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A CONSTRUCTIVIST INTERPRETATION OF NUCLEAR ANXIETIES IN WEST ASIA: THE SAUDI-PAKISTAN CONFLUENCE AND THE IRANIAN DILEMMA

Dr. Irshad Ahmad
Assistant Professor, Department of Civics and Ethical Studies, College of Social Science and humanities, Madawalabu University, Bale Robe, Ethiopia.

Dr. Mohd Jameel Dar
Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science and International Relations.
Adi-Keih College of Arts and Social Sciences, Eritrea.

ABSTRACT

This review article employs the constructivism theory of international relations to analyze the divergent security perceptions of Saudi Arabia towards the nuclear programmes of Pakistan and Iran. It posits that a purely materialist or structural realist account, which would view all nuclear capabilities through a similar lens of threat, is insufficient to explain the Saudi stance. Instead, this article argues that the social construction of identity, shared norms, and intersubjective understandings, as articulated by constructivist scholars, provide a more robust explanatory framework. The analysis demonstrates that the Pakistani nuclear programme is not perceived as a threat by Riyadh because it is embedded within a dense web of shared religious identity (a Sunni Islamic bloc), convergent strategic interests vis-à-vis India and Iran, and a history of security cooperation that has constructed Pakistan as a "brotherly" state. Conversely, the Iranian nuclear programme is securitized by Saudi Arabia because it is situated within a context of a protracted ideological and geopolitical rivalry. This rivalry constructs Iran as a "revolutionary" and "sectarian" other, whose nuclear ambitions are perceived not merely as a military threat but as an existential challenge to the Saudi-led regional order and its custodianship of the Islamic world. By testing constructivist propositions against this empirical puzzle, the article concludes that state behavior in West Asia is profoundly shaped by socially constructed identities and the normative structures of amity and enmity, which ultimately determine whether a nuclear capability is interpreted as a shield or a sword.

KEYWORDS: *Constructivism, Nuclear Proliferation, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, Iran, West Asia, Identity, Norms, Securitization.*

1. INTRODUCTION: THE PUZZLE OF DIVERGENT PERCEPTIONS

The nuclear landscape of West Asia presents a complex and often contradictory picture for scholars of international relations (IR). From a traditional, materialist perspective, the acquisition of nuclear weapons by any state in a region constitutes a fundamental shift in the balance of power, compelling neighboring states to respond with balancing behavior, whether through internal armament or external alliance formation (Waltz, 1979). Yet, the case of Saudi Arabia's perceptions of nuclear programmes in its strategic environment defies this straightforward logic. Pakistan, a contiguous and powerful state, successfully developed and tested nuclear weapons in 1998, becoming a declared nuclear weapons state. Iran, another major regional power, has pursued a nuclear programme that the international community, particularly the

West, suspects has weaponization potential, leading to severe sanctions and diplomatic isolation (Fitzpatrick, 2014).

A structural realist might predict that Saudi Arabia would view both nuclear-capable neighbours with a high degree of suspicion and threat perception. However, the empirical reality is starkly different. The Kingdom of Saudi Arabia has maintained a conspicuously muted, and at times even supportive, stance towards Pakistan's nuclear status (Hilali, 2010). There exists substantial evidence of long-standing strategic and financial ties that suggest a level of comfort, if not tacit approval, of Islamabad's nuclear deterrent. In contrast, Riyadh has consistently articulated a position of profound anxiety, opposition, and outright threat perception regarding Iran's nuclear activities (Gause, 2014). This dichotomy presents a compelling puzzle: why is Pakistan's nuclear weapon not considered "bad" for Saudi Arabia, while Iran's nuclear programme is constructed as a primary security threat?

This article proposes that the constructivist theory of international relations offers the most persuasive explanation for this puzzle. Constructivism, as pioneered by scholars such as Alexander Wendt (1992, 1999), asserts that the core structures of international politics are social rather than purely material. These structures are shaped by shared ideas, beliefs, norms, and identities. For constructivists, anarchy is not a fixed, self-help environment as realists claim; instead, "anarchy is what states make of it" (Wendt, 1992, p. 395). The meaning of military power, including nuclear weapons, is not inherent or objective; it is intersubjectively constituted through historical interaction, discourse, and the social identities that states hold of themselves and of others.

