western terms as the “inferior,” the “disoriented” the “weak” and the “backward Other.”

In this regard, Blight *et. al* explained the East-West dichotomy in the context of the “frontier spirit”. Once involved in the Middle East, the U.S. shaped its conception of the region, its people, and its religion (in brief, its identity) within the frontier myth—and all it implied regarding the superiority of Judeo-Christian religions, European origins, and the supposed responsibility to civilize backward nations (“The White Man’s Burden”). The Western (American and British) encounter with Iran took place in that framework. Both British and Americans were dealing with “the identity” of the “Other” that was a misconceived and distorted image rather than the real identity. Hence the deepening of the “clash of civilizations”. A question that arises here is the following: what happens to one’s identity when one’s own space is invaded? The Western conception of Iranian space as its own space, thus explaining why the U.S. and Britain considered Iranian oil as theirs, shapes the Western conception of Iranian identity. The latter, considered as inferior and dependent on Western culture and values, is debased.

Iran, or Persepolis, that symbol of greatness, civilization, wealth, and cultural rootedness, provided Iranians with a sense of “unique identity” as a Muslim, non-Arab civilization in a Muslim, Arab-dominated region. During the Persian Empire and the epochs following it, Iran saw different instances of attempting to project its power worldwide. For instance, the Revolution’s spiritual leader Ayatollah Khomeini tried to export the Iranian Revolution abroad in the 1970s. Furthermore, in the years 2000s, former Iranian President Mahmud Ahmadinejad(2005-2013) was known for his inflammatory anti-Western speeches that stood as an overt defiance of Western authority.

The concept of space and identity is illustrated, one more time, in the 1979 Tehran Hostage Crisis wherein Iranian students kidnapped American diplomats from the American Embassy in Tehran and held them hostage for 444 days. Tehran, and more specifically, the American Embassy, is another space of encounter that involved a Western identity and an Eastern identity. The Western identity, represented by the U.S. represented the Western Christian entity that opposed the Eastern Iranian identity. The latter represented the presumably “inferior,” non-Western (therefore “non-modern,” “backward”) non-Christian, (therefore “uncivilized”) “breed.” Here again, Edward Said’s “Othering” the “Other” comes to the surface. Non-Western and non-Christians’ identity is stigmatized as pejorative because it is not in line with Western values and does not correspond to the Western conception of being the “right culture.”

## B. Edward Said's "Orientalism"

Said argues that even though the "age of empire" came to an end following World War II, during the process of decolonization that began with the independence of India in 1947, imperialism continues to have a significant cultural impact. In order to be conscious of this fact, he notes, one should observe how colonists and imperialists continue to use "culture" to control faraway territories and people. Said's message is that "imperialism is not about a moment in history;" it is rather about an ongoing symbiotic "discourse between subject peoples" and the prevailing discourse of the empire" (Curran and Takata). Notwithstanding the seeming end of colonialism, the implicit assumptions on which the empire was founded remain, putting out "visions" of an "other" world devoid of dominance, restraining the "imaginary of equality and justice" (Ibid.) Said perceives drawing attention to "these unstated assumptions" and making people aware of them "as a first step" toward altering "the old tentacles of empire" (Ibid.). For this reason he wrote *Culture and Imperialism* (Ibid.).

According to Edward Said, what he calls the "Occident" has a long tradition of what he terms « Orientalism », which he defines as « a way of coming to terms with the Orient that is based on the Orient's special place in European Western Experience » (Ibid.). The Orient is close to Europe; furthermore, it contains Europe's best colonies (rich and old) from which it derives its civilizations, languages, « cultural contestant, » and the most important conceptions of the « Other » (Ibid.). Moreover, the Orient contributed to the definition of Europe or the West as its opposite image, "idea, personality, experience" (Ibid.). This « Orient », claims Said, is not « imaginative », but is « an integral part of European material civilization and culture. Orientalism expresses and represents that part culturally and even ideologically as a mode of discourse with supporting institutions, vocabulary, scholarship, imagery, doctrines, even colonial bureaucracies and colonial styles » (Ibid.).

Orientalism, Said adds, is "a style of thought based upon ontological and epistemological distinction made between "the Orient" and (most of the time) "the Occident." Therefore, a significant number of writers "have accepted" the main "differences between East and West as the starting point for elaborate accounts concerning the Orient, its people, customs, "mind," destiny, and so on" (Ibid.).

## II. The Anglo-Iranian Oil Dispute and the 1953 CIA Coup

These events are important in many ways. First, they help put the Iran-West relations in their historical and geo-political perspectives. Indeed, Iran as a space and an identity, representing the Eastern part of the dichotomy, faced Britain and later the U.S., namely the Western part of that dichotomy. Second, since this study is conducted within the theoretical framework of the "clash of civilizations", the oil dispute clearly illustrates that clash through the British conception of Iranians or the "Other." The oil dispute takes one to the realm of cultural conflicts originating from colonialism, Western hegemony and imperialism. This point also reveals that the "clash of interests" was at the heart of the East-West conflicts.

Coming back to the U.S.-British-Iran relations and the 1950s' oil crisis, in order to destabilize Mosaddeq's regime, the British launched a propaganda battle against Mosaddeq and the National Front. The British issued articles in important British and American newspapers.

For example, the *Observer* described Premier Mosaddeq as a “Robespierre fanatic” and a “tragic Frankenstein” with a gigantic head” and “obsessed with one xenophobic idea” (qtd. in Abrahamian 2001, 193). *Time* depicted him as a shy man with a tendency to become dangerously courageous when “emotionally aroused” by his “martyrdom complex” (qtd. in Abrahamian 2001, 193). In this regard, the issue of martyrdom in the Iranian Shia culture is part of the Iranian identity.

In Shia theologians’ belief, Husayn’s martyrdom represented the victory of moral values over barbarian authority (Nasr, 49). The assassinations of Shia imams fostered the emotional connections to the imams in the form of strong ties to the sanctuaries raised above their graves (Ibid. 54). The imams’ grief is at the hub of the Shia creed of martyrdom, “shahadat” (57). In Shia doctrine, martyrdom is the utmost evidence of faith, following the imams’ model, an action that will not only secure the martyr a place in paradise but also foster Shiism (57). The Shiite students, impregnated with the cultural heritage of their religion, had adopted the legacy of Hussein’s martyrdom, which remained part of the revolutionary fervor of the late 1970s in Iran. For the Western mind, however, exposing oneself to death is simply a crazy act; such was the hostages’ view of their captors. This can also be interpreted as an instance of the “clash of civilizations”; indeed for those Westerners who are not familiar with Shii Islam, martyrdom or dying for the cause would remain a strange, irrational, and even barbaric act. In brief, the notion of martyrdom, which was interpreted by Westerners as a “complex”, as seen above in the British depiction of Premier Mosaddeq, was part of Iranian identity. In this regard, the concept of identity is subjective and needs to be redefined on Iranian terms, and not on Western ones.

The use of the media against Mosaddeq reveals that both the United States and Britain were determined to use all means possible to shake Mosaddeq’s government because he refused to yield to Western pressure and compromise Iran’s valuable oil industry. Britain similarly launched a hard attack on the National Front. British officials described it as “nothing but a noisy bunch of malcontents;” that Mosaddeq, who was a “wily Oriental,” was “wild,” “erratic,” “eccentric,” “crazy,” “gangster-like,” “fanatical,” “absurd,” “dictatorial,” “demagogic,” “inflammatory,” and “single-mindedly obstinate” (qtd. in Abrahamian 2001, 193).