The objective of this review article is to systematically test this constructivist framework against the empirical case of Saudi perceptions. It will argue that the Saudi-Pakistan relationship is built upon a foundation of a shared Sunni identity, a history of cooperation against common threats (such as the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan and the perceived Shia expansionism), and a mutual recognition as status quo powers within a broader Islamic framework. This social context has constructed a relationship of "friendship" in the IR sense, where power is not threatening because it is understood to be wielded for common purposes. Conversely, the Saudi-Iranian relationship is defined by a deep-seated ideological contestation. This contestation pits the Saudi monarchy, which styles itself as the leader of the Sunni Muslim world and custodian of its holiest sites, against the Iranian revolutionary state, which projects itself as the vanguard of Shia Islam and a challenge to Western-dominated monarchical orders (Mabon, 2013). Within this socially constructed relationship of "enmity," any accretion of power, particularly the symbolic and strategic weight of a nuclear capability, is immediately securitized as an existential threat.

This article will proceed in several sections. First, it will elaborate on the theoretical framework of constructivism, drawing on the key tenets of its leading proponents. Second, it will provide a historical overview of the Saudi-Pakistan relationship, tracing the construction of a shared identity and convergent interests. Third, it will delve into the historical and ideological roots of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry, illustrating how a relationship of enmity has been socially sustained. Fourth, it will apply the constructivist lens directly to the nuclear question, analyzing how the same weapon type is accorded diametrically opposite meanings based on the social relationship in which it is embedded. Finally, the conclusion will summarize the findings and reflect on their implications for the study of international relations in West Asia.

2. THE CONSTRUCTIVIST THEORETICAL FRAMEWORK: IDEAS, NORMS, AND IDENTITY ALL THE WAY DOWN

To comprehend the divergent Saudi perceptions, one must first move beyond the materialist and rationalist assumptions that dominate mainstream IR theories. Neorealism, for instance, treats states as like units, differentiated only by their relative capabilities (Waltz, 1979). From this viewpoint, a nuclear weapon is a nuclear weapon; its impact on the security calculus of a neighboring state should be a function of its destructive yield and delivery range, not the identity of its possessor. This perspective fails to account for the Saudi case. Constructivism provides the necessary corrective by shifting the analytical focus from purely material forces to the ideational forces that give them meaning.

2.1. The Core Tenets of Constructivism

Constructivism’s fundamental premise is that the international system is not a physical or material given but a social construct. Alexander Wendt, one of its most influential figures, encapsulates this by

stating, "A fundamental principle of constructivist social theory is that people act toward objects, including other actors, on the basis of the meanings that the objects have for them" (Wendt, 1992, p. 396). These meanings are not intrinsic; they are created and sustained through social interaction, discourse, and practice.

The first key concept is identity. For constructivists, state identity is not a pre-given, fixed entity. It is a property of international actors that is generated through their interactions with others (Wendt, 1999). States hold multiple identities—sovereign state, liberal democracy, Islamic republic, etc.—and these identities are crucial because they shape a state's interests. As Martha Finnemore (1996) argues, state interests are not simply deduced from the structure of the international system; they are shaped by international norms and social structures through a process of socialization. A state that identifies as a "leader of the Sunni world" will have different interests and perceive threats differently from a state that identifies as a "revolutionary vanguard of the oppressed."

The second key concept is norms. Norms are shared expectations about appropriate behavior for actors with a given identity (Katzenstein, 1996). They are the "rules of the game" in a society of states. The nuclear non-proliferation norm, for example, is a powerful social construct that shapes how states justify their nuclear activities. Norms can compete, and their influence varies across different regional and cultural contexts. In West Asia, norms of pan-Islamic solidarity can, at times, trump global non-proliferation norms, depending on the identities of the states involved.

The third key concept is intersubjectivity. This refers to shared understandings that are collectively constructed among states. The security dilemma, for instance, is not an inevitable consequence of anarchy but an intersubjective structure. If two states share a collective understanding that their relationship is cooperative, then an increase in one's military power may be seen as a contribution to collective security. However, if the shared understanding is one of rivalry, the same action will be interpreted as a threat, triggering a security dilemma (Wendt, 1999). This is precisely at the heart of the Saudi puzzle.

2.2. Constructivism and the Social Meaning of Nuclear Weapons

From a constructivist standpoint, a nuclear weapon is not merely a physical object; it is a symbolic vessel whose meaning is filled by the social relations between states. The bomb itself is "socially constructed" (Tannenwald, 1999). Nina Tannenwald's concept of the "nuclear taboo" is a prime example—a powerful normative injunction against the use of nuclear weapons that has been constructed over decades of practice and discourse. This taboo is not a material fact but a social one.