The British conception of Iranians discloses a negative attitude riddled with value judgment and misconceptions of the nature of the “Other.” Iranians are described as “child-like,” “tiresome and headstrong,” “unwilling to accept facts,” “volatile and unstable,” “sentimentally mystical,” “unprepared to listen to reason and common sense,” and “swayed by emotions devoid of positive content” (Ibid. 193). In a printed document entitled “A Comparison between Persian and Asian Nationalism in General,” Shepherd told senior officials in the other ministries that Iranian nationalism was not “authentic” and desperately needed a “guiding hand”; the salvation of Persia, he added, would be a twenty-year occupation by a foreign Power (rather like the occupation of Haiti by the United States) (194). Another revealing printed memo of the British embassy in Tehran read:

Most Iranians are introverts. Their imagination is strong and they naturally turn to the agreeable side of things—they love poetry and discussion, particularly of abstract ideas. Their emotions are strong and easily aroused. But they continually fail to test their imaginations against reality and to subordinate their emotions to reason. They lack common sense and the ability to differentiate emotion from facts. Their well-known

mendacity is rather carelessness to the truth than a deliberate choice of falsehood. This excess of imagination and distaste for facts leads to an inability to go conscientiously into detail. Often, not finding the world to their dreams, they relapse into indolence and do not persevere. This tendency is exaggerated by the fatalism of their religion . . . Nearly all classes have a passion for personal gain and are ready to do most things for money. They lack social conscience and are unready to subordinate personal interests to communal ones. They are vain and conceited, and unwilling to admit to themselves that they can be in the wrong. They are always ready to blame other people (qtd. in Abrahamian 2001, 194).

In this regard, William Roger Louis observes that “[i]n view of Shepherd’s low opinion of the “Oriental character” and of Iran itself as a country of “Oriental decadence,” it is hardly surprising that he and Mosaddeq found conversation difficult. He impressed upon Mosaddeq, and, it seems, on all other Iranians he met, that Iran had not been allowed to develop “at the hands of a virile and civilized nation” (135-136).<sup>2</sup> An important question arises here: who sets the standards of “civilization”? The British side believes that Iranians cannot grow as a mature nation without the help of a “civilized nation,” which of course means a Western nation. This criticism is in line with Said’s “Orientalism.”

The 1953CIA Coup against Mosaddeq was an invasion of Iranian space both physically and non-physically. Indeed, the CIA disrupted the modernization and democratization processes that were being undertaken by Mosaddeq. The Western behaviour during the coup was a blow to Iranian identity. The way the British depicted Iranians reveals that the former perceived the latter as inferior. They saw them as people who, instead of relying on reason (presumably like Westerners), relied on emotions (presumably like Easterners). Another possible interpretation is that this “othering” of the “Other” gives the political struggle between Iran and the West a cultural dimension. One cannot overlook the value judgment inherent in those British comments on Iranians, portraying them as emotional and unreasonable, or incapable of reasoning. Furthermore, the comment on the Iranians’ religion can be deemed as not simply derogatory but even racist. Heiss’s view on the stereotypical image of Iranians as they were depicted by British and American officials stems from the fact that Iranians were judged by the predominant Western norms of acceptable behavior, rather than measuring them against acceptable Iranian standards (4).

In reality, the clash originated from the conflict of economic interests that opposed the great powers and their drive for imperialism and control of Middle Eastern resources on the one hand, and Iran, along with its drive for nationalism on the other hand; again, this topic is treated by Mary Ann Heiss in her book *Empire and Nationhood: The United States, Great Britain, and Iranian Oil, 1950-1954*, which is also reminiscent of Edward Said’s *Culture and Imperialism*.

Heiss affirms that the Anglo-Iranian dispute was important as an outcome of Iranian nationalism, which rose following World War II (4). She contends that it was Iranian nationalism that pushed the Iranian government to nationalize the oil industry and maintain it, despite its consequences, and not merely its wish to increase oil revenues (Ibid). It gives us answers as to why Iran wished that Britain would give up its total control over the oil industry and why the

---

<sup>2</sup>Gasiorowski and Byrne (2004).



Iranians persevered despite the enormous economic difficulties (4). Interestingly, Heiss conceives of the “clash of civilizations” in terms of the relations between nationalism and the oil controversy when she observes that “[T]he role that nationalism played in the oil dispute suggests another important aspect of the story: the clash of cultures that is evidenced between the industrialized West and the developing East” (4). She argues that during the oil conflict, English and American statesmen displayed Western cultural prejudices; indeed, they “consistently” used what Edward Said termed “orientalism” during talks with Iranian officials, particularly Premier Mosaddeq, whom they portrayed as inferior, childlike and feminine (4). They frequently described him using gendered language that revealed their belief that he was not “manly enough” to get involved in international politics, and not suitable for the position of Prime Minister (4). Heiss further notes that “[t]hey condemned as personal quirks or eccentricities what were accepted forms of behavior in Iran, failed to see Mosaddeq as their equal, and dismissed him as an unworthy adversary whose position did not matter” (4).

This conflict joins the spirit of nationalistic movements of liberation in the post-World War II era as a reaction to the colonialism and imperialism of the West. The “clash of civilizations” paradigm can be seen at different levels. First, it might be argued that it was an elaborate work of the West, or a product of Western colonization and imperialism with underlying economic motives. Second, the imperialist drive accounting for the clash, was obvious in the way the AIOC perceived Iranian oil, seeing it as its property; hence the British alarm at Mosaddeq’s oil nationalization. Third, the way both the British and the Americans dealt with Mosaddeq, who represented “the other,” the one who was an obstacle to their economic interests, reflects a certain scorn vis-à-vis this “other.” Consequently, this “obstacle” had simply to be removed in order for them to pursue their own interests, and this whatever the means, the human consequences, and the moral repercussions.

The reason accounting for British criticism of Iran was their failure to control Iranian oil resources. Commenting upon Mosaddeq’s and the Popular Movement’s domestic as well as international impact, Katouzian (2009) contends that the struggles for decolonization, especially in the Middle East and Africa, in the 1950s, were to varying degrees accounted for by the Iranian Popular Movement, the emblem of which was Mosaddeq (xv). Yet, he contends, there was a main difference with several of those battles for independence, in that the Iranian movement also targeted the creation of a democratic government (xv). Iranian identity was epitomized in the character of Iran’s nationalist figure, Premier Mosaddeq. He was the incarnation of nationalist struggle for independence, autonomy, sovereignty and dignity.

The nationalization dispute intertwines some of the main themes in the recent histories of the United States, Britain, and Iran (Heiss, 5). On the one hand, it reveals the significance of the Middle East and its oil for both the economic and national security strategies of the Western great powers; on the other hand, it links this development to the character of the Anglo-American relationship and to the emergence of nationalism in the developing countries (Ibid.).

### III. The 1979 Tehran Hostage Crisis

From the Iranian perspective, the hostage takeover became an essential chapter in a narrative of “national self-determination and revolutionary” fervor (Blight *et. al.*, 140). The heroism associated with the Students Following the Line of the Imam on the Iranian side was in

conflict with the tragic episode of the hostage crisis on the American side, thus illustrating two completely different national narratives of the crisis. This theme joins Blight *et. al's* view of the “dueling” national narratives of the U.S. and Iran. Arguably, the respective national narratives of both the U.S. and Iran can be interpreted as dimensions or illustrations of the clash of civilizations advanced by Huntington. On the other hand, the students’ stance as heroes defending their country against what they perceived as Western aggression, opposed the Iranian identity, a mixture of Islam, nationalism and resistance to a Western identity revolving around imperialism, hegemony and oppression.