Similarly, whether a state's nuclear programme is perceived as legitimate or threatening depends on the social context. A nuclear arsenal possessed by a state considered a "friend" or an "ally" can be seen as a source of stability and extended deterrence. The same arsenal, in the hands of a state constructed as an "enemy" or a "rival," becomes an existential threat. The material capability is constant, but its social meaning, and therefore its political effect, is transformed. This theoretical lens allows us to see that Saudi Arabia is not reacting to the objective fact of nuclear capability but to the social identity of the possessor and the historical narrative of their relationship.

3. THE SAUDI-PAKISTAN "SPECIAL RELATIONSHIP": THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF STRATEGIC KINSHIP

The relationship between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan is a textbook case of how shared identity and convergent norms can construct a security community where power is not viewed with suspicion. This section traces the historical and ideational foundations of this relationship, demonstrating how Pakistan's identity has been constructed as that of a reliable, brotherly state whose power complements, rather than challenges, Saudi security.

3.1. Historical Foundations and the Ideational Glue

The relationship between the two states was forged in the early years of their independence, rooted in a shared religious identity as Sunni-majority Muslim nations. Pakistan's founding ideology, while not theocratic, emphasized its identity as a homeland for Muslims of the subcontinent. This immediately created a symbolic affinity with Saudi Arabia, the birthplace of Islam and home to its two holiest cities, Mecca and

Medina (Hilali, 2010). This was not a trivial connection; it provided a powerful normative and ideational glue that facilitated trust and cooperation.

The strategic dimension of this relationship solidified during the Cold War. Both states were firmly in the anti-Soviet, pro-Western camp. Pakistan's membership in the US-led alliances CENTO and SEATO aligned with Saudi Arabia's own alignment with the West. However, the relationship went deeper than mere alliance politics. During the 1970s and 1980s, this partnership evolved into a tangible strategic nexus. When the Grand Mosque in Mecca was seized by militants in 1979, Pakistani troops were reportedly called upon to assist (Hilali, 2010). More significantly, during the Soviet-Afghan War (1979-1989), Pakistan and Saudi Arabia became key partners in the US-backed jihad against the Soviet Union. Saudi funding flowed through Pakistani intelligence (ISI) to the Afghan Mujahideen, and both states saw themselves as frontline defenders of the Muslim world against atheistic communism (Rashid, 2000). This shared project was not just a strategic collaboration; it was a joint enterprise framed in civilizational and religious terms, which profoundly reinforced their intersubjective identity as defenders of Sunni Islam.

3.2. The Nuclear Dimension and the Construction of Trust

Pakistan's pursuit of a nuclear weapon, particularly in response to India's nuclear tests in 1974 and 1998, was observed closely by Saudi Arabia. From a realist perspective, a nuclear-armed neighbour should be a cause for alarm. However, the social context of the Saudi-Pakistan relationship dictated a different interpretation.

First, Pakistan's nuclear programme was framed, both domestically and to the Muslim world, as a necessary deterrent against a much larger, Hindu-majority India. This narrative resonated in Riyadh, where India has historically been viewed with some suspicion due to its close ties with the Soviet Union and, later, with Iran. Pakistan's bomb was thus socially constructed not as an instrument of aggression but as a "Sunni bomb" or an "Islamic bomb"—a symbol of Muslim power and resistance in a region dominated by non-Muslim powers (India and Israel) (Hilali, 2010). This narrative, while often exaggerated, found a receptive audience in Saudi Arabia, which saw its own regional leadership bolstered by the presence of a powerful Muslim ally.

Second, there is strong circumstantial evidence of Saudi financial support for Pakistan's nuclear programme over the decades, though the specifics remain opaque (Hilali, 2010). Such support would be inconceivable if the programme were perceived as a threat. Instead, it suggests that the Saudi elite viewed the success of the Pakistani programme as being in their own strategic interest.

Third, and most tellingly, is the post-testing behavior. Following Pakistan's nuclear tests in 1998, Saudi Arabia did not join the international condemnation. Instead, it provided crucial economic assistance to help Pakistan weather the subsequent sanctions (Hilali, 2010). This demonstrated that the normative bond of Islamic solidarity and the shared strategic identity overrode the global non-proliferation norm. The relationship had constructed a reality in which Pakistan's nuclear capability was seen as a collective asset for the broader Sunni Muslim bloc, a shield against common adversaries, rather than a direct threat to Saudi security. The repeated high-level military exchanges and joint exercises between the two countries further institutionalize this trust, creating a dense web of interactions that continuously reproduces their identity as "friends."

4. THE SAUDI-IRANIAN ENDURING RIVALRY: THE SOCIAL CONSTRUCTION OF EXISTENTIAL THREAT

In stark contrast to the amicable Saudi-Pakistan relationship, the Saudi-Iranian dynamic is defined by a deeply entrenched rivalry that is as much ideological as it is geopolitical. This section outlines how decades of conflictual interaction have constructed a relationship of enmity, within which any Iranian power accretion, especially nuclear, is inevitably securitized.

4.1. The Historical and Ideological Roots of Enmity

While tensions between Persian and Arab worlds have historical antecedents, the modern phase of the Saudi-Iranian rivalry was decisively triggered by the 1979 Iranian Revolution. The revolution replaced a staunchly pro-Western monarchy with a theocratic republic whose founding ideology was explicitly revolutionary and anti-monarchical. Ayatollah Khomeini's doctrine of Velayat-e Faqih (Guardianship of the

Islamic Jurist) presented a direct ideological challenge to the legitimacy of the Saudi monarchy (Gause, 2014). The Saudi state derives its legitimacy from a traditionalist pact with the Wahhabi religious establishment and its custodianship of the Holy Mosques. The Iranian model, which claimed to represent a more authentic and popular form of Islamic governance, threatened to undermine this carefully constructed legitimacy.

This ideological contestation was immediately translated into geopolitical competition. Iran's call for the export of its revolution was perceived in Riyadh as a direct threat to its domestic stability and its leadership of the Muslim world. The Iran-Iraq War (1980-1988) became a proxy battleground, with Saudi Arabia and other Gulf monarchies providing massive financial support to Saddam Hussein's Iraq, fearing the spread of Iranian revolutionary influence (Gause, 2014). This period solidified the initial construction of the "other." Iran was no longer just a neighboring state; it was a "revolutionary," "expansionist," and "sectarian" power seeking to overthrow the established order.

4.2. The Sectarianization of Regional Politics

A critical element in the social construction of this enmity is the sectarian divide. While the Saudi-Iranian rivalry is not solely about Sunni vs. Shia Islam, the sectarian dimension provides a powerful and easily mobilized discursive tool for both regimes to consolidate domestic support and frame their regional competition (Mabon, 2013). The Saudi state, which promotes a conservative version of Sunni Islam (Wahhabism), and the Iranian state, which is the world's only Shia theocracy, have increasingly instrumentalized sectarian identities.

This sectarian framing has intensified in the post-2003 era. The US-led invasion of Iraq dismantled the Sunni-dominated Ba'athist regime, leading to a Shia-majority government in Baghdad that is politically aligned with Tehran. This was perceived in Riyadh as a decisive strategic shift in the regional balance of power in Iran's favor (Gause, 2014). Subsequent regional conflicts, most notably the Syrian civil war and the war in Yemen, have become clear proxy wars along this Saudi-Iranian fault line. In Syria, Iran supports the Alawite-led regime of Bashar al-Assad, while Saudi Arabia backed the Sunni-dominated opposition. In Yemen, a Saudi-led coalition is fighting against the Houthi movement, which Riyadh portrays as an Iranian puppet (Juneau, 2016).

Through these repeated, conflictual interactions, the identity of Iran as the "sectarian other" and an "existential threat" has become deeply embedded in the Saudi national security discourse. This is not a reflection of an objective material reality alone; it is a social reality that has been painstakingly constructed over four decades of rivalry, rhetoric, and proxy conflict. The "othering" of Iran is a central component of the Saudi state's identity projection as the leader and protector of the Sunni world.

5. APPLYING THE CONSTRUCTIVIST LENS: NUCLEAR PROGRAMMES AND SOCIALLY DIVERGENT MEANINGS

With the social relationships clearly defined, the constructivist explanation for the divergent Saudi perceptions becomes clear. The nuclear capabilities of Pakistan and Iran are not assessed in a vacuum; they are interpreted through the pre-existing, socially constructed lenses of "friendship" and "enmity," respectively.

5.1. Pakistan's Bomb: A Shield for the Ummah?

Within the context of the Saudi-Pakistan "special relationship," Pakistan's nuclear arsenal acquires a specific social meaning. It is not seen as a weapon that could be turned against Riyadh. The history of cooperation, the shared Sunni identity, and the convergent strategic interests regarding India have created a high level of trust. This trust is not based on naivety but on a sustained pattern of interaction that has constructed a shared understanding of their roles in the region.