Based on the U.S. national narrative, for the majority of Americans, Iran came to the surface only with the collapse of the Shah and, most intensely, with the seizure of American embassy hostages in 1979 (Blight *et.al*, 37). The Tehran hostage crisis, one of the most traumatic chapters of American diplomatic history, reverberates with a fundamental theme of the American frontier myth, the “captivity narrative” (Ibid. 37-38). Stories of European-origin settlers, mainly women, being kidnapped by indigenous tribes flourished during the Indian wars. These stories aimed particularly at contrasting the virtue and supremacy of Christian morals over those of the barbarians the Europeans were driving out of their ancient lands by force (Ibid. 38). A *Time* magazine tale in December 1979 read: “the nation’s official Christmas tree is dark except for one star at the top, because the hostages in Iran have yet to receive the Christmas gift of freedom from the unwise men of the East” (qtd. in Blight *et.al*, 38). This statement reiterates what British diplomats stated about the “unwise” Mosaddeq. Being unwise, according to the British was a feature of feature of Mosaddeq that he shared with Iranians at large. In their perceptions, it set Easterners apart from the wise Westerners who decided Iran’s destiny. They did it because they believed that they were the astute, shrewd ones who had the best of judgments. Commenting upon the above statement in *Time* magazine, scholar Catherine Scott observed that the “quote captures nearly all of the captivity myths surrounding the hostage crisis in Iran: Christianity in battle with ‘unwise’ Islam, fervent patriotism, remembrance of the hostages’ plight, and Carter’s steadfast and heroic bearing in the White House” (Ibid. 38).

Clearly, the East-West or the Iran-West encounter opposed two identities that are at the heart of Huntington’s theory of “clash of civilizations.” An Eastern identity, shaped by a distinct rich history and heritage, trying to position itself on the winning side of the dichotomy, “struggling” with a Western identity shaped by a different history and believing in its “cultural superiority”. The latter was accounted for by political and economic supremacy.

The portrayal of this East-West friction on the “frontier” of the Iranian “desert wilderness” was compatible with other typecasts of Muslims described in European narratives of their confrontation with non-European cultures, specifically, the disdainful Orientalism dominating European perceptions of the Middle East (Blight *et.al*, 38). The very old European encounter with Islam was dominated with violence and imperialism, marked by long battles opposing Christian Europe to Turkish and Arab Muslims who had occupied the Iberian Peninsula in the 8<sup>th</sup> century as part of expanding the new religion (Ibid.). According to historian Barbara Tuchman, the Turkish defiance of Europe in the 1683 siege of Vienna, and the invasion of Spain, the Balkans, and other areas aroused the already superior self-esteem of Europeans (Ibid.). Therefore, when it was settled by Europeans, the U.S. inherited and espoused the European perception in the New World (Ibid. 38-39). In its encounter with the Middle East (at the end of WWII), the “frontier myth” dominated the American perception of the region, its nations, religion and its related conception of the superiority of Judeo-Christian religions,

European origins and the assumed white man's burden to civilize backward people (Ibid. 39). The Middle East fits perfectly into the "frontier myth," which had greatly impacted most Americans' views on the westward expansion of European power in North America and the related removal and dislocation of its aboriginal peoples (Ibid.). In Richard Slotkin's view, the taking over of the wilderness and the "subjugation" or dislocation of the Native Americans were the Western tools to the achievement of a "national identity, a democratic polity, an ever-expanding economy, and a phenomenally dynamic and 'progressive civilization'" (qtd. in Blight *et.al*, 39).

The wilderness was a Puritan conception revealing an idea of wild lands, occupied by dangerous and pagan savages (Blight *et.al*, 39). A major principle of the so-called "American exceptionalism" is Americans' recognition of a holy mission to civilize (i.e., christianize) the dwellers of the wilds, with the use of violence if needed, which was almost always the case (Ibid.). Of course, if there was any wealth, Americans of European origin would hurry to take advantage of it, and there almost always was.

Therefore, the Eastern identity was defined in Western terms as weak, fragile and emotional, hence its need for the Western identity, the savior, to christianize and civilize. This entails the dependence of the Eastern identity on the Western one. It was with this cultural frame of mind, full of feeling of superiority and prejudice about the "Other," that the Americans encountered the Middle East wherein they found "backward," "savage" people who resisted the European colonialists' culture (Ibid.). For the Americans, those "undeveloped" and "uncultured" people worshipped an alleged false prophet, Mohammed, who had himself opposed both the religion of Abraham and the Old Testament prophets (Blight *et.al*, 39-40). Americans considered the richness of the Persian heritage and the accomplishments of Arab culture unworthy of interest, if they were barely aware of them at all (Ibid. 40). Since the victory of the Islamic revolution in Iran, the depiction of its leaders in the U.S. has stressed the assumed wildness, foolishness, and savagery of the Iranian people (Ibid.). From the hostage crisis episode to the current moment the three major American charges against Iran: terrorism, human rights abuse, and the dangerous nuclear project, have been construed in terms of irrationality (Ibid.).

The attitudes of Western "anti-Muslim chauvinists" were reinforced by tragedies such as the 9/11 attacks which confirmed the view of Arabs as barbarians (Ibid.). This unthinking reaction, nurturing by paranoia and ignorance, was officially endorsed in President George W. Bush's State of the Union address in January 2002, in which he labeled Iran one-third of an "axis of evil," thus joining it with Iraq and North Korea (Blight *et al*, 40-41). It should be emphasized that the dynamics of advanced capitalism are strongly connected to an avid drive to expand, to look for new "wildernesses" to conquer and civilize (that is to westernize) (Ibid. 41).

Carter's political needs were far from being in line with those of the Imam. Also, the State Department's efforts to conduct effective and "rational" talks grounded on "the rule of law" were obstructed by the students' apparently "irrational" disposition to die as martyrs and by the shaky Iranian government's unreliability as a negotiating partner (Farber, 140-41). This conception of "rational" Americans facing "irrational" Iranians is once again reminiscent of the British views of Iranians during the oil negotiations' crisis in the early 1950s. The stunned and confused hostages believed that the students' willingness to die as martyrs was an irrational basis for action; however, in revolutionary Iran, a generation overwhelmed by the feelings of sacrifice, was eager to die for the cause. The Shiite students, impregnated with the cultural heritage of their

religion, had adopted the legacy of Hussein's martyrdom, which remained part of the revolutionary fervor of the late 1970s in Iran. For the Western mind, however, exposing oneself to death is simply a crazy act; such was the hostages' view of their captors. In many ways, the East-West cleavage is a clash between two different identities, but on the same space, which is the Iranian space. This can also be interpreted as an instance of the "clash of civilizations". Indeed, for those Westerners who are not familiar with Shii Islam, martyrdom or dying for the cause would remain a strange, irrational, and even barbaric act. This raises another issue, that of the extent of the embassy personnel's knowledge of Iranian culture. It would be expected that all the embassy's representatives have a proper knowledge of the host country's culture for an effective diplomatic mission well before starting their work. In this regard, Carter and the whole White House political team drew an important lesson, however late it had been, from the hostage crisis: one should know one's enemy very well before dealing with him.

In brief, the U.S.-Iran relations witnessed a turning point during the hostage crisis, deemed by scholars as the gravest foreign policy crisis in the history of the U.S. The crisis, which was political and diplomatic, took cultural proportions. Indeed, the way Americans approached revolutionary Iran and the crisis, revealed a certain perception of Iranians that put the bilateral relations in a cultural framework.

The media in the West have labeled Khomeini and the Islamic Revolution of 1979 as "dogmatic", "atavistic" and "primitive". For the Americans, Iranian mullahs or clerics were simply a bunch of "crazy fanatics", American-haters and an "irrational" type of people. However, for Khomeini and his circle, what they did was "rational" and motivated by their willingness to preserve their identity as well as their interests.

## Conclusion

The objective of the paper was to shed light on the issue of space and identity in Iran-Western relations. Iran as a space was important to the geo-political and economic interests of the West. That space was intruded, exploited and usurped by Western powers. This relation of hegemony involved a western identity that considers itself as "the model" to be followed. Western values of Christianity, modernity and progress oppose an Eastern identity that resists that model and believes in its unique identity.