From a constructivist viewpoint, the Pakistani nuclear deterrent functions as an instrument of what can be termed "extended identity-based deterrence." While there is no formal NATO-style alliance, the intersubjective understanding between the two elites suggests that Pakistani power is, in a broad sense, a resource for the broader Sunni bloc. The repeated, though unconfirmed, speculation about a potential Saudi acquisition of Pakistani nuclear technology or a ready-made deterrent is a logical extension of this socially constructed reality (Hilali, 2010). The very fact that such speculation is credible in policy circles underscores

the depth of the trust. The bomb, in this social context, is a symbol of Muslim empowerment and a strategic shield, its meaning defined by the amity between the two states. It reinforces the normative structure of their relationship rather than challenging it.

5.2. Iran's Programme: The Sword of the Revolutionary Other

The Iranian nuclear programme, however, is inserted into a completely different social structure—one of deep-seated enmity and rivalry. Within this context, every aspect of Iran's nuclear activities is securitized. The secrecy, the past breaches of IAEA safeguards, and the rhetoric from hardliners in Tehran are all interpreted through the lens of the pre-existing threat perception (Fitzpatrick, 2014).

For the Saudi security establishment, a nuclear-capable Iran is not just a state with a powerful weapon. It is the ultimate empowerment of the "revolutionary other." It would permanently alter the regional balance of power, not just in material terms, but in symbolic and ideological ones. A nuclear Iran would be seen as having achieved a position of unassailable leadership, potentially emboldening its Shia proxies across West Asia and undermining Saudi authority within the Muslim world. The nuclear programme becomes the ultimate symbol of the Iranian challenge—a sword that could be used to enforce its revolutionary ideology and intimidate its rivals, primarily Saudi Arabia.

This perception triggers a classic security dilemma, but one that is intensified by the social context of enmity. Any Iranian move to demonstrate nuclear latency or capability is read as confirmation of its hostile intent, which in turn pushes Saudi Arabia to consider countermeasures, such as pursuing its own nuclear latency or strengthening its alliance with the United States (Gause, 2014). The meaning of Iran's nuclear programme is thus inextricably linked to the four-decade-long process of "othering." It is the material embodiment of the existential threat that the Saudi state has long constructed Iran to be.

6. CONCLUSION: IDENTITY AND THE ARCHITECTURE OF THREAT PERCEPTION

This review article has tested the propositions of constructivist theory against the empirical dilemma of Saudi Arabia's divergent perceptions of the Pakistani and Iranian nuclear programmes. The analysis demonstrates that a purely materialist account, which would treat nuclear weapons as objective threats regardless of their possessor, is inadequate. The Saudi case powerfully illustrates that the meaning of power is socially constructed.

The sustained, cooperative interactions between Saudi Arabia and Pakistan, framed within a shared Sunni identity and convergent strategic interests, have constructed a relationship of amity. Within this social structure, Pakistan's nuclear arsenal is not perceived as a threat. Instead, it is interpreted as a potential asset, a symbol of Islamic power, and a deterrent against common adversaries. The shared norms of Islamic solidarity have, in this instance, overridden the global non-proliferation norm.

Conversely, the history of ideological contestation, geopolitical rivalry, and sectarian mobilization has constructed a relationship of enmity between Saudi Arabia and Iran. This social structure dictates that Iran's nuclear programme is securitized as an existential threat. It is seen not merely as a military tool but as the ultimate weapon in a long-running struggle for regional hegemony and ideological supremacy. The same technology is thus endowed with diametrically opposite meanings based on the identity of the possessor and the historical narrative of the relationship.

The implications of this constructivist analysis are significant for both scholars and policymakers. It suggests that efforts to manage nuclear proliferation in West Asia cannot be limited to technical fixes or traditional arms control measures. They must engage with the deeper, ideational sources of conflict—the contested identities and the normative structures of enmity that give nuclear technology its threatening meaning. De-escalating the Saudi-Iranian rivalry would require a long-term process of dialogue and confidence-building measures aimed at reconstructing their intersubjective understandings, a daunting but necessary task. Ultimately, this case study reaffirms the core constructivist insight: in international politics, ideas and identities are not ephemeral; they are the very architecture upon which threats and alliances are built.

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