The paper attempted to show how space and identity are illustrated in the Iran-West dichotomy. An Iranian identity faced a Western identity in a conflictual relationship within Iranian space. The paper sheds light on how the 1953 CIA coup against Mosaddeq impacted the Iran-West relations. It reveals how the West approached Iran and Iranian culture by invading its space, both physically and metaphorically.

The paper was divided into three sections. The first section introduced the theoretical framework: Samuel Huntington's "clash of civilizations" and Edward Said's "Orientalism." Both theories are used throughout the article in the analysis of the main historical accounts involving the West and Iran. While both theories are not very recent, they still account for the ongoing antagonism characterizing the Western and Iranian relations. The recent conflicts involving the East and the West, with the involvement of such countries as Yemen, Saudi Arabia, Syria, the U.S. and others attest to the validity of those theories that are at the hub of the East-West conflicts.

The second section shed light on the Anglo-Iranian oil dispute and its implications for the East-West cleavage and the issue of space and identity. The oil conflict that started between Iran and Britain and in which the U.S. eventually took part, explained the deep motives behind Western interference in the Iranian economy and domestic politics. The 1953 CIA coup against Prime Minister Mohammad Mosaddeq that was the outcome of the oil crisis was presented as a turning point in the decline of the Western-Iranian relations. Finally, section three focused on the 1979 Tehran hostage crisis and its impact on the East-West relations. Just like with the oil dispute and the CIA coup, the hostage crisis was an episode that reflected both the concept of the “Clash of Civilizations” and Edward Said’s “Orientalism.”

**References:**

- Abrahamian, Ervand. "The 1953 Coup in Iran." *Science and Society*. 65.2 (2001): 182-215.  
-----*.Khomeinism: Essays on the Islamic Republic*. Berkeley: University of California Press, 1993. Print.
- Axworthy, Michael. *Iran Empire of the Mind: A History from Zoroaster to the Present Day*. London: Penguin, 2007. Print.
- Blight, James G. et al. *Becoming Enemies: U.S.-Iran Relations and the Iran-Iraq War, 1979-1988*. Lanham: Rowman and Littlefield Publishers, 2012. Print.
- Curran, Jeanne and Susan R. Takata. Edward W. Said's *Culture and Imperialism*. December 16, 2000 (<http://www.csudh.edu/dearhabermas/said01.htm>).  
[www.allabouthistory.org/american-exceptionalism.htm](http://www.allabouthistory.org/american-exceptionalism.htm)).
- Farber, David. *Taken Hostage: The Iran Hostage Crisis and America's First Encounter with Radical Islam*. Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2005. Print.
- Gasiorowski, Mark and Malcolm Byrne Eds. *Mohammed Mosaddeq and the 1953 Coup of Iran*. New York: Syracuse University Press, 2004. Print.
- Heiss, Mary Ann. "The International Boycott of Iranian Oil and the Anti-Mosaddeq Coup of 1953." (p. 178-200). In Mark Gasiorowski and Malcolm Byrne (Eds.). *Mohammad Mosaddeq and the 1953 Coup in Iran 2004*.  
-----*. Empire and Nationhood: The United States, Great Britain, and Iranian Oil, 1950, 1954*. New York: Columbia University Press, 1997. Online.
- Huntington, Samuel. *The Clash of Civilizations and the Remaking of World Order*. New York: Simon & Schuster, 1996. Print.
- Katouzian, Homa. *Musaddiq and the Struggle for Power in Iran*. London: I.B. Tauris Publishers, 2009. Print.
- Nasr, Vali. *The Shia Revival: How conflicts within Islam Will Shape the Future*. New York: Norton, 2007. Print.
- Said, Edward. *Political discourse: Theories of colonialism and postcolonialism*. From *Orientalism*, New York: Vintage, 1979. Pages 1-3, 5. ([www.postcolonialweb.org/poldiscourse/pol11.html](http://www.postcolonialweb.org/poldiscourse/pol11.html)).
- Zakaria, Fareed. *The Post-American World*. New York: W.W. Norton and Company Inc., 2008.